

# The Reconnaissance and Security Strike Group: A Multi-Domain Battle Enabler

by MAJ Nathan A. Jennings

When the U.S. Army reorganized its final armored cavalry regiment (ACR) in 2011, it divested its institutional capability to enable corps maneuver with forceful reconnaissance and security (R&S) at the operational level of war.

Designed as relatively independent brigade-sized formations that included tanks, mechanized scouts, self-propelled artillery and organic aviation, storied units like the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> ACRs became iconic symbols of U.S. military power across the plains of Europe, jungles of Indochina and the deserts of Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Cold War and the 1990s, the unique commands employed advanced combined-arms integration to, as stated by BG John Kolasheski, the Army's 50<sup>th</sup> Chief of Armor, "fight and win decisively across the full spectrum of conflict as part of the joint force."<sup>2</sup>

Arguments for the recreation of ACRs typically center on their outsized impact during major combat operations. However, in addition to enabling corps-level attacks across theater depth during multi-domain battle, more expansive arguments can demonstrate how modernized versions of the regiments – perhaps reconceptualized as more dynamic R&S strike groups (RSSG) – could empower joint efforts across the simultaneous phases of *shape, deter, seize initiative, dominate, stabilize* and *enable civilian authority*.<sup>3</sup> Combined-arms teams with cross-domain capability could provide enhanced flexibility in diverse operations ranging from military engagement to limited contingency response; defeating adversaries by fighting for information and providing freedom of maneuver will remain critical.

Versatile RSSGs would be suited to "penetrate denied areas for the rest of the joint force" while having the agility to "operate in all domains simultaneously,"<sup>4</sup> said GEN Mark Milley, 39<sup>th</sup> Chief of Staff of the Army. As the vanguard of American landpower, they would supplement armored brigade combat team (BCT) rotations through Europe and East Asia while providing a permanent forward presence to achieve enduring partnership as a primary regionally aligned force (RAF). Second, the concept would augment the Army's excursion initiative to temporarily task-organize BCTs to serve as dedicated R&S elements. A modernized cavalry force optimized to fight for information and allow freedom of maneuver would achieve deeper expertise as the "eyes and ears" of joint-forces commands.

## Cross-domain capabilities

Modernized RSSGs would combine traditional strengths with emerging technologies. Improving on the ACR, its core would comprise three armored-cavalry squadrons designed to fight dispersed under group control or individually detach to support divisions. Each RSSG would control three cavalry troops with mechanized scouts, tanks, unmanned aerial surveillance and mortars to allow "hunter-killer" reconnaissance, a tank company to provide overmatch, engineers for mobility and self-propelled cannon in direct support.<sup>5</sup> As described by LTG H.R. McMaster, COL Mark Elfendahl and LTC Chris McKinney in their *Foreign Affairs* article (May-June 2013 edition, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2013-04-03/why-us-army-needs-armor>), "Why the U.S. Army Needs Armor," they would have the combat power to "fight their way through long-range weapons fire and gain physical contact with hard-to-find opponents" while striking enemies "from unexpected directions with multiple forms of firepower."

