

# The Fight for Information:

## Company D (Tank) as Reconnaissance Asset in an Armored Brigade Combat Team Cavalry Squadron

by CPT Tyler D. Stankye

The armored brigade combat team (ABCT) cavalry squadron is the only squadron built to conduct a reconnaissance-in-force (RIF); taking away the tank company removes that capability. The RIF is one of the five reconnaissance tasks assigned to a cavalry formation,<sup>1</sup> but it is often performed as a movement-to-contact or threat-focused zone reconnaissance due to the lack of a preplanned exfiltration or exploitation force.<sup>2</sup>

Company D can be the exfiltration and/or exploitation force that allows a squadron to conduct a doctrinal RIF. It is critical that Company D remain task-organized in the squadron to execute the full range of reconnaissance tasks. Further, task-organizing away from the squadron violates the “do not leave reconnaissance assets in reserve” reconnaissance fundamental.<sup>3</sup>

### Battlefield calculus

The ABCT cavalry squadron is the largest battalion-sized combat formation in the Army. The squadron’s Company D is an organic tank company with a full complement of 14 M1A2 System Enhanced Package V3 Abrams tanks.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of ratio-of-force, Company D brings significant combat power to the

reconnaissance fight. It can defeat a platoon of defending enemy main battle tanks (MBTs) or an equivalent force,<sup>5</sup> or enemy combat-security outposts in the friendly security zone.<sup>6</sup>

The tank company exploits the information gained by the cavalry troops or reinforces the troops to seize, retain and exploit the initiative. Company D can also defend against a battalion-sized formation of enemy MBTs<sup>7</sup> or an attacking battalion detachment<sup>8</sup> to allow the reconnaissance force to retrograde.

Whether it stays as an organic company or task-organizes a platoon to each cavalry troop, Company D increases the operational distances the cavalry squadron can operate in. According to the width formula (Table 2),<sup>9</sup> the planning width for an ABCT cavalry troop in unrestricted terrain is 18 kilometers.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the squadron with three reconnaissance troops can plan for 54 kilometers without the tank company.<sup>11</sup>

Company D adds 21 kilometers to the width, assuming no change to flank security because the M2A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicles will be on both flanks.<sup>12</sup> When task-organized to the troops, a tank platoon adds about seven kilometers to each troop.<sup>13</sup>

Operational variables will dictate the depth that can be covered based on the command and staff’s assessment.<sup>14</sup>

### Task-organization<sup>15</sup>

There are two main ways to task-organize Company D within the squadron to optimize its ability to conduct RIF. In the first task-organization, Company D remains pure and separate from the cavalry troops. The commander commits the company based on a well-thought-out decision-support matrix (DSM)<sup>16</sup> and commander’s reconnaissance guidance.<sup>17</sup>

In the second task-organization, the commander task-organizes tank platoons within each of the cavalry troops. This is the “hunter-killer” concept.<sup>18</sup>

Both task-organizations have a distinct mix of mass, flexibility and tempo. The commander must carefully weigh these benefits against the operational variables, a contiguous vs. non-contiguous area of operations (AO) and commander’s intent.

### Movement and maneuver

The Company D “pure” concept offers the advantages of mass, flexibility and centralized control of the company.

Friendly mission	Position	Friendly : Enemy
Delay		1:6
Defend	Prepared or fortified	1:3
Defend	Hasty	1:2.5
Attack	Prepared or fortified	3:1
Attack	Hasty	2.5:1
Counterattack	Flank	1:1

**Table 1. Historical minimum planning ratios.** (Adapted from Table 9-2, *Field Manual (FM) 6-0, Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*)

The cavalry troops conduct a RIF within their own respective AOs. Company D is staged behind them, prepared to be the exploitation or exfiltration force.

