



What's Wrong with the IBCT?

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The Army is undergoing change. Current modernization efforts are the largest since the introduction of the “Big 5” and AirLand Battle. Every part of the Army enterprise is pursuing upgrades in equipment, technology, and force design. Central to the majority of these efforts is the return of the division as the primary tactical unit of action, moving away from the brigade combat team (BCT) as that formation. If the future of combat is moving from the counterinsurgency (COIN)-centric operations of Iraq and Afghanistan to large-scale combat operations (LSCO) in either the European or Indo-Pacific areas, is the infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) the right formation for the missions?

The Infantry has been the center of formations and operations for the armies of the world for centuries and certainly in the U.S. Army over its relatively short history. Infantry companies, battalions, regiments, and divisions have led the charge into battle over the course of our country's history and across the globe. For the purposes of this discussion, we will start by looking back to the early 1980s.

Then Army Chief of Staff GEN John Wickham commissioned a White Paper to “provide direction for the development of the finest light infantry division the U.S. Army can field.”¹ This paper clearly outlined the need for light infantry. The study argued that having light infantry forces provides a strategic demission of mobility by being able to rapidly reinforce forward-deployed U.S. forces in NATO or in the “Far East.” Moreover, they are a force that can be employed in areas that lack developed infrastructure. GEN Wickham believed that a light infantry formation could “rapidly deploy to crisis areas before conflict begins... to show U.S. resolve.”² The “Division '86” study, as well as the designs that followed, took into account both threat and modernization to create these formations, specifically the 2nd, 7th, 9th, 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions. This division formation's operational concept called for the division and its maneuver brigades to be tactically mobile and to be able to attack to destroy enemy

Infantrymen assigned to 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, conduct squad live-fire training during a rotation to Pohakuloa Training Area, HI, on 27 April 2021.

Photo by SSG Alan Brutus



infantry forces, seize terrain, defend, delay, or disrupt heavier enemy forces, especially in “close terrain.”³ Efforts by later Army Chiefs, such as GEN Eric Shinseki, who commissioned the creation of the interim brigade combat team, and GEN Peter Schoomaker, who began the change to modularity, moved Infantry formations away from this “light” concept and produced a brigade-centric Army consisting of the three current brigade formations.

So where are we today? IBCTs are designed for combined arms offensive operations in restrictive or complex terrain against conventional or irregular threats.⁴ The design of the IBCT is such that it has all of the necessary capabilities to allow it to operate autonomously or semi-independently. The central capability of the IBCT resides in its lethality provided by the two or three infantry battalions and their ability to bring additional combat power to bear on an enemy force. The IBCT is the Army’s most strategically deployable brigade combat team (BCT); however, it does take a significant amount of lift to deploy the entire formation with all of its organic equipment. Additionally, while it is the most strategically mobile BCT, at the operational and tactical levels the IBCT loses this distinction. In fact, the formation’s mobility exists almost completely outside of its infantry formations. The IBCT was well designed and equipped for the missions of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and a COIN environment; however, with the shift to a division-centric Army, there may be a need to rethink the design.

The question that force designers are trying to answer now is: In order to meet threats and operational challenges of the future, how does the infantry formation continue to be the most strategically deployable formation, increase tactical and operational mobility, and maintain sufficient lethality to compete with, deter, and defeat enemy forces in dense or restrictive terrain? This is reinforced with a recent article highlighting a strategy paper from Army Chief of Staff GEN James McConville. This article explains that Army forces employed inside enemy missile ranges would have the ability to “disrupt the PLA’s [People’s Liberation Army’s] plans.”⁵ Recent design efforts are exploring two maturations of the IBCT: a mobile or motorized brigade combat team (MBCT) and a light brigade combat team (LBCT).

The MBCT concept provides organic tactical and operational mobility to higher echelon commanders, giving them flexibility in the employment of highly trained infantry formations to conduct operations to seize or control key and restrictive terrain. The LBCT concept provides a strategi-



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Soldiers assigned to the 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division conduct mounted live-fire exercises at Pohakuloa Training Area on 23 April 2021.

cally deployable and more robust infantry capability to these same commanders, giving them flexibility in employing highly trained infantry formations to conduct and also control key and restrictive terrain. Both of these designs would also support and reinforce heavier formations such as armor or Stryker brigades. As radical as this may sound, it is actually a throwback to the time of GEN Wickham’s White Paper from the early 1980s.

