

Reconsidering Division Cavalry Squadrons

Part II: 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, in Vietnam

by MAJ Nathan Jennings

(Editor's note: This is the second in a four-part series that describes the problem, history and potential solutions for the U.S. Army's lack of dedicated division-level ground reconnaissance and security capacity.)

Cavalry forces specialize in security efforts designed to protect their higher headquarters' operations. This tactical task, along with reconnaissance, has endured since antiquity as a primary function of mounted scouts due to their inherent operational reach. For divisions wielding a panoply of maneuver and enabling assets, the requirement for dedicated formations to safeguard and facilitate an increasingly complex order of battle remains a critical function in the 21st Century. As outlined in *Division Operations*, such scouting elements "provide early and accurate warning" to "provide the force" with "time and maneuver space within which to react to the enemy and to develop the situation."¹

Typical security tasks, as defined by modern U.S. Army doctrine, typically center on observing, reporting and, if need be, neutralizing enemy reconnaissance or blunting adversary incursions during offensive, defensive and stability operations. They may include conducting screen, guard and cover missions where arrayed units provide early warning and fight to allow time and space for higher headquarters to deploy main force battalions and brigades. These operations may also include distributed area security efforts to protect friendly forces and terrain within defined geographical boundaries. The division-cavalry (DivCav) formations – and the J and L-Series models in particular – usually accomplished these missions through integration of enhanced mobility, firepower, protection and aerial reach.²

DivCav in security operations

The combat performance of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, of 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam offers an illustrative case study on the potential effectiveness of division-level cavalry during distributed-security operations. From October 1965 to April 1970, the command – informally called "Quarterhorse" – conducted diverse tasks that included route patrolling, static defense, pacification and "search and destroy" missions against irregular, though highly lethal, Communist opponents. Since the Big Red One deployed as a predominantly light division, its cavalry squadron's complement of armored-personnel carriers, scout helicopters and eventually tanks, in addition to partnered infantry, heavy armor and host-nation forces, allowed them to provide critical and responsive combat power.³

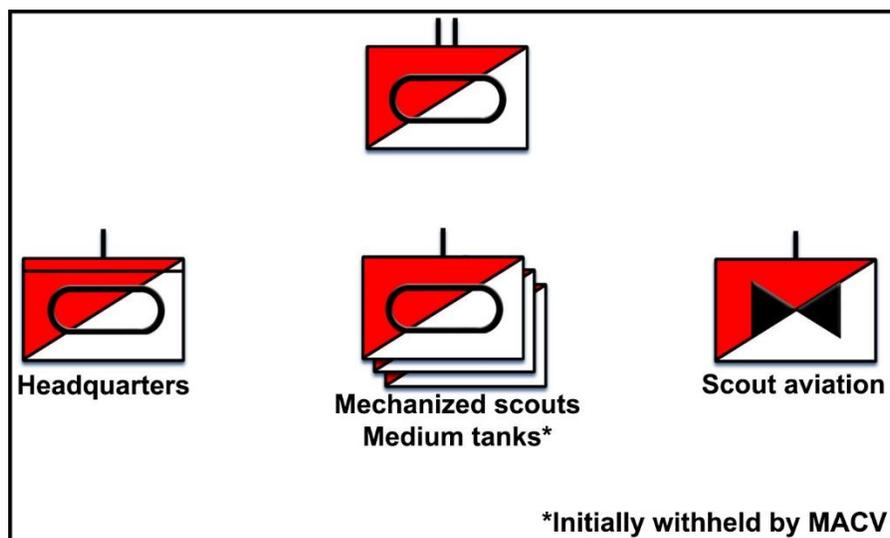


Figure 1. Organization of 1-4 Cavalry, Vietnam. (Adapted from John J. McGrath, *Scouts Out: The Development of Reconnaissance Units in Modern Armies*)

The Quarterhorse squadron deployed from Fort Riley, KS, to a volatile sector north of Saigon in III Corps' tactical zone amid skepticism over the effectiveness of heavy armor for stability operations in jungle terrain. When Pentagon officials grudgingly allowed III Corps to bring 27 M48A3 Patton tanks, GEN William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), impounded the vehicles at Phu Loi after criticizing that "Vietnam is no place for either tank or mechanized-infantry units."⁴ The cavalrymen thus relied on Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles – moderately protected M113s personal carriers with upgraded firepower and turret gunshields – for the first six months. During that time, the division usually dispersed the squadron's three ground troops and air troop to support infantry units.