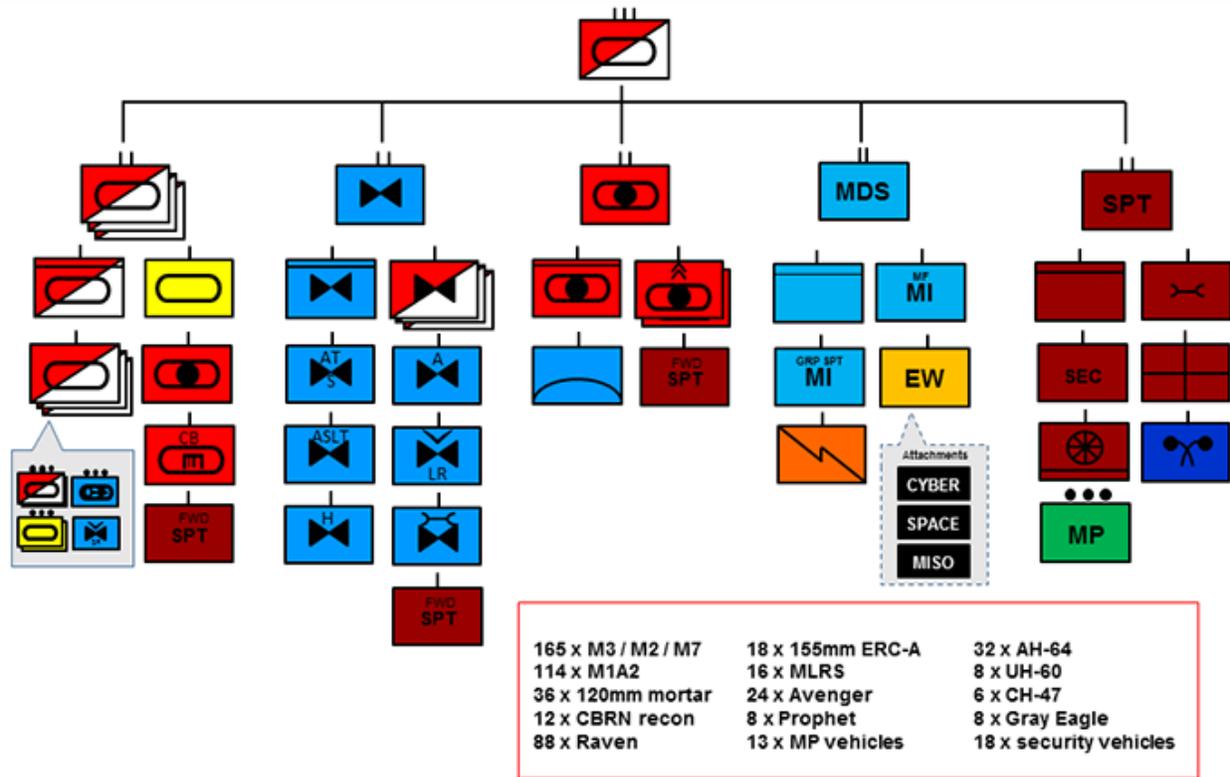


Figure 1. Objective RSSG organization.

While armored squadrons would employ maximum mobile protected firepower to fight forward and dispersed, the RSSG’s true value in joint operations would stem from emergent cross-domain capabilities. Beginning with indirect fires, it could include a multi-faceted artillery battalion with direct control of two long-range rocket batteries and an air-defense company while coordinating self-propelled cannon fires in support of each squadron during dispersed maneuver. This seamless integration of complementary fires assets – exceeding the capabilities of the ACRs – would allow massed or distributed fires in support of scouts who are reconnoitering at extended distances. When integrated with corps and joint fires, the group would operate semi-independently while allowing supported commands to economize resources.<sup>6</sup>

The inclusion of an organic aviation squadron would represent a second area where the RSSG would emulate and surpass ACR capabilities. The formation would first employ three Apache troops to reconnoiter in support of ground scouts and armor. It could also include an attack company to increase lethality, an air-assault company to allow modest insertion capacity and a lift company to facilitate responsive logistical or personal movement. Finally, to extend operational reach, the squadron would control, on behalf of the group commander, Gray Eagles with missiles and long-range sensors.<sup>7</sup> These capabilities, with integrated air traffic services support, would enable the command to, as mandated in the Army Operating Concept, “dictate the terms of operations” and “seize, retain and exploit the initiative.”<sup>8</sup>

The inclusion of a multi-domain squadron with intelligence, signals and electro-magnetic capabilities would expand capacity to dynamically “shape the deep fight,” while synchronized direct, indirect, aerial and joint fires would prove critical in dominating enemy disruption zones. This would include a company to enable human- and signals-intelligence collection and analysis at group and squadron levels, a company to train and allocate intelligence-support teams to cavalry troops and tank companies, and a company to facilitate integrated electronic warfare. These capabilities – in addition to network operations to enable dispersed mission command and attached cyber, space and informational capabilities – would enable expanded cross-domain fire and maneuver.

