

Organizing Light Cavalry in the Army of 2030

by CPT Charles Clouse

U.S. Army cavalry is about to undergo a massive restructuring. As the Army transitions to the division-centric Army of 2030 force structure, division cavalry (DIVCAV) formations are coming back from the dead to provide reconnaissance and security support to the newly empowered division formations.

The 1st Cavalry Division already has a test DIVCAV squadron to support its reorganization as a reinforced armored division, and additional DIVCAV formations throughout the force are planned to follow.¹ Based on publicly released planning materials, DIVCAV will be reserved for the armor division (Reinforced) and the air assault and airborne division structures; normal armor divisions and light divisions will likely lack DIVCAV.² Meanwhile, brigade combat teams' (BCTs) cavalry formations are planned to drop from a full cavalry squadron to a cavalry troop. In line with this model, the Army announced in February 2024 that U.S.-based Stryker and infantry brigade cavalry squadrons will be inactivated.³

Most public materials on the new DIVCAV formations focus on how the DIVCAV supporting the reinforced armored divisions will enable their parent formations to win decisively in large-scale combat operations (LSCO). The proposed force structure for these DIVCAV squadrons is a well-resourced and powerful formation capable of accomplishing the full spectrum of cavalry tasks for the division commander.⁴ What light DIVCAV will look like is less clear. It seems likely there will ultimately be at least two light DIVCAVs, along with a light cavalry troop supporting each of the 34 infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs).

The Army already has a model of what light DIVCAV squadrons and brigade-level cavalry troops may look like in the existing IBCT cavalry squadron and its subordinate mounted reconnaissance troop (MRT). Unfortunately, the IBCT cavalry squadron is a fatally flawed model and should serve planners mostly as a negative example. U.S. Army light cavalry needs significant changes to its force structure to enable success on the future battlefield.

What Not to Do: IBCT cavalry squadron

The IBCT cavalry squadron's structure is not fit for LSCO. The basic unsuitability of the IBCT Cavalry Squadron's modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) for carrying out its doctrinal tactical tasks has been commented on numerous times in the last 10 years, including in the pages of *ARMOR* magazine.^{5,6,7} In fact, the inadequacy of High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV also known as "Humvee") mounted scouts has been commented on as far back as the Gulf War.⁸



Figure 2. Cavalry scouts with B Troop, 2nd Squadron, 101st Cavalry maneuver at JRTC in July 2016. (U.S. Army photo by SGT Harley Jelis)

The dependence on the Humvee or JLTV creates a second critical problem, a lack of dismounted capability. The IBCT MRT has a greater need for dismounted troopers than its counterparts in the Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT) or the armored brigade combat team (ABCT) due to the terrain it is expected to operate in, yet perversely has the fewest dismounts. Stemming largely from the poor passenger carrying capacity of the Humvee and JLTV, each platoon is only able to generate six dismounts unless the vehicle commanders abandon the mission command systems in their vehicles and dismount as well. When the unit is under strength or attrited, the dismount position is often the first to go unfilled, further reducing the unit's ability to conduct dismounted reconnaissance. With so little dismounted capability, the MRT struggles to emplace an adequate number of long-term observation posts (OPs), reconnoiter and screen severely restrictive terrain between high-speed avenues of approach, and conduct effective push-pull maneuver between its mounted and dismounted elements. The lack of available dismounts is simply crippling for a formation intended to operate in severely restrictive terrain.

Beyond the limitations created by its platform, the IBCT Cavalry Squadron also lacks important organic enablers that will be required on the future battlefield. IBCT cavalry squadron's headquarters and headquarters troop (HHT) has few organic enablers and is typically only able to provide command and control (C2) and medical support to subordinate units. Additional support may be task-organized from other echelons; however, this causes the squadron to take combat power and enablers from the formations it is supposed to be supporting. Some of the most pressing capability gaps of the squadron include the following.

- **Inadequate organic unmanned aerial systems (UAS):** The IBCT cavalry squadron as currently constituted has no organic UAS save the obsolete RQ-11 Raven held at the troop level. Effective use of UAS is critical to effective reconnaissance on the modern battlefield, as shown by recent combat in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Middle East. A lack of effective UAS systems fielded at the lower tactical levels remains

a large capability gap in many Army units, especially in reconnaissance formations. It is no exaggeration to say that many non-state militant groups have access to more numerous, effective, and advanced UAS systems than a U.S. Army cavalry squadron.

