Analysis of Armored Cavalry Troop Performance During Combined Resolve XVIII

by COL Christopher “CJ” Kirkpatrick and CPT Rodric “Cam” Waugh

Since 2014, the War in Ukraine has significantly impacted the thought process surrounding large-scale combat operations (LSCO). The lessons learned from this conflict, as well as Nagorno-Karabakh, have spurred conversation and evolution of militaries worldwide. This evolution includes the U.S. Army, which has begun to implement the Army 2030 Force Design Updates (FDUs). The Army 2030 initiative alters the structure and training of the U.S. Army, down to the individual Soldier level, to create a “division-centric force capable of multi-domain operations under LSCO conditions."[1]

A crucial aspect of this FDU is the creation of a division’s cavalry squadron, which provides the division commander the capability to "mass combat power at decisive points."[2] To build this formation, the Army 2030 planners transferred the bulk of the combat power that formerly comprised the brigades’ cavalry squadrons to the respective division cavalry squadrons. In armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs), the remaining combat power was used to establish armored cavalry troops (ACTs). Although this force structure will likely change based on the feed back from this rotation and that of the division cavalry the lessons learned are critical to the professional discourse which will inform the next iteration of the ACT.

An ACT is a new formation based upon the brigade reconnaissance troops of the 1990s. ACTs are designed to provide an ABCT an organic force capable of conducting reconnaissance and security operations in close contact with the enemy, while also enabling the formation of the division cavalry squadron in a zero-growth environment. The troop’s tactical mission set aligns with that of the traditional cavalry squadron.[3] Even so, due to the ACT's economy of force role, it lacks many of the critical capabilities of a cavalry squadron. However, in accordance with Figure 1, it is still a much more potent force than a traditional cavalry troop. The 1st Cavalry Division was the first division to field this concept, as part of its conversion to a reinforced armored division, in accordance with the Army 2030 FDU.

The first ACT to be manned, trained, and equipped was Troop D, 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd ABCT, 1st Cavalry Division. This formation was established in June 2022, and it deployed in support of Operation European Assure Deter and Reinforce in early 2023. It was validated at the Army's Joint Multinational Readiness Center during exercise Combined Resolve XVIII (CbR XVIII) in April 2023. This evaluation clearly showed that the ACT is a very capable force. Yet to fill the role of a cavalry squadron in a zero-growth environment, the training, doctrine, and organization of both the ACT and those elements supporting it must be adapted to account for the reduction in capability inherent to the formation's economy of force role. This document will substantiate the necessity of these changes and articulate the steps necessary to implement them.

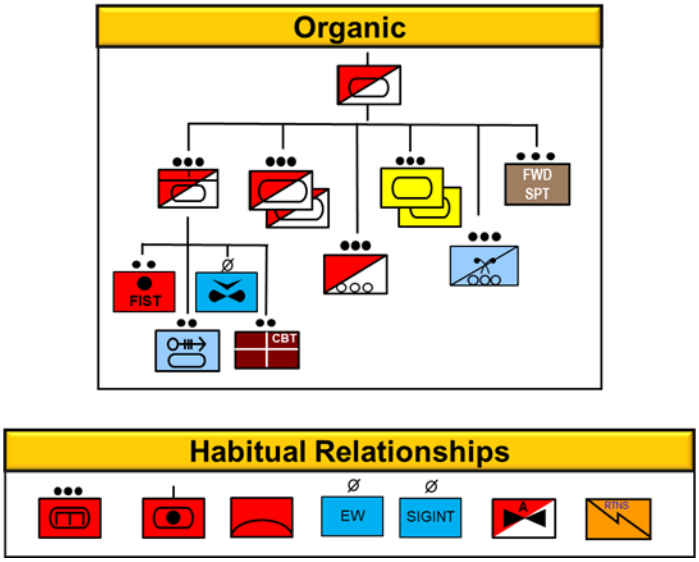

Figure 1: Troop D, 5th Cavalry's task organization circa 2023. Delta Troop 5th Cavalry's task organization circa 2023. *(Produced by CPT Waugh using visual assets from FM 17-97* ***Cavalry Troop*** *(1995); Supplement May 3, 2022.)*