While the cavalry troops are conducting their reconnaissance, Company D plans to support one or all of them while out of contact because of standoff. The squadron commander commits Company D as the exploitation or exfiltration force for one or all troops based off the commander's DSM and commander's reconnaissance guidance.<sup>19</sup>

This task-organization retains the squadron commander's control of Company D in total and the ability to mass direct-fire effects anywhere in the AO. However, there is a slower tempo as Company D maneuvers to the forward-line-of-own troops from the rear staging area.

The "hunter-killer" concept offers the advantages of tempo and decentralized control by providing each cavalry troop with a tank platoon.<sup>20</sup> Hunter-killer teams allow troop commanders to control the tanks and maintain a higher tempo (although at lower mass than the "pure" concept) with the tanks moving with them. Hunter-killer limits the size of the enemy force that each troop can reasonably defeat – with only one tank platoon rather than a whole company<sup>21</sup> – but it does provide equal firepower across the formation. This is beneficial when the enemy is spread out over the AO and not

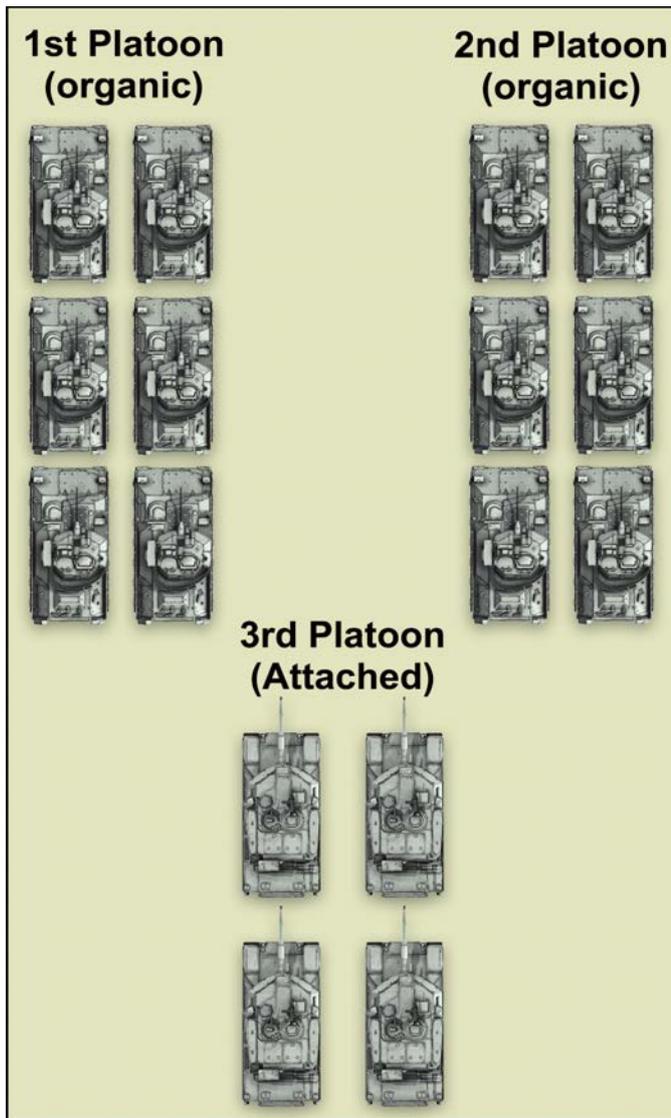


Figure 1. Cavalry squadron.

massed at a single position.

## Sustainment considerations

The last consideration is the sustainment warfighting function. The "pure" concept is the easier of the two to sustain. Company D is centrally located with all its organic logistics assets<sup>22</sup> relatively close to the squadron sustainment nodes.<sup>23</sup> The company can execute its own logistics plan without input from or coordination with the cavalry troops. The squadron sustainment footprint expands only when Company D commits forward to support one of the troops.

