

Warrant Officers for Modern Cavalry Divisions

by Michael McCabe

Modern divisions would benefit greatly by introducing new warrant-officer roles. The current management-labor model, introduced to the Army in 1947, is proven for general-purpose needs but has gaps which, if filled with warrant officers, would do wonders for readiness, continuity, elite standards, efficiency and effectiveness.

The reason for this is simple: management-labor relies heavily on experience; while experience is invaluable, experience alone never grants the sum of institutional knowledge to every individual. Warrant officers possess both extensive experience and advanced training which, when performed correctly, impart the sum of institutional knowledge; they are a repository to ensure the same lessons don't need to be learned twice. High-tech war demands such elite specialists, but operating equipment is only the tip of the iceberg.

Expanding the roles of warrant officers throughout the Army would enable them to be used as "seedcorn," enabling new recruits to learn the ropes faster during periods of rapid mobilization or high turnover. Expanding warrant-officer roles would also improve their commander's ability to delegate. Leaders who excel at one arm / task would be able to find their niche and stay there instead of being promoted out of the jobs in which they excel into those jobs where they will not.

Although the following proposed roles are intended for a Cavalry / Armor audience, there will be some overlap applicable to non-Cavalry units.

Troop-level warrant officers

Cavalry troops currently do not have warrant officers apart from pilots, and this is a missed opportunity. Cavalry troops should have organic reconnaissance / intelligence and communications warrant officers, since every Soldier is meant to be a sensor – especially the Cavalry. These warrant officers can assist troop leaders in delegation, efficiently process and securely relay information, and give a permanent space for niche roles such as terrain analysts.

Using warrant officers would bring the subject-matter expertise down to a lower level in the chain of command without clogging small units with too many commissioned officers. This philosophy will enhance Cavalry's capabilities when they are in contact with friendly forces and will strengthen their self-reliance when they must operate in a communications vacuum.

A third possible role for warrant officers in Cavalry troops would be useful in dismounted actions. The job of commissioned officers in a firefight is to coordinate the many moving parts and keep looking / anticipating one step ahead. The noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are responsible for the specific tasks assigned to them by their officers, all of which form a whole greater than the sum of their parts. The third role, which does not have a permanent place in any table of organization and equipment, is a forceful personality at the back pushing everybody forward to maintain momentum, overcome inertia and rally anyone being pushed back.

This need is obviously less necessary for mounted troops, but troops on foot (particularly inexperienced ones) can easily lose momentum when their officers' and NCOs' attention is on what lies ahead and not on who is slacking or falling behind.

While the need for a forceful personality in the back has not been an issue in recent low-intensity conflicts, it will be an important precaution for high-intensity conflicts where shock tactics will be more common. Shock shatters cohesion faster than maneuver and thus must be counteracted by someone standing by, ready to restore cohesion. This role is best performed by a familiar face rather than a stranger and therefore would ideally be filled by a warrant officer or senior NCO organic to the troop / platoon.

Tactical / operational expert roles

While each cavalry troop should gain S-2 and S-6 experts, tactical / operational experts are meant for larger forces, ideally battalion level. Tactical / operational experts would exist to provide subject-matter experts (SME) in fields such as armored-warfare tactics, convoy-escort tactics, cordon tactics, deep reconnaissance, road-

clearing / minesweeping, and even counterinsurgency (COIN). While it is desirable that each officer and enlisted Soldier knows every possible Armor / Cavalry tactic inside and out, time and budget constraints frequently prevent this.

It is far easier to justify training warrant officers to this standard rather than enlisted Soldiers, provided those warrant officers are readily available to pass along knowledge as needed. Warrant officers can bring along obscure, one-in-a-million tricks and hacks that Soldiers would otherwise need to learn the hard way, and experts in the previously mentioned fields can be mixed or matched in a battalion as needed.

This new setup would prevent a repeat of the Army's experience in Vietnam, where best practices were published but not integrated into training, and experienced Soldiers who could have passed on invaluable lessons to the next wave of recruits were rotated out before they could do so. Without this continuity and unity of vision, each new wave made the same amateurish mistakes year after year, leading to the quip that America did not have 10 years of experience but one year of experience repeated 10 times.

If new Cavalry / Armor units must be quickly raised, or old ones rebuilt after suffering heavy losses – or must simply shake off the dust from a period of inaction – the same problem will emerge. One or two tactical / operational warrant officers per battalion could tip the scale in America's favor.

America's army currently has no dedicated COIN units, and those calling for the establishment of such units may come to see cavalry divisions as an ideal solution due to their mobility and light footprint. While it is the author's opinion that terrain specialization is the better option, the advantages of Cavalry as a COIN force do not contradict the logic of increasing the warrant-officer footprint and should not be ignored.