Doctrine

Limited Capability Requires Limited Objectives and Maximum Support. Doctrinally, an ACT performs the same core security and reconnaissance tasks as a cavalry squadron over a frontage of 10-30 kilometers.[4] Although this is a 30 percent reduction in frontage covered by the ABCT's organic reconnaissance and security force, there is a significant reduction in capability during the transition from cavalry squadron to ACT. This reduction includes the loss of three scout platoons, a tank platoon, two retrains teams and a full staff. The decrease in combat power alone results in a 9- to 15-kilometer reduction in the frontage that an ACT can cover compared to a cavalry squadron.[5] The lack of enablers further reduces the unit's ability to execute the necessary mission sets across the prescribed frontage. In comparison, a traditional cavalry troop can cover a 10- to 12-kilometer frontage. A cavalry troop's ability to cover this frontage is dependent on the support provided by a squadron headquarters that provides access to critical enablers and capabilities such as retrains teams, the ability to surge sustainment assets, and access to products generated by the staff, including S-2 assessments, branch plans, and fire support products. Thus, the ACT's doctrinal employment must be articulated considering these limitations when compared to the cavalry squadron with which they share a mission set and the cavalry troop with which they share organic capabilities.

The operational employment of the 2nd ABCT's ACT during CbR XVIII illustrated the need to properly scope the mission set based on the organization's capabilities and to align the resources necessary to augment the Troop. During CbR XVIII, the ACT was employed across a 9-kilometer frontage with an operational depth of up to 5 kilometers. This battlefield geometry is well within the doctrinal employment of the formation. However, several requirements necessitated Brigade's intervention to enable the operation's success and thus must be accounted for in the doctrinal employment of the formation. The most complex security task executed during the rotation was a guard. This task exceeds the organic capability of a traditional cavalry troop but is within the capability of a Squadron. Thus, it falls within a gray area concerning ACT force employment.

During the rotation, the troop conducted a guard within a limited area. The troop successfully executed a guard when employed in tandem with a troop-sized element from the Belgian Intelligence Surveillance Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) battalion when given priority of fires. The Belgian ISTARs provided a motorized element that utilized dismounted observation posts (OPs) and ground surveillance radar to conduct stealthy and deliberate reconnaissance and surveillance. This allowed the ISTARs, positioned forward of the ACT, to cue Brigade assets to shape within the brigade's deep area. As the enemy moved into the close area, the ISTARs were able to cue ACT assets to enable shaping as the enemy moved into zone. Although this method of employment proved to be effective, the lack of a Squadron level mission command node, and accompanying staff, resulted in the long-

term desynchronization of the two company sized formations' operations. This asynchronicity occurred due to the preponderance of the troops' inadequate planning capacity being focused on current operations, rapidly developing contingencies, and integrating effectively with the brigade staff which proved to be resource intensive due to the lack of a battalion-level staff. The ACT and ISTARs were able to affect the enemy utilizing fires, close combat attack, and close air support, thus providing the brigade with a marked advantage over enemy forces. These augmentations were enough to enable the ACT to succeed. However, these augmentations required the brigade to be familiar with the capabilities of the ACT and to limit the scope of the mission particularly due to the lack of an intermediate staff.