The "hunter-killer" concept is more logistically challenging. It adds the burden of sustaining a tank platoon to a cavalry troop that does not have

organic assets to support tanks' logistical requirements,<sup>24</sup> thereby shortening the amount of time the squadron can sustain the heightened tempo. One option to overcome this hurdle is to task the Company D commander to coordinate logistics with the cavalry troops.<sup>25</sup>

The squadron commander can also divide Company D's sustainment assets among the reconnaissance troop to provide it an organic capability. However, this increases the size of the reconnaissance troops' headquarters element and troop trains.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

The ABCT cavalry squadron is the only squadron built to conduct a RIF, but taking away the tank company removes that capability. Company D fulfills the doctrinal requirement for an exploitation and/or exfiltration force. There is a benefit to the frontage the squadron can cover because of the inclusion of tanks in the width equation.

A RIF mission does, however, require the squadron commander to weigh the tactical and sustainment benefits and challenges associated with the two task-organizations. The benefits of a doctrinal RIF require the brigade commander to leave the tank company with the squadron to maximize its use as a reconnaissance asset.

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The same width and depth formula is expressed here two different ways:

**Width formula**

Width = (0.5 weapons system maximum effective range) x (0.75 number of vehicles) x terrain + flank security

Depth = width/2

Expressed another way:

$$(((.5R)(.75Nv)) \times t) + F = W$$

$$.375 RNvT + F = W$$

**Depth formula**

D = W/2 (depth will not be greater than 1/3 maximum effective range of internal direct-fire assets)

**Number of vehicles**

$$Nv \times .75$$

$$6 \times .75 = 4.5$$

$$5 \times .75 = 3.75$$

$$4 \times .75 = 3$$

$$3 \times .75 = 2.25$$

$$2 \times .75 = 1.5$$

**Legend**

D – depth

F – flank security

Nv – number of vehicles in formation

R – maximum effective range of weapon system

T – terrain

T – 1 for unrestricted

T – .5 for restricted

T – .25 for severely restricted

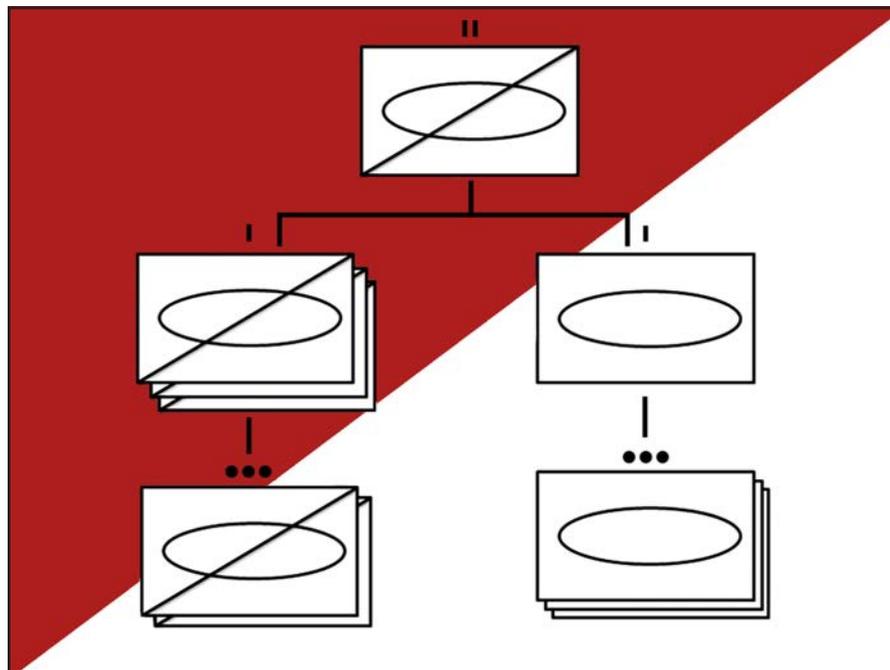
W – width

**Table 2. Scout platoon width/depth formula.** (Adapted from *Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-20.97, Cavalry Troop*)

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> ADP 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Army Lessons-Learned, *CTC Trends FY19*, No. 20-10, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Department of the Army, 2020.



