Reconsidering Division-Cavalry Squadrons

Part IV: the Division-Cavalry Task Force

*(**Editor's note:** This is the last 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.)*

by MAJ Nathan Jennings

Since the U.S. Army adopted tactical modularity in 2004, reorganized its final deployable armored-cavalry regiment (ACR) as a Stryker brigade combat team (BCT) in 2011 and, more recently, restructured its battlefield surveillance brigades without cavalry squadrons, it has lacked dedicated and optimized ground formations to conduct forceful information collection (IC) above the brigade level. Though intended to produce greater combined-arms versatility at lower tactical levels, modular transformation violated the long-held requirement, as argued by VII Corps after Operation Desert Storm, that ground forces require "armed and armored recce at every level … battalion through corps."[1] This capabilities gap has consequently impaired division and corps ability to execute informed and dynamic expeditionary operations across theaters featuring challenging area-denial networks.[2]

This deficiency – which stemmed from episodic understanding of the potential for maneuver warfare between peer and hybrid states – can be remedied, in part, by extracting insights from the Army's long record of successfully employing cavalry forces. World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War, first Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan War and second Persian Gulf War each provided testing grounds for combinations of heavy, medium, light and aerial squadrons as higher commands adapted pre-conflict organizations to the realities of complicated settings and adaptive foes. From the jungles of Indochina to the deserts of Mesopotamia, two lessons have emerged with certitude: division cavalry should optimize for high-end combat relative to threat capabilities, and division cavalry must also be empowered with enablers to maintain demanding tempos across battlefields of expanded breadth and depth.[3]

Historical lessons

Looking toward future combat operations, the U.S. Army can potentially incorporate insights from its recent past to design viable options to bridge structural gaps in reconnaissance and security (R&S) capabilities at division level. As illustrated by the 60-year evolution of American cavalry in general, and the performance of units like 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, in particular, two-star headquarters greatly benefited from direct-reporting formations optimized to collect information and defeat enemy scouts in a variety of combat operations. While these squadrons often excelled at shaping conditions during forcible entry, they likewise proved their value, sometimes counterintuitively, during distributed and asymmetric stability efforts.

This historical record yields two foundational insights, among others, that may inform the creation of future division-level cavalry. The first emerges from the enduring debate over stealthy or forceful optimization to achieve high-end capability relative to threat capabilities. In both the Vietnam War and first Gulf War, in addition to World War II, the Korean War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, general officers – regardless of pre-conflict expectations for narrow utility – ordered their cavalry to conduct a variety of combat actions that required enhanced mobility, protection and firepower. As the Armor Center assessed after Operation Desert Storm, "scouts must be in a hardened vehicle that must be able to move over all types of terrain, shoot and destroy chance contacts, and move through minefields and artillery fire."[4]

The requirement to equip and arm for tactical overmatch during R&S operations holds unique implications for the types of cavalry teams that divisions could potentially task-organize to create advantageous conditions and exploit windows of opportunity. Army cavalries are now both constrained and empowered by particular armored, Stryker and infantry brigade profiles. They each own variations of materiel advantages and limitations that would inform higher-echelon contributions. Similar to the tactical bifurcation of reconnaissance units that served under armored and infantry divisions during World War II, the current diversity of heavy, medium and light scouts allows commanders to create tailored instruments to combat specific threats.

Beginning with the humvee cavalry of the infantry BCTs (IBCTs), the Army maintains 15 Active Component and 20 National Guard squadrons that perform dismounted, wheeled, airborne and airmobile missions. If selected to

directly support division or joint-task-force IC, these scouts – who represent 59 percent of the total ground-cavalry force – would offer stealthier observation and greater strategic mobility.[5] However, as argued by a U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE) assessment in 2014, they often "lack the passenger-carrying capacity, protection and mobility required for [R&S] operations."[6] While IBCT troopers have been particularly useful during stability operations in places like Bosnia, Haiti and Afghanistan due to their mobility and convenient logistics, they proved generally inadequate for intense combat in Korea, Vietnam and both invasions of Iraq.[7]