If this comes to pass, Cavalry battalions would need certain staff officers not normally required in conventional formations. Using warrant officers would enable battalion staffs to be enhanced without making them top-heavy. Needs such as linguistics, gendarmerie tactics and civil-military cooperation would all be ripe for battalion warrant officers.

Terrain-specialization roles

In the Summer 2022 edition of *ARMOR* magazine, the author wrote an essay proposing that Cavalry divisions embrace terrain specialization over general-purpose roles. Terrain specialization has always been difficult to retain in the American army, but using Cavalry divisions would be an ideal long-term fix.

Terrain-specific warrant-officer roles created specifically for this niche would be desirable for longevity and excellence at all levels of command. Every army has a minority of Soldiers who thrive in one particular extreme climate, and these talented Soldiers should not be wasted in general-purpose roles away from their best climate.

Even if their parent divisions were to be disbanded, warrant officers could be retained in case the divisions needed to be rebuilt in a hurry while ensuring the training programs remain current. This would entail creating three new warrant-officer roles for arctic, desert and jungle warfare, with the possibility of others in the future.

Non-doctrinal staff officers

Staff work is crucial to the Army's success, and warrant officers can enrich battalion staffs by supplying specialist SMEs to each of the staff-officer fields (for example, S-1 through S-9). While it is common to merge some of these for commissioned officers, warrant officers would not merge functions. The goal would be to imitate Andrew Carnegie, who surrounded himself with men smarter than he was.

A commissioned officer performing both S-3 and S-5 functions, for example, would benefit from having an S-3 warrant officer and an S-5 warrant officer directly under him to learn from their experience and to aid in delegation of tasks.

Stevedores

America's military has excellent logistics, but we can take a page from our enemy's handbook by establishing porter platoons led by stevedore warrant officers (one or two platoons per battalion). Porters were commonly used by Red armies throughout the Cold War as a way to reduce the burden carried by the infantryman. Adding them to our battalions would improve mounted and dismounted resupply.

While the Quartermaster Corps and brigade-support battalions handle most resupply, getting supplies to individuals in prolonged, high-intensity large-scale combat operations (LSCO) is difficult. These units can become overstretched in vast theaters. Porter platoons organic to a combat battalion can supply extra hands to ensure individual needs are met, thus making the per-capita workload lighter.

Porters would also enable dismounted battalions marching through difficult terrain to carry more ammunition, food, water, batteries and other supplies on their backs without increasing the weight carried in each individual Soldier's rucksack. Besides mere resupply, porters would be versatile enough to also act as runners, stretcher-bearers and even riflemen in a pinch.

To lead porter platoons, stevedore warrant officers are better than commissioned officers due to the experience requirements. Stevedores trace their roots back to the shipping industry; loading and unloading a ship was a demanding, highly specialized line of work. Not only did every cubic inch of space need to be used, the ship had to also avoid being overloaded, changing its center of gravity, and require as little time to complete as possible.

Since troops in the field don't use shipping containers, stevedores will be desirable for ensuring every truck, helicopter, rivercraft and / or pack animal in use by the battalion is optimally packed and the contents speedily distributed. Such a role demands both extensive experience and the sum of institutional knowledge to be successful. Junior commissioned officers simply do not have the experience and training to replace stevedores, and there is no practical reason for porter platoons in a combat battalion to not be run by warrant officers.

Closing thoughts

New warrant-officer roles obviously must be approved by Congress, but if the Cavalry leads the way in introducing this warrant-officer-centric philosophy, it will be the most modern branch of the Army. America's way of war is high-tech, but its command structure dates from the age of hand-labor industrialism and universal conscription.

America likes to retain a small, elite army in peacetime, but one that can seamlessly mass-mobilize green recruits in wartime. Trying to preserve an elite, professional core cadre of commissioned officers is less effective and efficient than one comprised of warrant officers, as the former is top-heavy while the latter keeps long-serving career Soldiers in those middle roles which are hardest to fill because of time-in-service requirements.

This is also superior to the notion of slavishly copying the German army of World War II, popularized by the "military reformers" of the 1980s – the Wehrmacht had the same model but merely used senior NCOs to fill many leadership roles that are filled by commissioned officers in the U.S. Army. Not only was this model even more over-reliant on experience, it meant that the German army could not replace heavy losses in a timely fashion and fostered a culture of poor staff work, which cost Germany more than a few battles.

Embracing this new philosophy will allow the Cavalry to remain flexible and adaptable while preserving institutional knowledge. Enriching combat units with warrant officers will let the Cavalry weather peacetime better. Warrant-officer experts in extreme climate operations and / or COIN will be a beacon of stability to an army accustomed to ripsawing back and forth between LSCOs and COIN every five to 10 years.

War is a human endeavor, and a better balance between generalist commissioned officers and specialist warrant officers will get more out of our personnel than trying to create superhumans who can do both LSCO and COIN.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

COIN – counterinsurgency

LSCO – large-scale combat operations

NCO – noncommissioned officer

SME – subject-matter expert