

# Resurrecting 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment

by LTC Cole C. Pinheiro

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, established in 1846 as a regiment of mounted riflemen, marked its 175<sup>th</sup> birthday with excitement about rumors that the Army will re-establish an armored cavalry regiment (ACR) within the next two years. Leaders across the Army are assessing an emerging requirement for an ACR to conduct corps-level reconnaissance and security (R&S) operations against a peer threat.

How did we get here?

Multiple 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR veterans argued against plans more than a decade ago to convert the unit into a Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT) in Fiscal Year 2012 and lamented the loss of III Corps' pre-eminent R&S formation. I argued in 2010 that the conversion to an SBCT was short-sighted, supported by leaders who were misguided by Army Transformation initiatives that were predicated on information-dominance theories. I thought the decision to convert 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR ignored the regiment's counterinsurgency successes in Iraq and disregarded the fact that 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR was uniquely capable of serving as III Corps' eyes and ears during major combat.<sup>1</sup>

Although partially accurate, my argument was unfair to the leaders who advocated for 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR within the bureaucracy and who were forced to make tough choices and compromise to prevent the total decommissioning of the unit.

Changes in the international system during the past 10 years have emboldened peer competitors, increased the potential for major conflict and renewed the Army's focus on large-scale combat operations (LSCO). Conditions may now be ripe to vindicate those leaders who saved 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR from destruction. It's time to affirm that their efforts to preserve the regiment for another day were not in vain. Discussion now centers on the renewed need for an ACR, the proper organization given modern threats and the cost to the total Army force structure.



**Figure 1. SFC Ron Corella, a mortar-platoon sergeant assigned to Killer Troop, 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment, from Fort Hood, TX, slaps high-fives with Iraqi children in Mosul, Iraq, Feb. 1, 2008. (Photo by SGT John Crosby, 115<sup>th</sup> Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)**

## Purpose of an ACR

The ACR was uniquely capable of conducting a screen, guard or cover to protect an armored corps, and it could conduct reconnaissance across the breadth of a corps to facilitate offensive maneuver. On the offense, the original ACR was built to locate and penetrate the enemy's security zone and forward defenses while protecting friendly divisions from enemy observation, and also while employing direct and indirect fires to preserve their combat power.

Therefore the ACR's mission was to destroy enemy reconnaissance and advance guard units, and then locate and destroy the enemy's first echelon regiments.<sup>2</sup> The ACR would then use positional advantage or direct and indirect fires to fix the lead elements of the second echelon while passing forward divisions to complete the enemy's destruction.

In the defense, the ACR would protect the corps, delay the enemy to provide time for friendly forces, destroy enemy reconnaissance and the advance guard, attrite the first echelon and provide early warning to allow the commander to make decisions.

The need to conduct reconnaissance was inherent in all the ACR's missions. Importantly, the ACR's heavy organization allowed it to gain and maintain contact with the enemy's main body, survive, fight for information and provide timely and accurate reporting to answer the corps commander's information requirements, enabling the commander to make decisions.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR's role in Operation Desert Storm – and the regiment's actions against the Iraqi Tawakalna Division Feb. 26, 1991, during the Battle of 73 Easting – is the prime example of how a highly trained professional ACR can gain situational understanding and seize the initiative for an armored corps.<sup>3</sup>

## Contemporary challenges

Russia and China have implemented military-modernization programs to professionalize their forces and field advanced technology to compete in all domains.<sup>4</sup> Peer competitors now possess advanced reconnaissance assets (space, electronic warfare (EW), cyber, special-operations forces, unmanned aerial systems (UAS)), anti-access area-denial systems and long-range massed fires. The Russians in particular have streamlined their sensor-to-shooter processes that allow them to rapidly detect formations and command posts (CPs) and to deliver massed long-range fires with devastating results.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 2. SPC Stephen Whitney, a cavalry scout with Headquarters and Headquarters Troop (HHT), 3<sup>rd</sup> "Thunder" Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment, sits behind an M240B rifle May 28, 2010, while serving on a personal-security detachment at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, CA. (Photo by SGT Roger RyDell Daniels, 16<sup>th</sup> Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)**

The notorious Russian fires attack that destroyed a mechanized Ukrainian battalion near Zelenopillya July 11, 2014, highlights this rapid find-fix-finish kill chain. The Russians employed multiple intelligence-collection efforts to identify unit locations and then massed rockets to destroy the concentrated Ukrainian forces.