The entire RSSG, as a high-tempo combined-arms team, would include a sustainment squadron tailored to facilitate extended lines of communication for seven to 10 days. By fielding a distribution company to conduct

forward resupply, a field-maintenance company to ensure equipment readiness, a medical company to provide Role II-plus care, a chemical company to execute reconnaissance and decontamination and forward-support companies for supported squadrons, the command would provide multifunctional logistics across the group's area of operations while enabling more than 300 kilometers of operational reach by forward air, ground, cyber and electronic scouts. With an organic security company and internal aerial surveillance, the squadron could secure convoys while "pushing" logistics to dispersed formations.

This array of capabilities would consequently allow RSSGs to enable corps or joint commands to dislocate complex defenses through high tempo and forceful information collection and counter-reconnaissance. The integration of diverse enablers – including cyber, electronic, indirect and aerial fires – would reflect a 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach to conducting aggressive zone, area and forcible reconnaissance or contested screen, guard and covering assignments. The ability to detach squadrons to support modest joint task forces in disparate theaters would likewise mitigate the capabilities gap left by the demise of division cavalry in 2004.<sup>9</sup> With cross-domain optimization, the group would offer an agile formation to bridge air and land component efforts across theater depth during unified land operations.<sup>10</sup>

## **Joint expeditionary operations**

The potential operational impact of RSSGs can be assessed according to potential contributions during joint efforts across the doctrinal phases of theater engagement. Moving beyond appreciation of the ACR's outsized, but relatively narrow, impact in large-scale offensives as experienced in the Persian Gulf, an expansive conception of how modernized air-ground teams could support multi-domain battle across broader ranges of operations is more applicable. In this context, forward positioned RSSGs would enable the U.S. Army, as described by GEN David Perkins, the 15<sup>th</sup> commander of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), to "combine sufficient cross-domain fires" to "enable decentralized ground maneuver and the creation of durable domain windows for the joint force."<sup>11</sup>

The first phase of joint expeditionary operations, according to joint doctrine, focuses on continuously shaping the enduring security environment by "influencing adversaries' and allies' perception" and "providing U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access."<sup>12</sup> RSSGs with cross-domain capabilities would serve as ideal forward elements to conduct these enduring activities due to unique pairing of traditional strengths with emerging technologies. As a ground formation permanently assigned to combatant commands – as opposed to BCTs that continuously rotate and unavoidably disrupt continuity of partnership – they would routinely cooperate with a variety of theater elements while supporting allies according to RAF assignment.

The RSSG's potential for shaping evolving theater environments finds ready precedent. As an example, 14<sup>th</sup> ACR provided theater R&S capability along West Germany's borders throughout much of the Cold War. For more than 23 years, as the U.S. military defended Europe against potential Soviet aggression, it covered the U.S. Army's V Corps and the Third German Corps with an evolving armament of aerial and armored platforms at famed places like the Fulda Gap.<sup>13</sup> While American joint forces have now embraced an expeditionary approach with fewer formations stationed abroad, the same model of employing forward RSSGs to execute security-cooperation activities would allow commands to shape favorable conditions with an air-ground team resourced to conduct dispersed operations.

The second phase of joint expeditionary operations is designed to "deter an adversary from undesirable actions because of friendly capabilities and the will to use them."<sup>14</sup> While armored BCTs own premier ability to threaten military response, RSSGs would offer a similarly intimidating mechanized profile with enhanced integration of enablers. Posturing the groups to serve as lead elements for forward joint commands would imply willingness to defend politically or operationally important terrain while providing a covering force for follow-on divisions during coalition mobilization. The return of memorable cavalry lineages to the forefront of American power projection, if publicized as a demonstration of national resolve, would also signal concrete intent to support allied nations against belligerent regimes.

This strategic deterrence is exemplified by the current rotations of armored BCTs in Europe, the Middle East and East Asia. Operation Atlantic Resolve, for example, has evolved to include the positioning of mechanized task forces in former Eastern Bloc states to deter Russian aggression. As argued by McKinney, Elfendahl and McMaster,

such formations “are well suited to seizing terrain and exercising control over populations and resources” and “are critical both to deterring aggression and to winning conflicts when deterrence fails.” However, rather than rotating BCTs or relying on temporary R&S brigades, forward strike groups would be uniquely suited – by structure, training and specialization – to permanently conduct this mission in concert with infantry and Stryker units already on the continent.

RSSGs would prove irreplaceable when joint forces seize initiative at the onset of major combat operations as they enable shaping and deterring efforts. As the lead ground element for corps or theater armies, they would fulfill combatant commands’ requirements to “gain access to theater infrastructure and expand friendly freedom of action” by “creating and exploiting temporary windows of advantage,” Perkins wrote. The group’s lethality and survivability would prove critical in penetrating and dislocating challenging area denial networks, and their expertise in facilitating a complex array of cross-domain fires would bridge air and land component efforts. Whether attacking or defending, the RSSGs would contribute to “setting the conditions for decisive operations” in the next phase.<sup>15</sup>

The success of 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR in Operation Desert Storm in 1991 provides a historical example of a large air-ground team enabling higher echelons to seize initiative during forced entry. When the U.S. Army’s VII Corps enveloped the Iraqi Army’s western defenses in a sweeping attack, the regiment rapidly advanced, destroyed two brigades of the Tawakalna Division and opened the way for follow-on divisions to annihilate the Iraqi Republican Guard. The robust cavalry formation – serving in its doctrinal role to shape advantageous conditions across its parent command’s “deep fight” – combined the superior target-acquisition capabilities of M1 Abrams tanks and M3 Cavalry Fighting Vehicles with self-propelled artillery fires to validate the ACR concept.<sup>16</sup>

The most decisive phase of joint expeditionary efforts usually occurs when ground forces dominate their opponents through multi-domain fire and maneuver. This synchronized action requires aggressive scouts to fight through adversary “recon-strike” networks to dislocate networked architecture and blind opposing commands. As described in Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, operational success during offensive maneuvers “depends on overmatching enemy capabilities at the critical time and place” on the battlefield.<sup>17</sup> RSSGs, as the most mobile of all brigade-sized ground formations, would excel at fixing enemy forces, passing friendly divisions through to attack and guarding the flanks of corps and armies during multi-domain battle. This ability would stem from its unique ability to fight with minimal support for extended durations.

The American mechanized-cavalry groups (MCG) of World War II illustrate how dedicated R&S elements can enable a corps during large-scale maneuver. The 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG, antecedent of 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, supported the XX Corps of LTG George Patton’s Third Army with a variety of jeeps, armored cars and light tanks during its advance through France, Belgium and Germany during World War II. By fighting for information, protecting flanks and occasionally attacking, the Brave Rifles enabled their higher command to seize positions of advantage against Nazi adversaries.<sup>18</sup> According to XX Corps campaign history, the group, “by a series of dashes, lightning changes of direction and sometimes plain, ordinary bluffing ran the gauntlet of enemy strongpoints.”<sup>19</sup> Though lacking the lethality of later ACRs, the MCGs that fought across Europe demonstrated a potential value of RSSGs.

Once major combat operations are complete, U.S. military forces, according to typical joint-phasing sequence, seek to “establish a safe and secure environment” while restoring “political, economic and infrastructure stability.”<sup>20</sup> While stabilization efforts in war-torn theaters sometimes favor infantry formations for dismounted patrolling in urban, jungle or mountainous areas, RSSGs could provide unique economy-of-force options to joint commands. RSSGs could secure extended international or ethnic borders, patrol large rural territories or conduct rapid attacks against enemy strongpoints with heavily mined defenses using their tailored combination of mobility, firepower and protection. They would also prove ideal for partnering with dispersed allied units or mitigating critical coalition capability gaps.

The 11<sup>th</sup> ACR’s service in Indochina from 1966 to 1972 provides an example of how RSSGs could enable joint task forces during distributed security efforts. Predominantly equipped with M-113 Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles and M-48 Patton medium tanks, the Blackhorse Regiment provided the U.S. Military Assistance Command-Vietnam three highly mobile squadrons that specialized in dispersed patrolling, route security and shock assaults. In addition to possessing a “better means of gathering intelligence,” GEN Donn Starry later assessed that the unit “had a higher density of automatic weapons, possessed long-range radios and had more aircraft than a

mechanized brigade.”<sup>21</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> ACR would mirror this success three decades later against a similarly challenging guerrilla opponent in Iraq.

The final phase of expeditionary campaigning centers on empowering civilian authorities so American forces can return to shaping security conditions in normalized operational environments. Similar to their amplifying value in stability operations, versatile RSSGs would own the potential to provide economized, yet impactful, capacity for joint and allied commands to control large areas and safeguard transitioning regions. The combined-arms teams would excel at dispersed security-force partnership and border-security operations given their inherent operational reach and advanced sensory integration. These tasks, reflective of historical cavalry missions, would enable, as usually expected during latter stages of expeditionary campaigns, “the civil authority to regain its ability to govern.”<sup>22</sup>

The U.S. Army’s employment of constabulary regiments from 1946 to 1950 in West Germany illustrates how armored teams have previously assisted in post-war transition. The *Stars and Stripes* newspaper explained in 1945 how “highly mobile mechanized security force units, which may prove more efficient for occupation duty than infantry-type troops, will be organized in occupied Germany.” It then noted that “using armored cars, tanks, jeeps, motorcycles and other vehicles outfitted with full radio and signal equipment, units will patrol areas and maintain contact with local counter-intelligence corps detachments, military government, German civilian police and occupational-troop commanders.”<sup>23</sup> By 1948, as tensions increased with the Soviet Union, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Constabularies reorganized as ACRs (Light) to begin their long service along the Iron Curtain.<sup>24</sup>

## Enabling multi-domain battle

The Army’s Chief of Staff recently warned that “right now the level of uncertainty, the velocity of instability and potential for significant inter-state conflict is higher than it has been since the end of the Cold War in 1989-91.”<sup>25</sup> Even as American forces shape and deter adversaries, seize initiative and dominate, and stabilize and transition troubled regions, RSSGs could provide a versatile cornerstone for the Army’s forward presence. This concept would augment BCT rotations in Europe and East Asia while improving corps and division information-collection and counter-reconnaissance capabilities. In case of an offensive campaign in the Middle East, a group or individual squadrons could deploy to lead forced entry as the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> ACRs did during Operation Desert Storm.

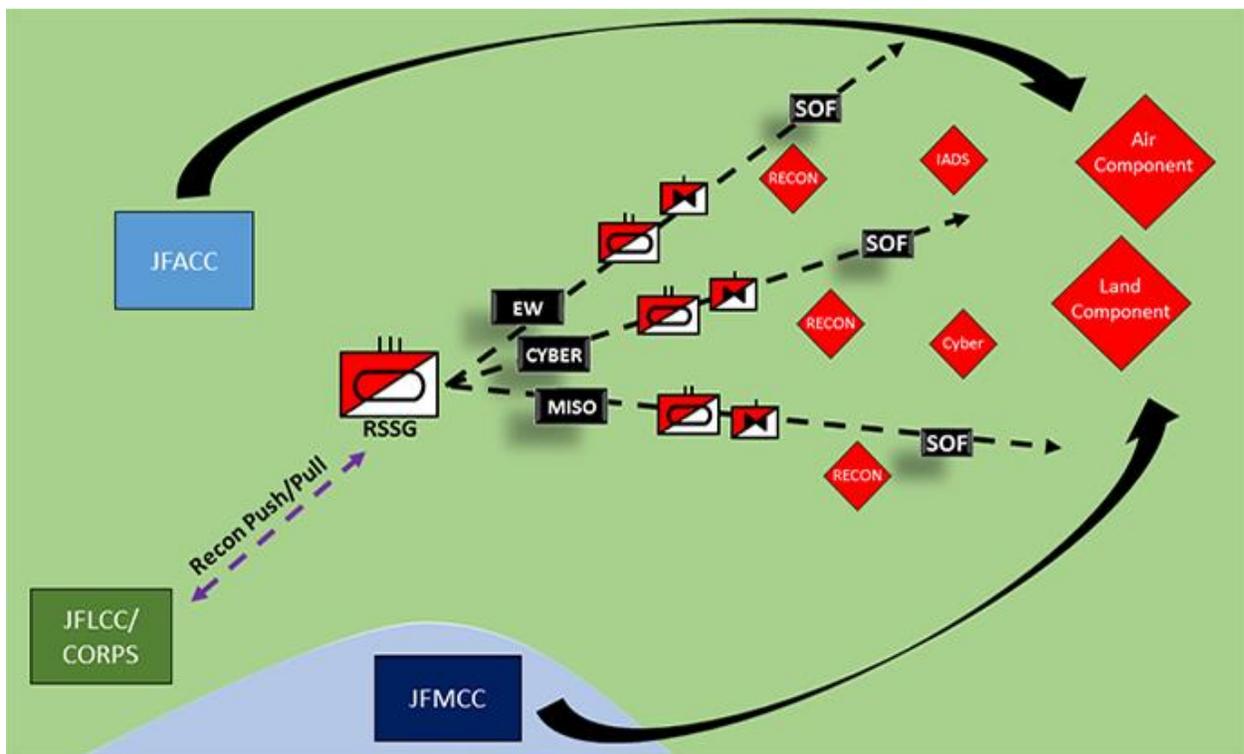
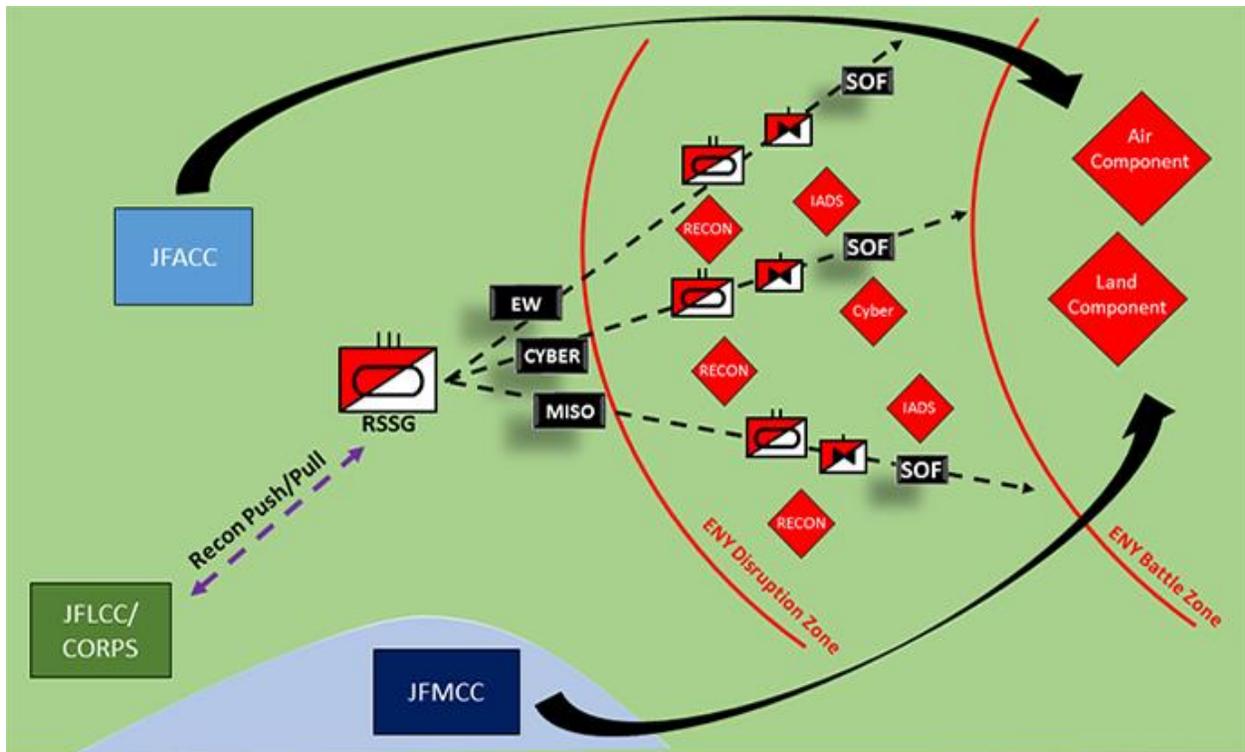


Figure 2. RSSG in multi-domain battle.