**Figure 2. ABCT cavalry squadron with Company D remaining as an organic tank company.**

<sup>3</sup> FM 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> CPT Kyle Hoisington, “Understanding Reconnaissance Missions Instead of Focusing on Reconnaissance Platforms,” *ARMOR*, July-September 2015; *CTC Trends FY19*.

<sup>6</sup> Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE) Supplemental Manual 3-90, *Force Structure Reference Data: Brigade Combat Teams*, Fort Benning, GA: Maneuver Capabilities Development and Integration Directorate, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> FM 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Training Circular (TC) 7-100.2, *Opposing Force Tactics*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2020; accessed May 31, 2021, [https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/TC/TC\\_7-100.2\\_Opposing\\_Force\\_Tactics](https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/TC/TC_7-100.2_Opposing_Force_Tactics).

<sup>9</sup> FM 6-0.

<sup>10</sup> TC 7-100.2.

<sup>11</sup> ATP 3-20.97, *Cavalry Troop*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> ATP 3-20.96; FM 6-0.

<sup>17</sup> ATP 3-20.96.

<sup>18</sup> FM 6-0; ATP 3-20.96.

<sup>19</sup> FM 3-98; ATP 3-20.96.

<sup>20</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, *Hunter-Killer TACSOP*, informally published, last modified July 2, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> FM 3-98; ATP 3-20.96.

<sup>22</sup> *Hunter-Killer TACSOP*.

<sup>23</sup> FM 6-0.

<sup>24</sup> MCoE Supplemental Manual 3-90.

<sup>25</sup> ATP 3-20.96.

<sup>26</sup> *Hunter-Killer TACSOP*; MCoE Supplemental Manual 3-90.

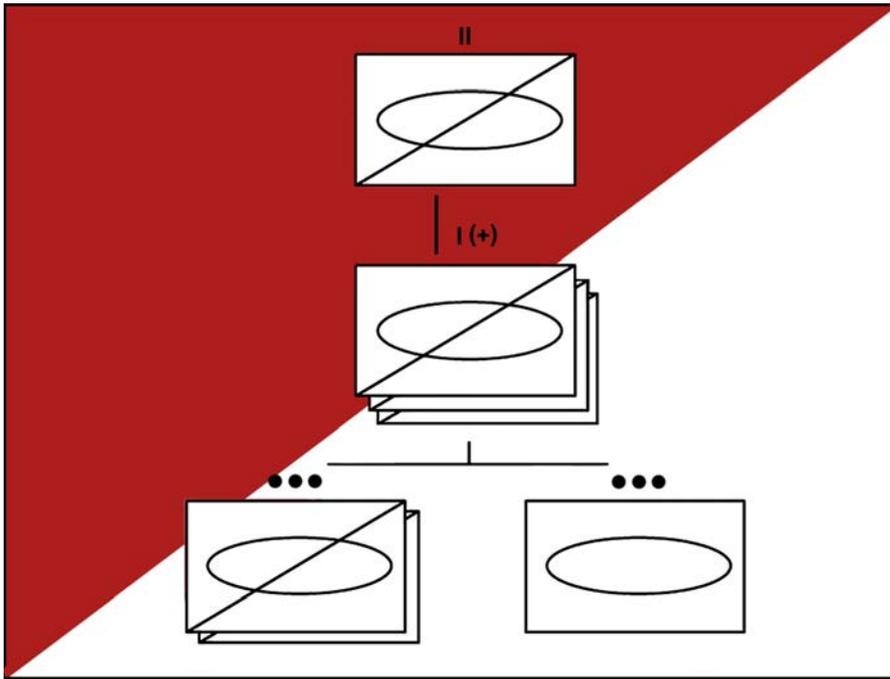


Figure 3. ABCT cavalry squadron with Company D tank platoons task-organized to the reconnaissance troops.