Russia's investment in sensors and continued modernization of artillery systems is intended to extend battlefield geometry even farther. This will allow them to detect and destroy enemy formations at even greater ranges using their integrated-fires commands.<sup>6</sup> To counter these threats, our formations require long-range intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) platforms and fires. Enemy indirect fires increase the importance of dispersion, survivability and redundant communications among friendly echelons in LSCO.<sup>7</sup>

The U.S. III Corps experimented by employing a traditional ACR against a modern, technologically advanced enemy during Warfighter Exercise (WfX) 21-4 in April 2021. The ACR was comprised of an armored brigade combat team (ABCT) augmented with fires, aviation and engineers. III Corps ordered the regiment to conduct an advance guard in front of a portion of the corps, destroy enemy forces in the disruption zone and protect the trailing division from direct and indirect fires until the enemy's battle zone was reached.

Although WfX 21-4 was an imperfect replication of LSCO, the simulated enemy's robust reconnaissance capabilities, obstacle efforts, attack aviation and joint fires created significant challenges for the ACR. The exercise has doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities and policy implications that suggest the next ACR must be designed differently than its Cold War ancestor to achieve its purpose on the modern battlefield.



**Figure 3.** SPC Melvin Stewart, R Troop, 4<sup>th</sup> "Longknife" Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry, talks with the pilots after connecting a fuel line to an AH-64 Apache helicopter May 27, 2010, during four weeks of training at NTC. (Photo by SGT Roger RyDell Daniels, 16<sup>th</sup> Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

### **Previous 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR**

The next ACR should not fully adopt its predecessor's blueprints. It requires redesign to survive all forms of contact against a peer threat. The old 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR was organized this way:

- Three ground-cavalry squadrons. Each squadron contained three cavalry troops (cavalry troop: nine M1A2 Abrams tanks, 13 M3A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicles and two M1064 mortar carriers, plus headquarters, medical and maintenance sections), one tank company, an organic field-artillery battery (M109A6) and an HHT, which contained the staff, medical platoon and support platoon.
- An attack-aviation squadron with an assault company and aviation-maintenance company (4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR: 24 AH-64 Apache attack helicopters and 10 UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters).
- A regimental-support squadron (RSS).

The regiment's separate companies included 66<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence Company, 43<sup>rd</sup> Combat Engineer Company (three sapper platoons and an assault/obstacle platoon) and a Bradley Linebacker battery (for air defense).

The ACR was well-resourced with decentralized firepower but was short on the dismounts required to clear key terrain to enable maneuver. The regiment knew that enemy with anti-armor systems in complex terrain was a significant threat, and the ACR's only solution was suppressive fire. Scenarios similar to what the Israeli Defense Forces faced in 2006 during the invasion of Lebanon were a real possibility.

## Intelligence collection

If the future ACR is going to successfully conduct R&S for a corps on a deeper battlefield, the intelligence warfighting function requires reinforcement. The ACR will likely continue to operate forward enough of the divisions to provide decision space, but it will not physically be located in the corps' deep area past the coordinated fire line (CFL). If the ACR is going to contribute to the corps' shaping efforts or inform the corps commander's decision-making, it must be able to see and detect enemy formations deeper on the modern battlefield. This requires more cyber and EW capabilities at the regimental level, and more low-level voice-intercept teams to allow squadrons to gain signal intelligence across a vast front.

**UAS.** The ACR requires a UAS capability that can range the corps' deep area to assist in detection and delivery of joint fires. This UAS capability, unlike the MQ-1C Gray Eagle, should be easily launched and recovered without the use of an airfield so that the ACR can employ it effectively while maintaining tempo in the offense. The ACR may incorporate future semi-autonomous and autonomous ground and air sensors when they become available to extend its reach. The regiment should field small UAS at company level to enable tactical maneuver. Sensors should be networked so that ground-combat systems can view them, and they should support the joint force interoperability initiative of any sensor, any shooter.

**Human intelligence (HUMINT).** The regiment should retain HUMINT capability to collect from the population. These intelligence capabilities will support both the ACR's close fight and the corps' deep fight.