Stryker BCTs, as the Army's newest type of maneuver brigade, field scouts with medium-weight platforms. With seven Active Component and two National Guard squadrons, they comprise just 15 percent of the cavalry force.[8] Because Stryker formations are, according to Army doctrine, "more deployable than the [armored BCT (ABCT)]" and have "greater tactical mobility, protection and firepower than the IBCT," they could provide divisions and joint task forces with a compromise option that possesses moderate capability to fight for information and provide freedom of maneuver.[9] Similar to the scouts the Army predominantly relied upon in Europe during World War II, Stryker squadrons, especially select units that have been "upgunned" with 30mm autocannons, boast ability to defeat lighter enemy forces while defending, under ideal conditions, against adversary armor.[10]

The heavy cavalry of the ABCTs represent the Army's most capable ground R&S formation in high-intensity warfare. As illustrated by the combat record of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, in settings ranging from open deserts to restrictive jungles, mechanized squadrons provide divisions or joint task forces with the ability to forcefully shape maneuver options with high-tempo reconnaissance and durable security. While the immense weight of their armored platforms, high rates of fuel consumption and large signatures make them less strategically mobile and more expensive, their Cavalry Fighting Vehicles and tanks possess unique potential to deter potential opponents through forward positioning. Armored scouts, representing nine Active Component and six National Guard squadrons, comprise about 25 percent of the larger cavalry force.[11]

The second insight from the Army's record of employing cavalry since mechanization centers on the importance of empowering scouts with cross-domain capabilities. While mounting them on appropriate vehicles with requisite mobility, protection and firepower has traditionally defined their maneuver parameters, augmenting squadrons with expanded surveillance, destructive fires, engineer mobility and cyber/electronic warfare means can multiply capabilities. Rotary-wing aviation, as an ideal instrument for extending a supported element's breadth of frontage and depth of reach, remains among the most important combat multipliers. The placement of attack helicopters in direct support or under operational control of ground cavalry is a primary factor that separates division and corps-level scouts from those that enable brigades with more narrowly defined tactical purposes.[12]

The crucial importance of pairing at least one aviation troop with a heavy division cavalry, or more in the case of an airborne-infantry division or a dispersed joint task force, finds ready historical validation. Retired COL William Haponski, commander of 1-4 Cav in 1969, emphasized how the "close-in support" by air cavalry with "instant, accurate firepower" empowered his squadron during "extended action" in security efforts in Vietnam. Likewise, 1st Infantry Division's report from the first Gulf War articulated how integrated rotary-wing assets were "needed to effectively cover the sector normally associated with the division's frontage" during forced entry.[13] The uniting of aerial and ground scouts – which unsurprisingly share much of the same organizational culture and traditions – creates air/ground teams capable of conducting expanded screens or extended reconnaissance in zone.

While rotary-wing troopers enhance a squadron's tactical breadth and depth, joint fires have traditionally provided scouts an outsized ability to disrupt and destroy enemy forward elements. For cavalry to fully enable division maneuver, it requires support from responsive indirect fires – often with precision rockets at extreme ranges – to compensate for limited organic lethality. As Haponski again noted, his troopers in Vietnam "always" had a "specific artillery battery assigned in direct support to fire immediately in the event of contact." He also emphasized how joint and combined fires, swiftly delivered by Air Force, Navy, Marine and allied attack aircraft, provided "immediate support" with "huge swaths of terrain erupting in a hell that cannot be imagined by anyone who has not seen it."[14] These kinds of echeloned fires remain particularly critical for enabling light scouts during high-intensity combat.

Cavalry formations, when organized to support joint-forces maneuver, can be empowered with additional enablers to better serve as agile combined-arms teams. Fighting early and forward of the main body, they have historically incorporated air defense, engineers, chemical reconnaissance, high-altitude surveillance, signals collection,

human-terrain specialists, civil-affairs teams, forward air controllers and additional operations staff with specialized expertise. As the Army continues to integrate emerging technologies, scouts will increasingly facilitate cyber/electronic warfare, space, human terrain, special operations and informational efforts to shape operating environments across depth and dimension. Similar to the traditional pairing of air and ground scouts, cyber action teams in particular may increasingly find cavalry troops to be ideal partners for facilitating early-access penetration.[15]

Each of the Army's types of ground squadrons – when empowered with tailored cross-domain capability according to maneuver profile and mission requirements – consequently offer flexible options for divisions and joint forces to attain R&S superiority. The structural diversity of the cavalry force, though currently overly represented by humvee troops, provides a panoply of customizable teams for dominating disruption zones during offensive, defensive and stability operations. This means leaders should select and design division-cavalry teams to achieve tactical overmatch relative to expected enemy capabilities rather than preconceived platform biases. As argued in VII Corps' report following Operation Desert Storm, effective scouts need to be resourced to "fight for information" and "go in harm's way," regardless of intended stealthy observation.[16]