**Figure 3. RSSG in multi-domain battle, illustrating enemy disruption zone and enemy battle zone.**

Creating regionally aligned RSSGs as the vanguard of American expeditionary operations, while certainly costly, would ultimately facilitate the Army's ability to conduct dynamic multi-domain battle. As argued by the National Commission on the Future of the Army, which suggested increasing heavy-brigade quantities and forward-stationing them to attain higher readiness, "the value of armored forces for conducting major combat operations adds to their value for deterring aggression."<sup>26</sup> Deploying robust air-ground teams with specialized reach, lethality and survivability to contested landscapes would achieve these propositions while demonstrating resolve to defend allies and deter enemies. If ACRs seemingly outlived their utility in 2011, their reinvention as modernized RSSGs could hold the key to their reawakening.

*MAJ Nathan Jennings is a student in the School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, KS. His previous positions include assistant professor of history at the U.S. Military Academy; headquarters-troop commander and cavalry-troop commander, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division; security-force platoon leader, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division; and 19D cavalry scout in 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR (Light) with Operation Iraqi Freedom tours in Baghdad and Kirkuk, Iraq. MAJ Jennings holds a bachelor's of arts degree in history from Northwestern State University of Louisiana and a master's of arts degree in history from the University of Texas at Austin. His military schooling includes the Maneuver Officer Basic Course, Maneuver Officer Advanced Course, Cavalry Leader's Course and Air Assault and Airborne schools. He won 1<sup>st</sup> place in the U.S. Army Armor School's 2015 Starry Writing Competition, and he is the author of **Riding for the Lone Star: Frontier Cavalry and the Texas Way of War, 1822-1865.***

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Sawicki, *Cavalry Regiments of the U.S. Army*, Dumfries, VA: Wyvern Publications, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> BG John Kolasheski, foreword, *The United States Army Armor 2017-2018 Training and Leader Development Strategy*, March 2017.

<sup>3</sup> JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, August 2011; see Robert Cameron, *To Fight or Not to Fight? Organizational and Doctrinal Trends in Mounted Maneuver Reconnaissance from the Interwar Years to Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 2010, for the 1990s origins of the cavalry-strike-force concept.

<sup>4</sup> GEN Mark Milley, quoted in "Army \$40B Short on Modernization vs. Russia, China: CSA Milley," *Breaking Defense*, Oct. 3, 2016.

- <sup>5</sup> Field Manual (FM) 17-95, *Cavalry Operations*, December 1996.
- <sup>6</sup> FM 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, July 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> FM 3-04.126, *Attack Reconnaissance Helicopter Operations*, February 2007.
- <sup>8</sup> TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, October 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> William Nance, "Lost Sabers: Why We Need Operational Cavalry and How to Get It Back," *ARMOR*, October-December 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Kyle Trotter, "The Cavalry Squadron of 2025," *ARMOR*, January-March 2015.
- <sup>11</sup> GEN David Perkins, "Multi-Domain Battle: Joint Combined Arms Concept for the 21st Century," *ARMY*, Nov. 14, 2016.
- <sup>12</sup> JP 3-0.
- <sup>13</sup> Sawicki.
- <sup>14</sup> JP 3-0.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid; Perkins.
- <sup>16</sup> MG Robert H. Scales, *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, Office of the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Washington, DC, 1993.
- <sup>17</sup> JP 3-0.
- <sup>18</sup> Harry Yeide, *Steeds of Steel: A History of American Mechanized Cavalry in World War II*, Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2008.
- <sup>19</sup> *XX Corps personnel, The XX Corps*, Osaka, Japan: Mainichi Publishing Co., 1945.
- <sup>20</sup> JP 3-0.
- <sup>21</sup> GEN Donn Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 1989.
- <sup>22</sup> JP 3-0.
- <sup>23</sup> *Stars and Stripes*, Nov. 13, 1945.
- <sup>24</sup> Sawicki.
- <sup>25</sup> Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "Gen. Milley to SASC: World Getting Worse, Army Getting Smaller," *Breaking Defense*, July 21, 2015.
- <sup>26</sup> *National Commission on the Future of the Army*, Jan. 28, 2016.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ACR** – armored cavalry regiment  
**BCT** – brigade combat team  
**FM** – field manual  
**JP** – joint publication  
**MCG** – mechanized-cavalry group  
**R&S** – reconnaissance and security  
**RAF** – regionally aligned force  
**RSSG** – reconnaissance and security strike group  
**TRADOC** – (U.S. Army) Training and Doctrine Command