## Force structure, organizational restructure

**Fires.** The fires complex should differ significantly from the traditional ACR. An organic field-artillery battalion is superior to the old independent battery model because it provides a battalion commander with staff to train the fires enterprise and to assist in fires planning and execution during LSCO. The ACR can anticipate that the corps and division commanders will place the M142 High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System and the M270 Multiple-Launch Rocket System as far forward as possible to shape their respective deep fights, normally behind the ACR's lead elements within the ACR's support area.

The ACR will clear position areas for artillery of the field-artillery brigade and should advocate for a general-support reinforcing relationship with those rocket battalions. Corps and division commanders will use their long-range munitions to disintegrate the enemy's integrated air-defense systems and destroy the integrated-fires command (IFC), but the ACR can effectively use the shorter range, less-desired M26 rockets to enable its maneuver.

The Army's nascent extended-range cannon artillery (ERCA) should be fielded to the ACR. Pairing ERCA with long-range sensors, including radars, would allow the ACR to range the enemy's artillery with organic fires, which would help shape the corps' high-payoff target list and protect the divisions from the enemy's IFC. The regimental commander could attach batteries to ground-cavalry squadrons to enable operations or keep the batteries consolidated under regimental control to mass fires.

Finally, when the ACR is operating as the lead element of the corps' forward-line-of-own-troops (FLOT), it should be the proponent that controls the CFL's movement to maximize the use of fires between the CFL and fires-support coordination line.

**Airspace.** The ACR is challenged because it cannot control airspace, and this impedes responsive fires, attack aviation and joint fires. Lacking a joint air-ground integration center, the ACR can only manage airspace if a division allocates it to them, and the current size and composition of the regimental fires-and-effects coordination center does not favor positive control of airspace. During the restructure, the Army should consider providing the ACR with the capability to control airspace to enable responsive, deep joint and surface fires in support of the corps.

**Movement and maneuver.** The Army should rectify the original ACR's shortcomings when reconstituting the movement-and-maneuver warfighting function. Ground-cavalry squadrons consisting of three troops (each with two scout platoons and two tank platoons), a tank company and a Stryker or mechanized-infantry company would have enough combat power to achieve the ACR's original purpose. Each squadron would contain the infantry required to clear complex terrain or to employ anti-armor weapons to enable rapid maneuver.

Army research-and-development initiatives, including unmanned ground-combat vehicles and networked UAS platforms, should be considered when modernizing the ACR. Organic mobile 120mm mortars would provide cavalry troops with responsive fires to enable maneuver. The regiment's engineer capability should include sapper platoons for each cavalry squadron as well as redundant breaching, bridging and blade assets to enable mobility and countermobility against an enemy with significant engineer capabilities. But the regiment may lose some dig assets that standard brigade combat teams (BCTs) use for survivability in the defense. The right engineer structure may have more capabilities than 43<sup>rd</sup> Engineers but less than a brigade engineer battalion.

**Air cavalry.** Lastly, the ACR requires a unique air-cavalry squadron that contains three air-cavalry troops of reconnaissance aircraft, an assault-aviation company to move infantry and supplies, a medical-evacuation section and an aviation-maintenance company. The regimental commander would decide how to employ the aircraft, either decentralized in support of the cavalry squadrons or as a battalion-sized maneuver element to destroy large enemy formations.

**Air defense.** The ACR needs more assets to protect itself from contemporary peer threats. Arrayed across the corps' FLOT, the ACR is extremely vulnerable to enemy air attack. This threat necessitates short-range air-defense (SHORAD) systems that are lightly armored and capable of surviving direct-fire attacks from enemy ground-reconnaissance elements. The original ACR architects understood this and provided a battery of Bradley Linebackers. Future solutions may include mobile vehicle-mounted SHORAD systems and dismounted Stinger teams in the cavalry troops and infantry companies.

**Other assets.** The ACR also requires counter-UAS systems to prevent the enemy from detecting the regiment's formations. The increased chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosives threat suggests that the ACR requires a chemical company with a chemical reconnaissance platoon and decontamination capabilities to maintain tempo for the corps.