Division-cavalry task forces

These insights can potentially inform future institutional efforts to bridge the current R&S capability gaps at higher echelons. The Army could in part mitigate the issue by creating tailored cavalry task forces from assets typically controlled by divisions in both garrison and combat environments. Similar to the Excursion initiative that task-organizes entire BCTs to temporarily serve as corps-level R&S brigades, divisions or modestly-sized joint task forces can create combined-arms teams from assigned aerial, fires and maneuver elements to provide maximally equipped reconnaissance capability.[17] Rather than relying on brigades to "shape the deep fight" as an artificial layer between forward scouts and division commanders – as criticized in 1st Armored Division's 2015 Warfighting Assessment – the flexible construction of separate cavalry task forces may allow more efficient information collection.[18]

The compositions of typical U.S. Army divisions allow myriad possibilities to create tailored R&S teams. An initial and expedient option would be to detach a cavalry squadron from its parent BCT and provide it an attack-aviation company in direct support. The addition of armed rotary-wing capabilities would create, according to historical norms, the minimal air/ground capabilities required to execute more expansive IC and counter-reconnaissance. To create the operational reach, flexibility and survivability to maneuver forward of the main body, the low-augmentation task force would also require direct support of air defense and indirect fires, a liaison officer from the providing combat-aviation brigade and tailored logistical support.

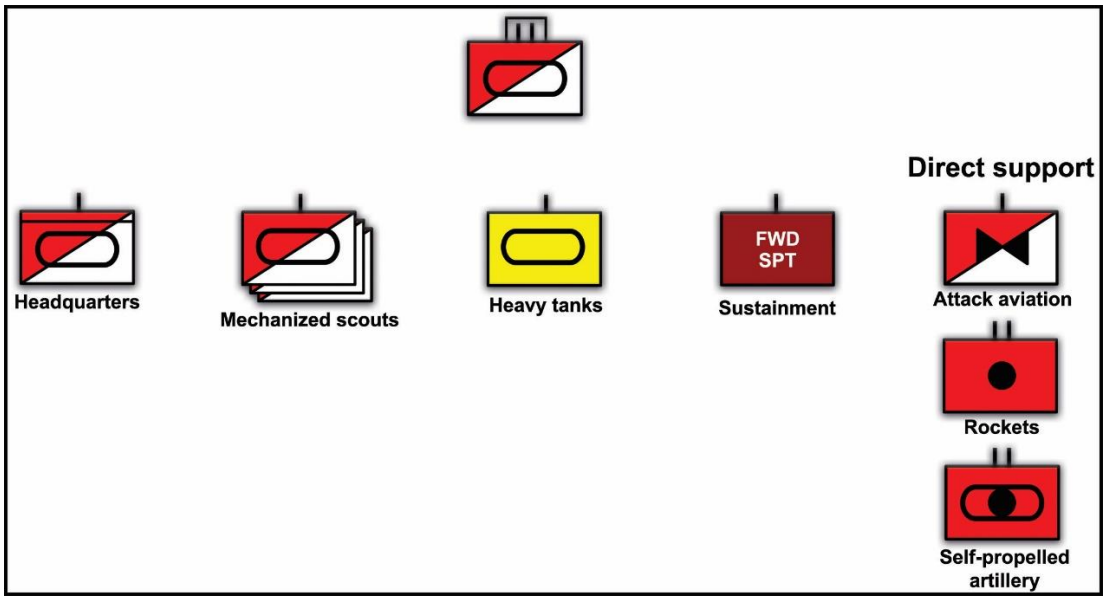

Figure 1. Division-cavalry task force (armored), low augmentation.

This battalion-sized task force would provide an economized method for divisions to recreate the basic capabilities of the legacy Reorganization of Army Divisions H-series squadrons that fought in Vietnam and defended Europe. Depending on the task force's mechanized, motorized or aerial profile, the air/ground team could execute zone, route and area reconnaissance, or screen and guard operations with minimal preparation. This configuration would potentially allow divisions to reconnoiter three major routes or maintain a contested screening effort across 40- to 50-kilometer frontages.[19] However, the changes would leave the BCT that provided the squadron with limited scouting capability while compelling aviation, fires and sustainment units to dedicate early resources to support the forward effort.