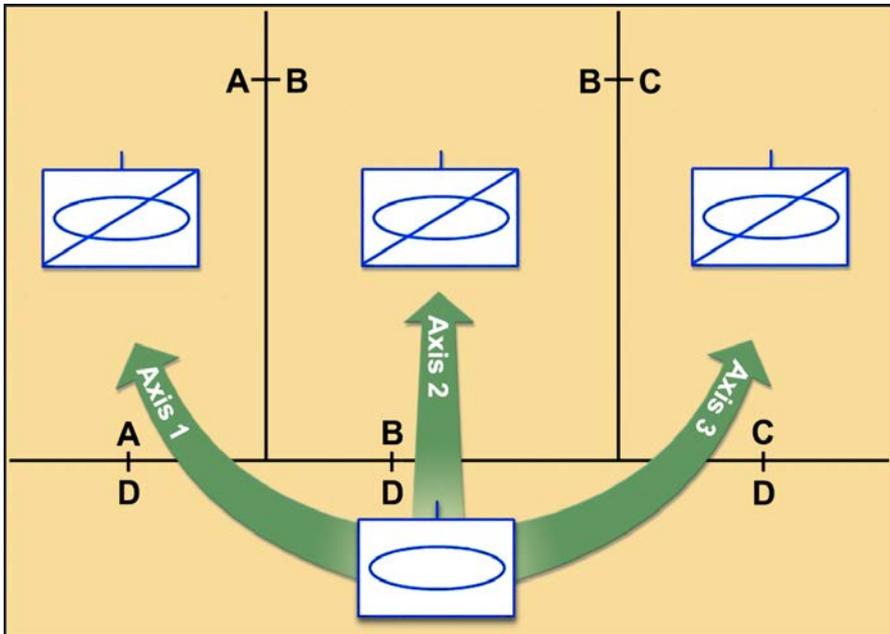


Figure 4. Operational graphics for a squadron RIF. Company D stays organic, with flexibility to support any troop as dictated by the DSM.

## ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

**ABCT** – armored brigade combat team  
**ADP** – Army doctrine publication  
**AO** – area of operation  
**ATP** – Army techniques publication  
**DSM** – decision-support matrix  
**FM** – field manual  
**MBT** – main battle tank  
**MCoE** – Maneuver Center of Excellence  
**MTC** -- movement-to-contact  
**RIF** – reconnaissance-in-force  
**TACSOP** – tactical standing operating procedure  
**TC** – training circular

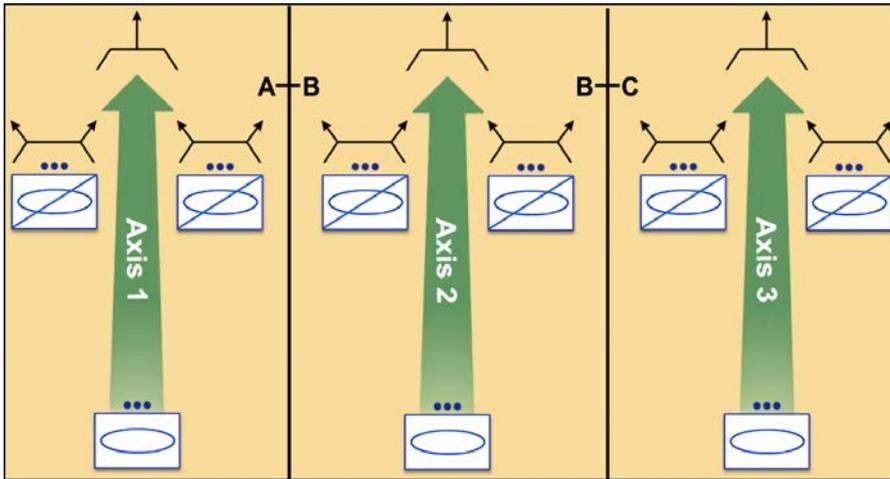
## RIF vs. MTC

The reconnaissance-in-force (RIF) is a complex form of reconnaissance frequently mislabeled as a movement-to-contact (MTC).