Organization

Necessity of all-weather all terrain reconnaissance. M1A2 SEPV3s Abrams tanks and M2A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicles comprise the bulk of the ACT's combat power. This composition lends itself to kinetic security operations and rapid and forceful reconnaissance. However, due to the limitations of the Bradley as a reconnaissance platform and the manning of heavy scout platoons, their utility is limited during stealthy and deliberate operations. The light scout platoon provides an alternate force capable of executing stealthy and deliberate operations in complex terrain with minimal sustainment requirements and a limited electromagnetic signature.[6] Even so, this formation is slated to be replaced by a robotic and autonomous systems (RAS) platoon; composed of 23 troopers, six robotic combat vehicles, and three optionally manned fighting vehicles upon fielding of those systems in 2025.[7] This formation will provide the troop with significantly more combat power than the light scout platoon including 30mm canons, integrated anti-tank guided missile capabilities, as well as the flexibility of the Mission Payload System.[8] However, due to the force's mounted and remotely operated nature, it is not feasible for employment in highly restricted terrain or a battle with a highly contested electromagnetic spectrum. Thus, the light scout platoon, an all-weather all-terrain reconnaissance and security asset, provides a critical capability that the RAS platoon cannot replicate.

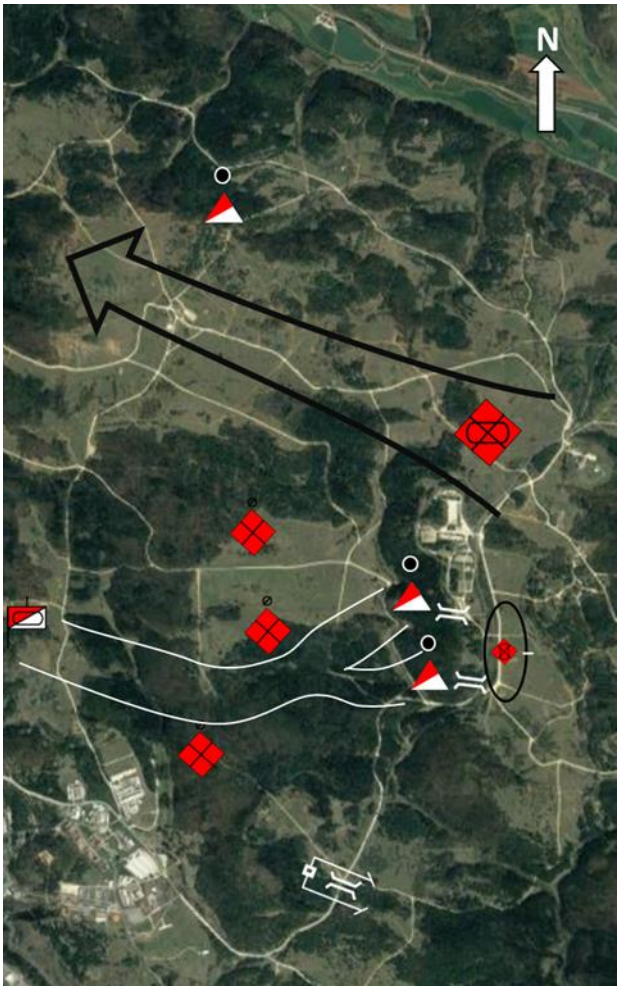

Figure 2: ACT light platoon infiltration CbR XVIII. Infiltration route used by 3rd Platoon, Troop D, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd ABCT, 1st Cavalry Division during CbR XVIII to gain observation of two critical bridge crossings.
(Produced by CPT Waugh using Google Earth)

In both defensive and offensive operations, during CbR XVIII, the light scout platoon's actions proved to be decisive. As the brigade established its defense, the light scout platoon established in dismounted OPs, in severely restricted terrain, west of Route of the Lion overlooking the northern avenue of approach (AoA), as shown in Figure 2. They initially disrupted enemy operations using both direct and indirect fires. However, the enemy initiated an attack along the northern AoA. After being cued by the Belgian ISTARs, the light scout platoon identified the enemy's lead column and confirmed that they were conducting an armored attack along the northern AoA. Upon identification of a second armored column using the same AoA, they were then able to confirm the enemy was executing their most dangerous course of action, an integrated attack. This allowed the brigade to allocate the necessary resources to blunt the enemy attack and regain the initiative. The platoon also proved to be decisive during offensive operations. During this battle period, it was tasked to execute an infiltration to establish dismounted OPs overwatching two critical crossing points. Once established, it was to confirm or deny enemy presence and identify possible bypasses for follow-on forces. The platoon executed a 6k infiltration during a storm that prevented armored and wheeled vehicles from moving due to the treacherous conditions, gained observation of both pieces of key terrain, and confirmed enemy presence on-site while remaining undetected. This enabled the troop to execute a diversionary breach in the south that contributed to the successful brigade breach along the northern axis of attack. The platoon's actions enabled the brigade's success and highlighted the need for an all-weather all-terrain reconnaissance asset.