A second option for creating a more robust division-cavalry task force would be to build on the first template with expanded combat power and cross-domain fires. This medium-level augmentation could include operational control of an additional ground-cavalry troop, an engineer platoon, a chemical platoon and an IC-and-analysis section. To enable adequate tactical reach, it would require support from air defense, extended logistical trains, long-range unmanned aerial surveillance (UAS), cannon or rocket battalions, an attack reconnaissance battalion (air) and, potentially, dedicated cyber/electronic warfare and information-operations teams. It would likely require transfer of staff from providing aviation, artillery and sustainment units to increase squadron mission-command capacity.

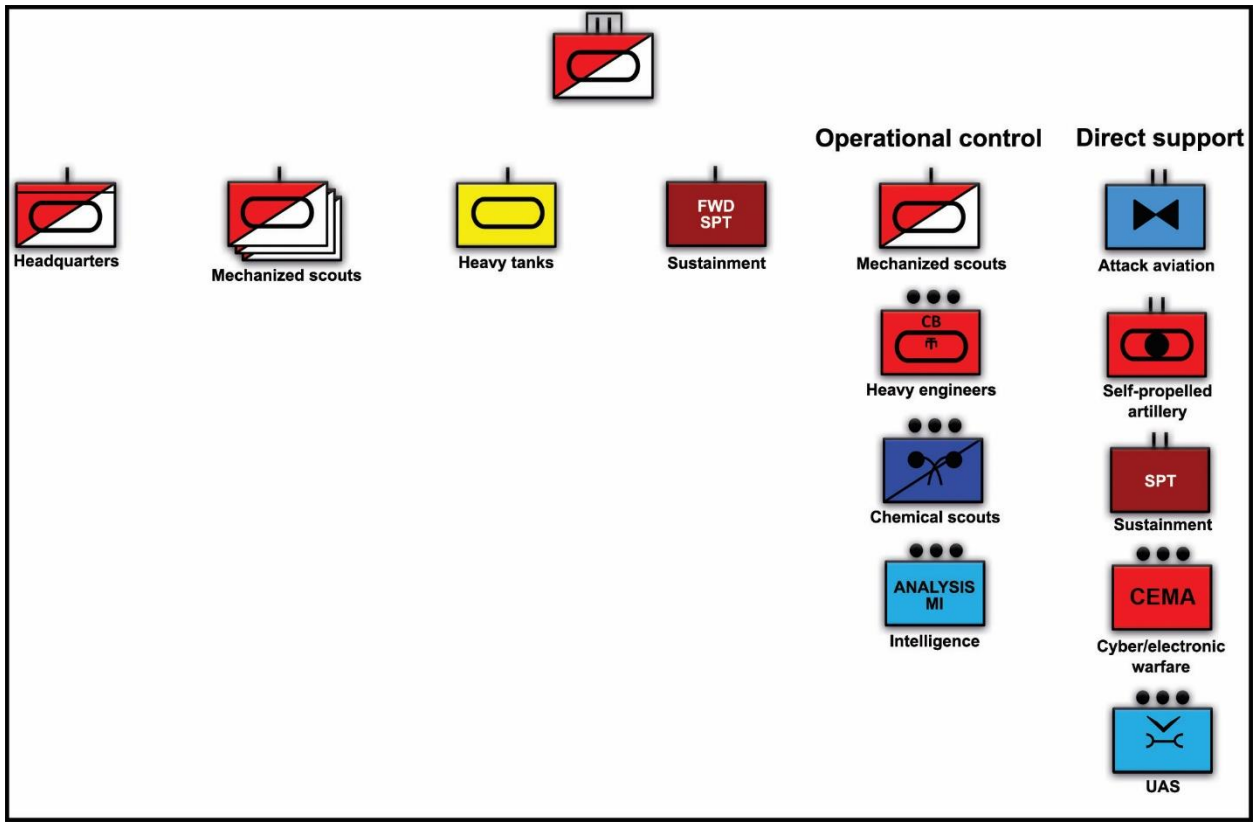

Figure 2. Division-cavalry task force (armored), medium augmentation.