- **Lack of counter-UAS:** The IBCT cavalry squadron has little ability to defend itself from observation or attack by tactical UAS. Given the proliferation of UAS worldwide, and the fact that cavalry formations are likely to be the first ground troops encountering enemy UAS, the lack of organic counter-UAS capability leaves the formation extremely vulnerable on the future battlefield.
- **Lack of indirect fires:** Unlike a typical maneuver battalion, the IBCT cavalry squadron lacks any indirect fires capability at the squadron level. As a result, the squadron must rely on higher echelon fire support to support its subordinate troops should the two mortar tubes possessed by each prove inadequate.
- **Headquarters' lack of ability to self-secure:** The only gun trucks within the HHT are those of the commander and the S-3. The net effect is that the HHT cannot secure itself while moving, and can barely do so while stationary, forcing the commander to either steal combat power from the subordinate reconnaissance troops or accept a high degree of risk to combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS) elements. This also leaves the squadron with no combat power with which to support subordinate troops if they become decisively engaged.¹³ The MRT Headquarters Section has the same problem, with little ability for the command post (CP) or the mortar section to self-secure, which creates the same tactical dilemma at the troop level.



Figure 3. Paratroopers assigned to the Airborne and Special Operations Test Directorate prepare to depart for a 50-kilometer road test in a fully loaded Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV). (U.S. Army photo by Michael Zigmond)

The Army would be making a mistake to retain the organizational structures associated with current light cavalry formations. The IBCT cavalry MTOE is already not suited to its current mission, and asking the same unit structure to support an even larger parent echelon in a higher tempo combat environment is setting the cavalry up for failure. While it would be easy for planners to simply repurpose existing formations, Army planners need to upgrade the capabilities of light cavalry before expecting it to support the divisions and brigades of the Army of 2030 in LSCO.

Ways forward: Light cavalry in Army of 2030

Given the inadequacy of current light cavalry structures, the Army should reequip cavalry supporting infantry formations. The doctrinal compromises that planners are willing to accept should drive the most important choice in structuring the new formations, the selection of their mounted platform. Depending on the capabilities that planners feel are most important, there are two broad options to improve the performance of the cavalry: go light or go heavy.

- **Go light:** For very light cavalry, troopers should be mounted on an extremely light platform with the capability to transport numerous dismounts, perhaps a variant of the newly fielded Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV) with a crew-served weapon and a sensor like the LRAS3. This would make cavalry formations significantly stealthier and provide much better off-road mobility and dismounted capability than the current IBCT cavalry formations. These formations would be relatively cheap to field, would be easy to support logistically, and would possess a high level of tactical, operational and strategic mobility. These platforms would also be suitable for airdrop and sling load, especially important for the DIVCAV tasked to support joint forcible entry (JFE) capable divisions. The main drawback of this design is the inherent lack of firepower and survivability in such a platform. These scouts would have limited ability to fight for information against well-armed opponents and would likely be unable to perform some traditional cavalry tasks such as a guard.
- **Go heavy:** For more robust light cavalry, troopers should be mounted on an armored platform with a stabilized autocannon, such as the M1296 “Dragoon” Stryker variant. These formations would be able to aggressively fight for information and perform the full range of traditional cavalry tasks in support of their parent divisions and brigades. With additional capacity for dismounts, these formations would still be able to effectively accomplish their missions in severely restrictive terrain far better than current Humvee-mounted scouts. These cavalry formations would trade these greatly increased capabilities for reduced stealth, a larger logistical tail, more difficult off-road mounted maneuver, and worse strategic mobility.¹⁴

Regardless of the platform chosen, light cavalry organizations will need to share several critical features and enabling capabilities to successfully execute reconnaissance and security operations in a LSCO environment. Any light cavalry force designed for the Army of 2030 should do the following:

- **Generate an adequate number of dismounts:** Infantry formations are intended to operate in severely restrictive or complex terrain, and the design of the supporting cavalry formations must reflect that. Having an adequate number of dismounts is critical for successful reconnaissance in the environments light cavalry units are likely to fight in. Whatever platform light cavalry uses should support at least a 6x36 structure (six vehicles with six troopers each, for a 36-Soldier platoon) to allow each vehicle to generate its own dismounted team.
- **Have nested UAS at all levels from section through squadron:** UAS will be ubiquitous on future battlefields, and current force structure does not provide enough UAS capability. The Army must field UAS of increasing size and capability at the section, platoon, troop and squadron levels in its reconnaissance formations.
- **Have access to necessary enablers at both squadron and troop level:** The DIVCAV squadron will need additional enabling capabilities to properly support its subordinate troops, including fires, intelligence, and protection assets such as counter-UAS. These capabilities can be split between the HHT and the planned cross-domain troop as needed. Some of these enabling capabilities will not be organic to the squadron and must come from habitual direct support (DS) relationships between the DIVCAV and various division assets. Where templated force structure does not support these relationships, the Army should consider adding additional batteries and companies to the division artillery (DIVARTY) and protection brigades to support them. Cavalry troops within IBCTs will also need many of the same enablers, and must be assigned them or have habitual DS relationships that provide those capabilities.
- **Include extra combat power:** The proposed armored division (reinforced) includes tanks in both the DIVCAV and brigade-level cavalry troops to give these formations the combat power needed to win on the battlefield.¹⁵ Light cavalry similarly needs augmented combat power if it is to fight for information without pulling reconnaissance assets away from critical information collection tasks. This additional combat power need not be organic; Mobile Protected Firepower (MPF) assets from the division’s MPF battalion

could provide a powerful reserve for a maneuvering DIVCAV. Whether organic, attached, or DS, DIVCAV and brigade-level cavalry troops need enough additional combat power to secure command and logistics nodes, and to provide an adequate reserve to support the maneuver of their scouts.

- **Have realistic doctrine for employment:** Leaders need to understand that light DIVCAV will be required to be able to fight or infiltrate through an enemy's disruption zone to reach their reconnaissance objectives. Where formerly Army cavalry supported an organization one echelon larger than itself, now it will be supporting an organization two echelons larger than itself. Chinese and Russian units still have a reconnaissance battalion per brigade, and both expect their reconnaissance elements to fight aggressively on both offense and defense.^{16, 17} Cavalry will potentially fight outnumbered, and will require significant combat power or external support to accomplish their mission against a peer threat. BCTs also need to accept that their cavalry troops, however organized, simply will not be able to provide the same level of reconnaissance and security support as the entire squadron they had previously, and plan accordingly.



Figure 4. U.S. Soldiers with 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment prepare to conduct a live fire exercise using the 30mm Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicle-Dragoon at the 7th Army Training Command's Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, Feb. 20, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Sara Stalvey)

Conclusion

The Army of 2030 initiative gives the Army the chance to revitalize its cavalry formations for LSCO. The Army should not accept the status quo in its light cavalry formations and lock in the mistakes in structure and equipment that have hamstrung the cavalry for years. The IBCT cavalry squadron is a model that should best be retired and replaced with a force structure that will be able to win in the battlefield environment of the future.

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Notes

¹ LTC Jennifer Bocanegra, "1st Cavalry Division Re-Activates Division Cavalry 'DIV CAV' Squadron," *Fort Cavazos Media Center*, March 8, 2023. <https://fortcavazosmediacenter.com/1st-cavalry-division-re-activates-division-cavalry-div-cav-squadron/>. This article was also published in the Spring 2023 issue of *ARMOR*.

² LTC Kevin Hadley, MAJ Savannah Spencer, and MAJ Justin Martens, "How the Army 2030 Divisions Fight," Feb. 2, 2023. A similar structure was presented during the U.S. Combined Arms Center's (CAC) Commanding General and Department of the Army G-3/5/7 Remarks at the 2023 Maneuver Warfighter Conference (MWfC).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hSGGYZd-Ho&list=PLnTI6lVvk6GDyx8LTxQeafFudNHb483X2h&index=10>.