Armored cavalry proved its value in 1st Infantry Division's first major engagement of the conflict Nov. 10-11, 1965. Troop A, then supporting 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment, provided vital mobility and firepower as the task force defended National Highway 13, the main line of communication north of Saigon, against a sudden Viet Cong (VC) attack. Called the Battle of Ap Bau Bang for a small hamlet nearby, the cavalrymen broke 272th Regiment's surprise assault with a mounted counterattack that allowed time for the American infantry to ready defenses. This fight, and many others that followed, rapidly changed the Army's perception of the utility of armored cavalry in Vietnam. The troop received the Valorous Unit Award for its actions.⁵

The squadron continued to conduct search-and-destroy missions, cordon villages during larger clearing operations and secure key routes and convoys throughout Spring 1966. By summer it had reconsolidated its troops and repossessed its tanks as the division launched Operation El Paso II to secure a contested area called War Zone C northwest of Saigon. Since 1-4 Cavalry boasted greater road mobility than the infantry battalions, it focused on clearing critical routes with "roadrunner" reconnaissance-in-force patrols. This assignment resulted in a series of engagements where usually independent troops fought through VC ambushes while coordinating joint fires. The squadron's tanks, though not immune to mines and artillery, allowed the typically outnumbered cavalrymen to react, seize initiative and disperse the unpredictable foe.⁶

Enabling division success

Quarterhorse's success that summer inspired its new division commander, MG William DePuy, to employ it to bait the elusive enemy into a decisive ambush. When Task Force Dragoon, comprising Troops B, C and an attached infantry company, accordingly traveled down Highway 13 on July 9, the VC's 272nd Regiment launched a vicious artillery barrage followed by massed infantry assaults near the small town of Srok Dong. Despite suffering 12 killed and 55 wounded, 1-4 Cav maintained a stubborn defense while the Big Red One's 1st Brigade counterattacked and defeated the enemy. The squadron's Presidential Unit Citation attested that it achieved "712 confirmed hostile dead, an estimated 850 additional killed and large quantiles of captured weapons and equipment."⁷

Throughout the Vietnam War, division-level cavalry was not the only mounted security force proving its tactical value. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), 1-4 Cav's corps-level equivalent, likewise demonstrated the potency of independent mechanized firepower during security operations. GEN Donn A. Starry, who commanded the unit late in the war, believed the ACR devised "better means of gathering intelligence" and had "a higher density of automatic weapons, possessed long-range radios and had more aircraft than a mechanized brigade."⁸ From 1966 to 1971, the Blackhorse Regiment thus provided a mobile force that MACV repeatedly used for large-scale clearing operations. It also spearheaded the allied incursion into Cambodia in 1970, which occurred as the largest armored operation of the war.⁹



Figure 2. III Corps area of operations, Vietnam. (From Wikipedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:III_Corps_Tactical_Zone_December_1966.png)

The year 1967 found 1-4 Cavalry again conducting traditional cavalry tasks in support of III Corps' efforts in War Zone C. Beginning with Operation Cedar Falls, which lasted Jan. 8-26, 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions, 11th ACR, 196th and 173rd infantry brigades, and South Vietnamese allies cleared the VC 9th Division from the "Iron Triangle" with echeloned search-and-destroy attacks. The squadron initially screened the corps' eastern flank along Highway 13, then transitioned to blocking key enemy routes, and finally cleared targeted sites. Though they reportedly killed 37 enemy and captured another 96, their protection of lines of communication with Saigon proved most significant.¹⁰

Quarterhorse next participated in Operation Junction City, again in War Zone C, from February to May 1967. The plan called for the Big Red One and several attached brigades to create a "horseshoe" around the enemy stronghold while 25th Division and 11th ACR attacked its center. Returning to its previous site of operations, 1-4 Cav led its parent division into position, seized landing zones for infantry-battalion insertion, escorted support units, secured contested routes and cleared enemy positions. Later in May, the squadron conducted similar actions during Operation Dallas in the same area, where, as ordered, it conducted "combat reconnaissance" to destroy "[VC]/[North Vietnamese Army (NVA)] forces and installations."¹¹

These attacks occurred as the largest American operations in Vietnam thus far. Throughout the escalation, Quarterhorse provided critical time and space for higher commands to clear VC concentrations. The scouts' efforts in controlling Highway 13 in particular ensured division and corps logistical continuity. In March 1967, after observing 1-4 Cav and others during Operations Cedar Falls and Junction City, MACV reported that "armored cavalry squadrons" had "proven responsive" for "aggressive action in [the Republic of Vietnam] because of their balanced combined-arms structure and inherent capability for quick response and independent action."¹² Despite this validation, 1-4 Cav frequently lost direct control of its air troop, which limited its potential for service as an economy-of-force asset.

Combined-arms value

Allied forces across South Vietnam began 1968 by repelling the Tet Offensive. Due to their unique ability to rapidly reposition with survivable lethality, division commanders relied on their prized armored cavalries to rapidly reinforce weakening defenses and assault enemy concentrations. Quarterhorse, as the Big Red One's most agile mechanized force near Saigon, sent its Troop A to reinforce a task force defending the Tan San Nhut airfield while Troops B and C supported 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, in a hard fight with four enemy battalions over control of the town of An My. The troopers engaged in some of the war's fiercest fighting as they unleashed heavy firepower against lighter VC forces.¹³

The squadron, along with attached infantry units, fought another intense engagement several weeks later at Tan Hiep, near Di An, against an attacking enemy battalion. On May 5-6, it then supported a division effort to defeat retreating VC forces northeast of Di An by first blocking, and then pursuing and defeating, a retreating contingent. Troops A and B saw extremely heavy fighting during the final assault. The troopers reportedly killed about 340 enemy over the two-day fight.¹⁴

Throughout the rest of 1968, they executed continuous security operations as MACV placed greater emphasis on stabilizing civilian areas and empowering the Army of South Vietnam.