This cavalry task force would likewise find recent historical relevancy. Building on the imposing L-series model that led 3rd Infantry Division's invasion of Iraq in 2003, it would field four ground-cavalry troops, a tank or anti-armor company and organic mortars. It could potentially reconnoiter five major routes or guard some 50 to 70 kilometers of frontage.[20] An armor-centric version in particular would also be equipped to, as required by Army doctrine, conduct "aggressive" reconnaissance-in-force "to determine and exploit enemy weaknesses" while destroying enemy scouts.[21] Though it would stress a squadron's span of control, compel extensive combined-arms training and again require mitigation of the losing BCT's loss of scouting capacity, the concept would allow divisions to achieve early access into contested domains without prematurely committing entire brigades.

A third and more consequential option for enabling division or joint-forces maneuver would be to create a larger and more powerful task force. In a marked departure from the current R&S brigade program that provides modest augmentation to standard BCTs, this initiative would place three cavalry squadrons under a brigade headquarters while removing two of its maneuver battalions to other brigades. It would retain control of its organic artillery, engineer, sustainment and remaining maneuver battalion. The team could further benefit from gaining operational control of an attack reconnaissance squadron (air), an air-assault company (air) and two more chemical platoons. It would also require support from a cyber action team, tactical air defense, long-range rocket fires, unmanned and high-altitude surveillance and a tailored forward-logistics element from a sustainment brigade.

An alternate method for creating a brigade-sized reconnaissance team would be for a division to provide its combat-aviation brigade operational control of a ground-cavalry squadron. While this type of force would lack ACR-type ability to execute methodical reconnaissance and durable security actions, it would expand on the capabilities of the air-centric squadrons that once enabled airborne and airmobile divisions – exemplified by 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment's missions in Vietnam – with responsive IC across vast distances and restrictive terrain.[22] Though the brigade's ground scouts would benefit from increased availability of AH-64 Apache attack helicopter and UAS fires, they would, similar to any cavalry organization, still require robust support by indirect fires, engineers and modified logistical trains.