The successful employment of the light scout platoon illustrates the need for an all-weather, all-terrain, reconnaissance and security asset. The light scout platoon's infiltration of complex terrain, coupled with its ability to maneuver despite unfavorable weather conditions, highlighted the utility of the formation when executing, primarily dismounted, stealthy and deliberate, reconnaissance operations. The mounted nature of the RAS platoon prevents it from filling the same roll. Additionally, this formation can be fielded long-term without allocating additional resources. Thus, it is critical that the light scout platoon be maintained in the ACT's modified table of organization and equipment.

Training

ACT leadership and brigade staff integration. As an ABCT's organic reconnaissance and security asset, the ACT has very similar staff requirements, both administratively and tactically, to a cavalry squadron. These include assisting the commander with their role in the operations process, by extracting relevant data and providing salient analysis, helping subordinate elements understand operational requirements and their capabilities, via staff-assisted visits as well as orders production, and serving as the intermediary between adjacent units and the unit's higher headquarters, via staff-to-staff coordination and regular reporting.[9] Yet the ACT lacks the necessary personnel to fulfill these staff functions and thus must depend upon higher echelons to provide this support. In garrison, a battalion is more than capable of performing the necessary functions with minimal augmentation. However, due to the fluid nature of the modern battlefield, the ACT cannot depend upon a single battalion-level staff to provide the continuity of support necessary to achieve mission success across the breadth of the troop's area of operations in accordance with the troop's accelerated operational timeline.[10] Thus, the brigade staff must provide the required support. To do so, it must have a well-developed understanding of the ACT's capabilities and limitations, the experience necessary to receive and rapidly action requests for support, and the communications architecture to transmit information to the ACT in a highly contested environment.

During CbR XVIII, the brigade staff improved their understanding of the operational limitations of the ACT, in a contested and highly kinetic environment, which led to the implementation of more efficient and sustainable processes and the development of additional capabilities. During the training period prior to CbR XVIII, the brigade staff and ACT leadership participated in two command post exercises (CPXs) that led to the development of the initial SOPs for direct integration of the two elements. These SOPs drove the production and transmission of critical products and information from the Brigade to the Troop level, during CbR XVIII, primarily via face-to-face engagement due to the non-tactical nature of the initial CPXs. However, as the battlefield geometry became more complex, due to longer ground lines of communication, increased mining of main supply routes, as well as more frequent incursions by enemy forces in the brigade's rear area, face-to-face coordination became untenable. Thus, the brigade staff and ACT leadership were forced to distill their communications into the most basic form to enable the rapid transmission of vital conclusions from complex products and analysis. To further accelerate the two-way transmission of information and requests for support, the ACT leadership established a liaison officer (LNO) at the brigade tactical operations center. Due to the lack of training and equipment, the LNO package proved to be of limited utility; however, its contributions indicated that the LNO package would prove to be of immeasurable value when adequately manned, trained, and equipped. The lessons learned, and steps taken to facilitate the more effective integration of ACT leadership and brigade staff indicates that it is critical to integrate these forces as early as possible and to validate their shared systems in a contested tactical environment in complex terrain at distance.

As the rotation progressed, the brigade staff and ACT leadership were able to adapt to the challenges presented by the highly complex terrain and the frenetic nature of a combat training center (CTC) rotation. Yet, if they had executed an integrated training progression that included situational training and live fire exercises, these two elements would have been able to efficiently communicate information and requests for support despite the kinetic and contested nature of CbR XVIII. These exercises would also have allowed these forces to develop, test, and refine solutions, such as a troop LNO package, prior to employment at a CTC. Thus, as the ACT and brigade staff execute their respective training progressions, each element must ensure it integrates with the other during field exercises and refine the solutions that are developed. This includes ACT leadership and LNO participation in CPXs and brigade staff participation in troop-level operations through the attachment of support packages and the production of brigade-level products to support troop exercises. ACT participation in brigade CPXs will familiarize the staff with the needs of the ACT leadership and validate the composition of brigade products. Similarly, the troop's situational training exercises and live fire events will allow both parties to validate the means of

information transmission and to train the LNO package. These solutions will allow the brigade staff to effectively provide the ACT with the staff outputs and support necessary to maximize its capabilities despite limitations and will help the ACT leadership streamline their reporting processes.

Conclusion

As the ACT concept, armored reconnaissance squadrons, and echelons above brigade reconnaissance force structure is refined or reconsidered as part of the Army's force redesign, D-5 Cavalry's employment in the U.S. European Command area of operations and at CbR XVIII offers important lessons. First and foremost, the ACT is a capable formation but requires deep integration and training with the brigade staff to be effective. Ad hoc mission command, refined communication primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency (PACE) plans, and judicious management of priority intelligence requirements are essential to fighting an ACT in LSCO.

The possibility of attached enablers and potential interoperability challenges with partner or allied forces only heightens the need for thoughtful mission command solutions for the ACT. Second, D-5 Cavalry's employment as the first ACT deployed in a combatant command theater (and at a CTC) reinforces the lesson that all-weather, all-terrain reconnaissance is still vital in LSCO. Future technology and innovations must prove capable of replicating or improving on a scout's ability to occupy complex terrain undetected and provide real-time intelligence to answer the commander's priority intelligence requirements. Until that is possible, the most important reconnaissance and security asset on the battlefield will still be a specialist or sergeant with optics, a functioning radio, and a clear understanding of the commander's intent.

The doctrine, organization, and training of the ACT proves it is more than capable of providing the brigade commander with the information necessary to mass combat power at the decisive point. Further adjustments in mission command infrastructure and organization at the brigade and division level will only make the formation more capable and lethal, allowing the Army to continue to provide critical reconnaissance and security capability in a zero-growth environment on the modern LSCO battlefield.

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Notes

[1] White Paper, "How the Army 2030 Divisions Fight (Formerly Known as WayPoint 2028);" (page 2), Version 3.502, February 2023; **TRADOC Proponent Office—Echelons Above Brigade; U.S. Army Combined Arms Center; U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command;** https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docNB0D8C47DF8AF1c8b2b9b1ec39ee1825ca8b539913d32c658d50e2d0aaa4bc37c818de5002ccf.

[2] How the Army 2030 Divisions Fight (Formerly Known as WayPoint 2028); page 4.

[3] Army Techniques Publication (ATP), 3-20.97 ***Cavalry Troop*** (troop 1-1); and ATP 3-20.96 ***Cavalry Squadron*** (squadron 1-1).

[4] Annex C, Appendix 6, ABCT ACT O&O Executive Concept 2020-11-03 (page 8).

[5] ATP 3-20.96; page 51.
[6] ATP 3-20.98; (platoon, page 42/1-24.
[7] U.S. Army Acquisition Support Center, https://asc.army.mil/web/portfolio-item/robotic-combat-vehicles-rcvs/.
[8] Field Manual (FM) 17-97, ***Cavalry Troop*** (1995), Supplemental Slides 2022-05-03-1300; page 8.
[9] FM 6-0, ***Commander and Staff Organization and Operations***; page 21-22/2-1-2-2.
[10] ATP 3-20.96, page 34/2-2.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team
ACT – armored cavalry troop
AoA – avenue of approach
CbR XVIII – (exercise) Combined Resolve XVIII
CPX – command post exercise
CTC – combat training center
FDU – force design update
ISTAR – Intelligence Surveillance Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance
LNO – liaison officer
LSCO – large-scale combat operations
OP – observation post
RAS – robotic and autonomous system