Armored cavalry remained high-use offensive assets as less-mobile infantry units increasingly focused on "Vietnamization" of the war effort. On March 30, 1969, Quarterhorse accordingly joined a multi-division clearing operation called Atlas Wedge in the Michelin plantation fields 70 kilometers northwest of Saigon. Ordered to "detect, fix and destroy VC/NVA forces in the area," the Big Red One relied on 1-4 Cav and participating 11th ACR elements to accomplish the task.¹⁵ LTC William C. Haponski, then commanding the squadron, assessed that their subsequent victories over the 7th NVA Division revealed that his unit, when task-organized as a combined-arms force with an additional cavalry troop and infantry company, fought as the "most powerful combat force in the division" against "large main-force units."¹⁶

Even as mechanized cavalry supported ground infantry divisions, their helocentric counterparts enabled air-mobile divisions with expanded, if less forceful, reconnaissance and surveillance. As an example, the "Headhunters" of 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment, supported 1st Cavalry Division with three aerial troops and a light ground troop throughout the war. The aero-cavalrymen's swift and far-reaching scouting abilities complemented their higher command's use of massed rotary-wing transport to allow infantry to rapidly close with and engage elusive VC forces in restrictive terrain. At famed places like the Ia Drang Valley, 1-9 Cav repeatedly allowed the "First Team" to seize initiative and position for advantage.¹⁷

First in, last out

In February 1970, with the U.S. Army's withdrawal from Vietnam underway, 1-4 Cav assumed rearguard duty – an economy-of-force mission traditionally assigned to cavalry – as 1st Infantry Division redeployed to Fort Riley and Germany. Starry later described in his detailed study how, ironically, the armored forces who were late to concentrate in Indochina would remain to "anchor the withdrawal of American combat units."¹⁸ Unfortunately for the squadron, they suffered the last Big Red One Soldier-killed-in-action in Vietnam when a Troop A noncommissioned officer walked over a mine. With their wartime service complete, the headquarters, B, C and D Troops returned to Kansas, while Troop A joined the division's 3rd Brigade (Forward) in Europe.

Quarterhorse's experiences in the Vietnam War yielded insights concerning cavalry in security operations. Then-LTC Frederick Brown, the last 1-4 Cav commander in Indochina and a future commandant of the Armor Center, later attested that "through demonstration of ground and air firepower, mobility and shock action, combined with expert, flexible commanders 'fighting forward' at every level, [4th Cavalry] ... dominated ground combat."¹⁹ While seemingly boastful, the future general's suggestion of relative overmatch at places like Ap Bau Bang, Highway 13 and the Michelin plantations indicate that cavalry-centric task forces, when empowered with mission-specific capabilities, offer potential to decisively expand a division's tactical options through distributed security contributions. These lessons, though distinct to that conflict, remain relevant to future U.S. Army campaigns.

Part III of this series will examine the role of Quarterhorse as a division reconnaissance force in Operation Desert Storm.

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Notes

¹ Army Technical Publication 3-91.

² Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 3-90, ***Offense and Defense***, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, August 2012.

³ ***History of the Fourth United States Cavalry: Prepared and Loyal***, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991; retired COL William C. Haponski, ***Danger's Dragoons***, First Division Museum at Cantigny Park, 2014.

⁴ GEN Donn A. Starry, ***Mounted Combat in Vietnam***, St. John's Press, 2017.

⁵ James Scott Wheeler, ***The Big Red One***, First Division Museum at Cantigny Park, 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Annex A, "Battle of Srok Dong Narrative," combat after-action report (AAR), Operation El Paso II/III, 1st Infantry Division, June 30, 1966; ***Fourth United States Cavalry***.

⁸ Starry.

⁹ John J. McGrath, ***Scouts Out: The Development of Reconnaissance Units in Modern Armies***, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008.

¹⁰ Combat AAR, Operation Cedar Falls, 1st Infantry Division, March 13, 1967; ***Fourth United States Cavalry***.

¹¹ Operations report, lessons-learned, Headquarters, 1st Infantry Division, Nov. 9, 1967, quoted in Robert Peters, "Jack of all trades: the metamorphosis of armored cavalry in Vietnam," master's thesis, University of Louisville, 2005.

¹² Report, "Mechanized and Armor Combat Operations in Vietnam," Headquarters, U.S. Army Vietnam, March 28, 1967.

¹³ Wheeler.

¹⁴ Wheeler; ***Fourth United States Cavalry***.

¹⁵ Combat AAR, Operation Atlas Wedge, 17th Military History Detachment, 1st Infantry Division, April 19, 1969.

¹⁶ Haponski.

¹⁷ McGrath.

¹⁸ Starry.

¹⁹ Haponski.

Acronym Quick-Scan

AAR – after-action report

ACR – armored cavalry regiment

BCT – brigade combat team

DivCav – division cavalry

MACV – (U.S.) Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

NVA – North Vietnamese Army

VC – Viet Cong