## **Impact on support**

The RSS would struggle to support this organization without restructuring. While each cavalry squadron will maintain its vehicle fleet with its forward-support company, the RSS requires a passback maintenance capability to reconstitute combat power quickly and return it to the fight. The ACR's position in front of the corps makes evacuating broken vehicles to a cannibalization point or trailing division-support area problematic. The RSS maintenance company should have organic military-occupation specialty 91A, 91M and 91P mechanics to help repair tanks, Bradleys and Paladins.

This tracked mechanic capability was removed from the brigade-support battalion's Bravo companies, but this should be reconsidered given the ACR's unique mission. For the same reason, the RSS needs some heavy-equipment tractor-trailer capability for recovery to the regimental-support area (RSA), even if it is only given these assets during combat operations.



**Figure 4. “Donovian” forces, depicted by Soldiers from 11<sup>th</sup> ACR, advance through the “city” of Razish at NTC, Fort Irwin, CA, March 17, 2012. The Donovanian forces are used in the training environment to provide a greater sense of realism during training – 11<sup>th</sup> ACR serves as the opposing force (OPFOR) at NTC. However, the U.S. Army’s dirt combat-training centers have struggled to replicate corps and division effects. (Photo by SGT Zachary A. Gardner, 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment Public Affairs Office)**

Within the ACR’s supply-support-activity platoon, the common authorized stockage listing should be more robust than a BCT’s, and the regimental commander should be authorized to direct more lines to enable greater operational reach.

Enemy activity, displaced persons and the large volume of follow-on friendly forces will produce congested lines of communication (LoCs), traffic-control problems and a priority for movement forward toward the front. The RSS should anticipate that the expeditionary sustainment command throughput will be interrupted as resupply convoys pass through divisions to reach the RSA. Resupply will be delayed in LSCO as sustainment units fight to push commodities forward.

Accordingly, the RSS should have water production and storage capability, greater mobile bulk-fuel capacity and more transportation capability to carry additional Class V and commodities to prevent the ACR from culminating in front of the corps. Operating across the breadth of a corps will require the regiment to establish multiple forward logistics elements to support the dispersed squadrons. The extended LoCs between these sustainment nodes produce command-and-control (C2) challenges at echelon and distribution problems as drivers are pushed to the limits of human endurance.

## **CPs**

The ACR requires CPs that are equipped and manned to control increasingly complicated and dispersed operations across a vast front. CPs must be smaller, mobile, camouflaged and lightly armored to protect against artillery shrapnel. While the Army has experimented with modular ExpandoVan-based CPs, the force requires armored platforms that are rapidly established and displaced, enable staff collaboration and are networked for modern systems.

The depth and breadth of the battlefield require that ACRs be manned and equipped to maintain both a main CP and a tactical CP over a long time and to be outfitted with redundancy in all command, control, communications, computers and intelligence systems to ensure C2 survivability. Directional antennas, high-frequency and high-capacity line-of-sight radios can help maintain communications in a contested environment. The contemporary reality is that peer threats will be able to intermittently degrade communications across the spectrum.

Mission command, facilitated by a firm understanding of the commander's intent and initiative, are fundamental in the LSCO fight. The ACR has a role in answering the corps commander's critical information requirements and in shaping the corps' deep and close fights. The regimental staff should be larger and more senior than a BCT to meet those requirements. A post-battalion-command lieutenant colonel serving as the deputy commander would assist the regimental commander in synchronizing all warfighting functions across the regiment's area of operations.

## Winners and losers

The most contentious portion of the debate is who will win and lose in any force-structure change. Branch equities are at stake if 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment converts from an SBCT to an ACR. There is pervasive concern on where Army leadership will make cuts across the total Army force to field a modern ACR. Armor Branch, for example, has been discussing the importance of reconstituting division cavalry and an ACR because of the greater likelihood of major conflict.

Corps and divisions are the units of action in LSCO, and these commanders currently are overly reliant on ISR and national assets for reconnaissance. We will likely have to shutter the ABCTs' armored reconnaissance squadrons to make force-structure changes, perhaps leaving the ABCT with a brigade reconnaissance troop. However, change is hard for leaders who spent the last two decades with ABCTs as the units of action. These leaders became accustomed to strong, responsive BCT R&S formations.

Our dirt combat-training centers have struggled to replicate corps and division effects. Multiple decisive-action rotations have conditioned BCT leaders to distrust division intelligence feeds and to value brigade-level reconnaissance squadrons. For these reasons, a decision to move reconnaissance assets from BCTs to divisions/corps would require cultural and normative changes across multiple branches.