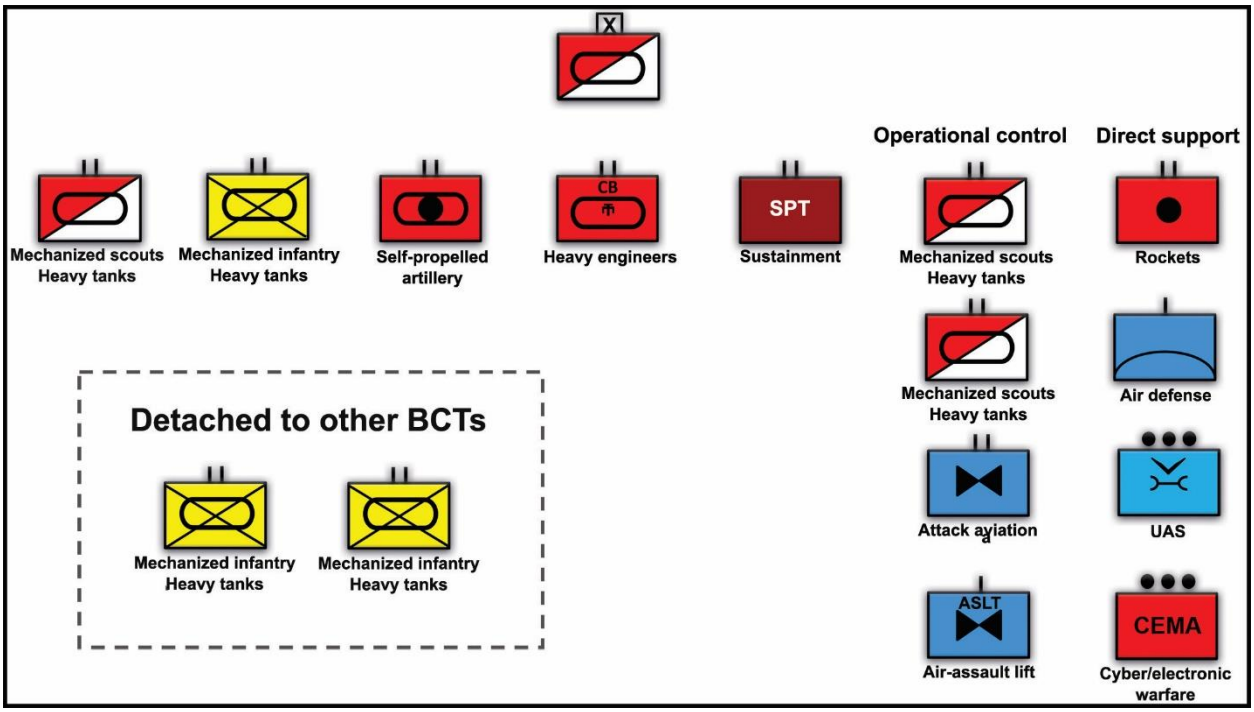

Figure 3. Division-cavalry task force (armored brigade combat team), high augmentation.

Task-organized cavalry brigades would replicate aspects of the capabilities demonstrated by 11th ACR in Vietnam and 2nd ACR in the first Gulf War. Depending on the air/ground force mix, they could potentially reconnoiter nine major routes or screen a front 120 to 150 kilometers wide. While the teams would require substantial training, they could provide aggressive advance guard and cover assignments while exploiting the effects of cyber, special-operations forces, fast-moving attack aircraft and informational, cyber/electronic and long-range fires to dominate counter-reconnaissance. As BG John Kolasheski, 50th commandant of the U.S. Army Armor School, noted of a 1st Infantry Division exercise in 2016 that experimented with an air/ground brigade, it provided "critical reaction time and maneuver space" for "exploiting success and seizing opportunities of our choosing."[23]

Reconsidering division cavalry

While creating permanent squadrons at the two-star level would be an ideal solution to current needs, task-organizing assets already under division control can provide mitigation that is internally resourced, tactically

effective and readily available. This could include empowering a detached squadron with attack aviation, creating modest task forces with maximal fires support or forming entire cavalry brigades to – as prescribed by retired LTG David Barno in his report, "The Future of the Army" – provide "division and corps commanders a scalable formation capable of screening and guard missions, as well as a myriad of long-range independent operations in support of other maneuver units."[24] Regardless of composition, tailored teams would offer options to capitalize on emerging cross-domain capabilities to answer higher-echelon information requirements.

GEN Mark Milley, 39th Chief of Staff of the Army, cautioned in the wake of America's large-scale ground campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan that "the level of uncertainty, the velocity of instability and potential for significant inter-state conflict is higher than it is has been since the end of the Cold War."[25] Given this volatility, which is intensifying in regions such as the Middle East, Europe and East Asia where air/ground cavalry teams proved their utility in past wars, divisions must prepare to fight for information as subordinate maneuver elements or as independent joint task forces. This imperative includes organizing to conduct forceful R&S against a variety of near-peer, non-state and hybrid adversaries. While division-cavalry squadrons seemingly outlived their usefulness in 2004, the challenges of the future may demand their return as optimized task forces.

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Notes

[1] Enclosure, after-action report (AAR): Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, VII Corps, June 27, 1991.
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[13] Retired COL William C. Haponski, ***Danger's Dragoons***; AAR, Operation Desert Storm, 1st Infantry Division, June 20, 1991.
[14] Haponski, ***Danger's Dragoons***.
[15] FM 3-98, ***Reconnaissance and Security Operations***.
[16] Enclosure, AAR, Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, VII Corps, June 27, 1991.
[17] Army Technical Publication 3-91, ***Division Operations***.
[18] MG Stephen M. Twitty to GEN Mark A. Milley, "1st Armored Division NIE/AWA Force Structure," Nov. 12, 2015.
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[20] Ibid.
[21] FM 3-98.
[22] McGrath.
[23] FM 3-98; quoted in Lee Robinson, "Advance Guard Fights for Information," ***ARMY*** magazine, February 2017.
[24] Barno.

[25] Sydney Freedberg, "GEN Milley to SASC: World Getting Worse, Army Getting Smaller," ***Breaking Defense***, July 21, 2015.

Acronym Quick-Scan

AAR – after-action report
ABCT – armored brigade combat team
ACR – armored-cavalry regiment
BCT – brigade combat team
Divcav – division cavalry
FM – field manual
IC – information collection
IBCT – infantry brigade combat team
MCoE – Maneuver Center of Excellence
R&S – reconnaissance and security
UAS – unmanned aerial surveillance