³ U.S. Army Public Affairs, "U.S. Army White Paper – Army Force Structure Transformation," Feb. 27, 2024.

https://www.army.mil/article/274003/army_changes_force_structure_for_future_warfighting_operations.

⁴ MG John Richardson, "Modernizing the Division," Maneuver Center of Excellence Warfighter Conference, March 8, 2022.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL-Jj7_LyY.

⁵ MAJ Charles G Bies, "Too Light to Fight: the Infantry Brigade Combat Team Cavalry Troop In Combined Arms Maneuver," *ARMOR*, Summer 2014.

⁶ Cavalry Squadron Capability Review White Paper. April 17, 2014.

⁷ SGT Christopher Broman, "Reforge the Broken Saber: Evolving the Infantry Brigade Combat Team's Cavalry Squadron to Win the Recon Fight," *ARMOR*, Summer 2020.

⁸ "Desert Shield and Desert Storm Emerging Observations." The U.S. Army Armor Center. Oct. 7, 1991.

⁹ Reconnaissance doctrine explicitly recognizes this. IBCT Cavalry Troops are described in Field Manual (FM) 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations* as having "limited direct fire standoff, lethality, and survivability." FM 3-98 Paragraph 1-89, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, January 2023.

¹⁰ Robert S Cameron, Ph.D., *To Fight or Not to Fight? Organizational and Doctrinal Trends in Mounted Maneuver*

Reconnaissance from the Interwar Years to Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, Combat Studies Institute Press. 2009. See also Robert S Cameron, Ph.D., "To Fight or Not to Fight? The Saga Continues," *ARMOR*, Fall 2023.

¹¹ "Desert Shield and Desert Storm Emerging Observations." The U.S. Army Armor Center. Oct. 7, 1991.

¹² FM 3-96 Paragraph 1-4, *Brigade Combat Team*, January 2021.

¹³ Forces held out of contact are necessary to enable cavalry to successfully fight for information; due to the current doctrinal fundamental of reconnaissance "do not keep reconnaissance assets in reserve," this is often either neglected or doctrine is twisted into knots to explain why this necessary element does not constitute a "reserve." For a fuller discussion, see MAJ Ragan Rutherford, "Uncertainty and the Reserve: Updating a Fundamental of Reconnaissance," *ARMOR*, Fall 2021.

¹⁴ It is worth noting for the DIVCAV that divisions will already have to solve logistical and deployability issues associated with a heavy platform, since they will include an MPF battalion equipped with the M10 Booker, which weighs 42 tons. Cory Dickstein, "Army unveils the M10 Booker, its first new combat vehicle in two decades." *Stars and Stripes*, 10 June 2023.

<https://www.stripes.com/branches/army/2023-06-10/army-combat-vehicle-m10-booker-10387122.html>.

¹⁵ MG John Richardson, "Modernizing the Division," Maneuver Center of Excellence Warfighter Conference, March 8, 2022.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL-Jj7_LyY.

¹⁶ Note that only "New Look" brigades have a dedicated reconnaissance battalion per brigade; older structures include a reconnaissance battalion per division and a reconnaissance company per regiment. ATP 7-100.1 (*Russian Tactics*, February 2024). See also Lester Grau and Charles Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016.

¹⁷ ATP 7-100.3 Paragraph 6-7, *Chinese Tactics*, August 2021.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

BCT – brigade combat team

C2 – command and control

CP – Command Post

CS – Combat Support

CSS – Combat Service Support

DIVCAV – division cavalry

DIVARTY – division artillery

DS – direct support
FM – field manual
HHT – headquarters and headquarters troop
HMMWV – high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle; colloquial: Humvee
MPF – Mobile Protected Firepower
MRT – mounted reconnaissance troop
HQ – headquarters
IBCT – infantry brigade combat team
ISV – Infantry Squad Vehicle
IV – Intervisibility
JFE – Joint Forcible Entry
JLTV – Joint Light Tactical Vehicle
LRAS3 – Long Range Advanced Scout Surveillance System
LSCO – large-scale combat operations
MCOE – Maneuver Center of Excellence
MRT – mounted reconnaissance troop
MTOE – modified table of organization and equipment
OP – observation post
SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team
UAS – unmanned aerial system