The greatest challenge decision-makers face is determining where to make force-structure cuts and what emerging technologies to fund. The ACR's maintenance cost is high and a deterrent to conversion in a budget-constrained environment. In fact, maintenance cost was a determining factor in the decision to transform 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR to an SBCT. Therefore, budget is likely the largest political and bureaucratic impediment to rebuilding the ACR.

Conversations across the force are converging in one aspect: a modern ACR structure should not simply mirror the storied regiment that was disassembled in 2012. However, there is one vital element that must remain the same in the next 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR. The troopers' esprit de corps and aggressive mentality has been the regiment's lifeblood for 175 years and the driving force behind its many notable contributions to our nation's defense. The regiment still practices its unique cavalry traditions, and its members are proud of its reconnaissance heritage.



**Figure 5. 278<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Tennessee Army National Guard) Soldiers test-fire their weapons before entering Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom III. The 278th is the only ACR in the National Guard as of 2017 and the only other current ACR besides 11th ACR. (U.S. Army photo)**

Senior leaders should be proud that they were able to protect this from destruction a decade ago. Today 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment is blessed with outstanding leaders and disciplined troopers who are awaiting a final decision on transformation, and they are ready to resume their role as III Corps' ACR.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> CPT Cole C. Pinheiro, "The Armored Cavalry Regiment: Battle Proven and Future Primed," *ARMOR*, June-August 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Field Manual 17-95, *Cavalry Operations*, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us about the Future of Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 1996).

<sup>4</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Radin et al, *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition*, RAND Corporation, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Operations*.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ABCT** – armored brigade combat team

**ACR** – armored cavalry regiment

**BCT** – brigade combat team

**C2** – command and control

**CFL** – coordinated fire line

**CP** – command post

**ERCA** – extended-range cannon artillery

**EW** – electronic warfare

**FLOT** – forward-line-of-own-troops

**HHT** – headquarters and headquarters troop

**HUMINT** – human intelligence

**IFC** – integrated-fires command

**ISR** – intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance

**LoC** – line of communication

**LSCO** – large-scale combat operations

**NTC** – National Training Center

**OPFOR** – opposing force

**R&S** – reconnaissance and security

**RSA** – regimental-support area

**RSS** – regimental-support squadron

**SBCT** – Stryker brigade combat team

**SHORAD** – short-range air defense

**UAS** – unmanned aerial system

**WfX** – warfighter exercise

From many to two

Current ACRs



11<sup>th</sup> ACR (Active Army)



278<sup>th</sup> ACR (Tennessee Army National Guard)

Former Active Army ACRs



2<sup>nd</sup> ACR (now a Stryker BCT)



3<sup>rd</sup> ACR (now a Stryker BCT)



6<sup>th</sup> ACR (converted to an U.S. Army Regimental System (USARS) aviation regiment)



14<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment: Broken up. 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron was reorganized to 1<sup>st</sup> BCT, 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA; 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron is a Cavalry squadron of 2<sup>nd</sup> BCT (an infantry BCT), 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, HI; 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron is inactive but had been reflagged to 5<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry, 1<sup>st</sup> BCT, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division; 5<sup>th</sup> Squadron, inactive, had been reflagged to 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment.



17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (Armored) (now a USARS parent regiment)

Former Reserve Component Guard ACRs (disbanded or redesignated as non-ACRs; most were part of the Organized Reserve Corps)



101<sup>st</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (New York Army National Guard)



102<sup>nd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (New Jersey Army National Guard)



103<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Maine Army National Guard)



104<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Pennsylvania Army National Guard)



107<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Ohio Army National Guard)



108<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Mississippi Army National Guard)



111<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (California National Guard)



112<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Texas National Guard)



115<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry (Wyoming Army National Guard)



116<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Idaho Army National Guard)



150<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (West Virginia Army National Guard)



163<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Montana Army National Guard)



173<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (Tennessee National Guard)



300<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



301<sup>st</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



302<sup>nd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



303<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



304<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



305<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



306<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



308<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



309<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



310<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



311<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



314<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



317<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



320<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment



321<sup>st</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment