

Mounted Infantry Brigade Combat Team Scout Platoons Struggle With Stealth

by 1LT J. Brian Sikma Jr.

Reconnaissance leaders must constantly balance competing priorities and assume risks to rapidly provide commanders with accurate information. Mission variables remain substantially similar across company- and platoon-level organizations throughout the Army. But for reconnaissance units, the organization of the scout platoon – the “troops” in mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, civil considerations – often determines whether it is possible for a single platoon to accomplish a reconnaissance mission within the higher commander’s reconnaissance guidance. As they are currently constituted, motorized reconnaissance platoons in infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs) are poorly organized to carry out missions where commanders require stealth.

When commanders direct that reconnaissance be “stealthy,” they expect scouts to take extra precautions to avoid detection and engagement. Paragraph 3-12 in Army Technical Publication (ATP) 3-20.98, *Reconnaissance Platoon*, explains: “Stealthy reconnaissance occurs when the platoon conducts a methodical, time-consuming mission that minimizes chance enemy contact.”

For mission planning, the directive to be stealthy – as opposed to forceful – is the commander’s expression of the intent behind his or her engagement criteria. Platoon leaders rely on this expression of intent as they employ troop-leading procedures to formulate a tentative plan and initiative necessary movement. Task-organizing the platoon is an important part of both planning and executing a mission.

Maximizing scouts

When the mission calls for stealth, the platoon leader must organize the platoon in a way that maximizes the number of dismounted scouts. Paragraph 3-12 in ATP 3-20.98 also offers some helpful guidance about the conduct of stealthy operations: “It is usually conducted dismounted. ... The lighter an organization, the more stealth becomes essential.” Ironically, perhaps, this is where the motorized reconnaissance platoon falls short.

Under the current 6x24 configuration, 24 scouts are spread across six humvees. That comes to four Soldiers per vehicle, not counting attachments (frequently only a military-occupation specialty (MOS) 68W Combat Medic Specialist in the platoon sergeant’s No. 4 truck). Each humvee requires a driver and a gunner – an irreducibly minimum crew. A truck commander and dismounted scout round out each vehicle’s normal complement. Truck commanders can and should dismount when the mission requires an increase in the number of scouts operating beyond the vehicles.

From the start, then, it is theoretically possible to deploy a maximum of 12 dismounted scouts for missions requiring stealth. But this is only a theoretical maximum. Six dismounted scouts per three-vehicle sections create a reasonably sized reconnaissance element that can move to the forward and flanks of each mounted section. Reality tends to intervene, however, and prevent this from happening.

At a recent exportable combat-training-capability rotation, it became painfully evident that when motorized platoons lose scouts for various details and real-life injuries, not to mention assessed casualties, the number of scouts available for dismounting drops significantly. Even minor changes – such as losing three scouts in the platoon – reduces the total dismounts in each section to around four. This means a leader has at most two teams of two scouts per section who must work in conjunction with both each other and the mounted element to stealthily move along mobility corridors or cross-country to observe specific named areas of interest.

Even when steps are taken to reduce the signature of vehicle platforms, shrinking the size of a dismounted element shortens the distance it can operate away from the mounted element. In security and surveillance missions, this distance may not be as limited as it is in mobile-reconnaissance missions. Bringing trucks closer to dismounts increases the risk of enemy detection and chance contact. Such a loss of stealth can severely compromise not only the reconnaissance mission but also negatively impact the missions of follow-on maneuver forces.

Assessing configuration

Fortunately, the Army is looking to change the configuration of the IBCT's motorized reconnaissance troops to platoons that are based on the 6x36 configuration. The arrival of the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle and its six-seat B variant will make this organization possible. Leaders and thinkers within the armor and cavalry community have touted this new organization as a more flexible and dynamic tool for reconnaissance. They are right, and the challenges of performing stealthy reconnaissance with the current configuration only confirm their assessments.

Of the several reconnaissance-platoon organizations spread across the various brigade combat team types, it is the motorized scout platoons of an IBCT that must excel at stealthy reconnaissance. IBCTs are highly versatile formations, but they lack the firepower, rapid mobility and survivability of heavier units. Thus, they and their cavalry squadrons must leverage their smaller signature through stealth to ensure survivability on the battlefield.

Fortunately, cavalry squadrons in IBCTs do not have to wait for the 6x36 force-design update to take effect before finding a solution to the problem of too few dismounts. By integrating dismounted scouts from the squadron's Troop C (which normally focuses on surveillance) with the mounted platoons of Troops A and B, mission-specific task-organizations can eliminate the deficit of mounted-platoon dismounts. In this scenario, dismounted scouts (both MOS 19D and 11B) can work in larger teams spread over a greater supporting distance than would otherwise be possible, while mounted scouts perform overwatch, prepared to rapidly move wherever their overwhelming firepower is required to gain fire superiority and prevent a decisive engagement.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ATP – Army technical publication

IBCT – infantry brigade combat team

MOS – military-occupation specialty