The Army defines a RIF as a “type of reconnaissance operation designed to discover or test the enemy’s strength, dispositions and reactions or to obtain other information. A commander assigns a [RIF] when an enemy force is operating within an area and the commander cannot obtain adequate intelligence by other means. The unit commander plans for both the retrograde or reinforcement of the friendly force (in case it encounters superior enemy forces) and for the exploitation of its success.”<sup>1</sup>

Whereas an MTC is a “type of offensive operation designed to develop the situation and to establish or regain contact. The goal of an [MTC] is to make initial contact with a small element while retaining enough combat power to develop the situation and mitigate the associated risk. ... Commanders conduct an [MTC] when an enemy situation is vague or not specific enough to conduct an attack. ... Once an enemy force makes contact, the commander has five options: attack, defend, bypass, delay or withdraw.”<sup>2</sup>

Though similar in nature, the key difference between the two is their purposes. A RIF is used to obtain information on an enemy and/or test its reactions. An MTC’s purpose is to gain contact and develop the situation. The RIF ends when the enemy is handed off to



**Figure 5. Operational graphics for a squadron RIF where Company D platoons are task-organized to each reconnaissance troop in a “hunter-killer” concept.**

the exploitation or exfiltration force, whereas an MTC transitions to attack, defend, bypass, delay or withdraw. They are interconnected, though, as a brigade generally tasks the cavalry squadron with a RIF as part of the brigade’s MTC with a combined-arms battalion as the exfiltration or exploitation force.<sup>3</sup>

## RIF vs. threat-focused zone recon

Commanders frequently use RIF interchangeably with threat-focused zone reconnaissance.<sup>4</sup> As with MTC, a threat-focused reconnaissance is similar to a RIF with a few key differences.<sup>5</sup>

The Army defines a zone reconnaissance as a “type of reconnaissance operation that involves a directed effort to obtain detailed information on all routes, obstacles, terrain and enemy forces within a zone defined by boundaries. ... Commanders assign a zone-reconnaissance mission when they need [more] information on a zone

before committing other forces. Zone reconnaissance is the most time- and resource-intensive form of reconnaissance.”<sup>6</sup>

The difference between the two forms of reconnaissance is the type and amount of information the commander needs and the level of risk the commander is willing to assume to gain that information.<sup>7</sup>

- A RIF is purely threat-focused and seeks to elicit information on the enemy’s reactions through contact.<sup>8</sup> It requires the commander to assume risk through permissive engagement criteria mitigated through the planned commitment of an exploitation or exfiltration force.<sup>9</sup>
- A zone reconnaissance seeks to gain detailed information on all factors within a zone before making a decision to commit main body forces to that zone.<sup>10</sup> In a threat-focused zone reconnaissance, the commander focuses on collecting detailed information on the enemy

forces within a zone with either restrictive or permissive engagement criteria.<sup>11</sup>

Commanders don’t plan for an exfiltration or exploitation force because they do not intend on the reconnaissance force committing to direct-fire contact.<sup>12</sup> Confusion occurs when the commander intends on making direct-fire contact, mislabeling the mission as a zone recon because they do not understand the difference. The mission can also be intentionally mislabeled when commanders view their cavalry squadron as a combined-arms battalion rather than a reconnaissance asset.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Army Techniques Publication 3-20.96, *Cavalry Squadron*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> CPT Kyle Hoisington, “Understanding Reconnaissance Missions Instead of Focusing on Reconnaissance Platforms,” *ARMOR*, July-September 2015; Center for Army Lessons-Learned, *CTC Trends FY19*, No. 20-10, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Department of the Army, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> ADP 3-90.

<sup>7</sup> Hoisington.

<sup>8</sup> FM 3-98.

<sup>9</sup> Hoisington; FM 3-98.

<sup>10</sup> FM 3-98.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hoisington; *CTC Trends FY19*.