In the mid-1980s, a future infantry brigade commander wrote about his ideas on the role and purpose of the modern infantry formation. In his 1985 article, “Three Kinds of Infantry,” COL Huba Wass de Czege described the need for the Infantry to adapt to the new threat.⁶ His idea called for three types of infantry, each designed and organized to address a specific Soviet threat. COL Wass de Czege explained that the Infantry has three main responsibilities, accomplished by armored infantry, regular infantry, and light infantry.

In his description of armored infantry, he wrote: “Armored infantry orients on the advance and protection for the main battle tank. It keeps up with the fastest tanks, gets through close terrain safely, overwatches and secures tanks during movement, clears... obstacles..., and in static positions provides close-in security and protection for the tanks...”⁷ This general description is very close to our mechanized forces of today and the role they play in heavy force maneuver.

The next infantry formation very closely resembles the current MBCT concept in purpose and capability. The regular infantry, as described by COL Wass de Czege, would conduct operations supported by tanks. He saw the regular infantry mounted in vehicles that could move infantry squads quickly over long distances. At the appropriate point, Infantrymen would dismount from vehicles to conduct the mission. He stressed the belief that this formation fought

dismounted: "...to do its job, regular infantry rides. But it fights dismounted — *always*." His explanation of the type of vehicle necessary was one of "great cross-country load-carrying capacity" and being able to move the formation rapidly to achieve an objective.⁸ The MBCT's mission and design resemble this idea very closely. Its advantage lays with the tactical mobility inside an infantry battalion, giving it the ability to independently maneuver across the battlefield to key terrain or positions of advantage.

The final infantry formation COL Wass de Czege described is, of course, light infantry. He wrote that light infantry is designed for rapid insertion into rugged terrain, infiltration, and raids. While raids and infiltration are not part of any brigade combat team's task list, his light infantry idea can accomplish attack, movement to contact, and either airborne or air assault operations. The light infantry's ability to quickly deploy and be employed through air-mobile means gives this concept great flexibility in the areas it may operate. Its ability to also operate in complex terrain gives it a distinct advantage.⁹ (Note: Complex terrain is defined as a geographical area consisting of an urban center larger than a village and/or of two or more types of restrictive terrain or environmental conditions occupying the same space.¹⁰) The LBCT is COL Wass de Czege's light infantry concept. The LBCT is capable of fighting in dense, restrictive, urban, or isolated terrain, especially useful in areas that has islands, dense vegetation, or significant urban areas. The LBCT would be ideal for this environment.

The IBCT's strength was its modularity. An IBCT could operate mostly independent of a parent organization. Over the past 15-20 years, the Army has learned many lessons with regard to force design and many point to the IBCT's design as the center piece to recent combat success. However, as the role of the Army moves away from the fight of the last 20 years and towards competition/conflict with peer and near-peer enemies and the division as the tactical maneuver formation, does the IBCT have a place in that formation or does it also need to evolve?

While the MBCT and LBCT concepts display many advantages over the current IBCT, they do have a downside. While being more deployable and responsive, their designs lack some of the key capabilities of the current IBCT such as fires, protection, and sustainment. While the new BCT concepts would retain limited reconnaissance, the parent division would have to provide the larger reconnaissance capability. Both the MBCT and LBCT will be dependent on their parent divisions for direct or general support of some or all of these capabilities, whereas the IBCT currently retains these abilities.

Additionally, the role of the division in LSCO must be to command and sustain its subordinate formations. These division formations "must have reconnaissance and security, aviation, fires, maneuver enhancement, and sustainment formations" to enable its maneuver brigades.¹¹ For this to happen and the division to establish these capabilities, its maneuver infantry brigades must divest of the same capabilities. The MBCT and LBCT are designed to and can very effectively "end the firefight" at the close tactical level. However, it is incumbent on the division and possibly the corps to get the maneuver BCTs to that close tactical fight.

Notes

¹ GEN John A. Wickham Jr., "Light Infantry Division," Army White Paper, 16 April 1984, 1.

² Ibid.

³ John L. Romjue, "A History of Army 86, Volume II, The Development of The Light Division, The Corps, and Echelons Above Corps," U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Historical Monograph Series, June 1982.

⁴ Field Manual (FM) 3-96, *The Brigade Combat Team*, January 2021.

⁵ Sydney J. Freedberg Jr. "Land Forces Are Hard To Kill": Army Chief Unveils Pacific Strategy," *Breaking Defense*, 23 March 2021.

⁶ COL Huba Wass de Czege, "Three Kinds of Infantry," *INFANTRY Magazine* (July-August 1985): 11-13.

⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸ Ibid, 12.

⁹ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰ Army Techniques Publication 3-34.80, *Geospatial Engineering*, February 2017, 1-5.

¹¹ LTG Michael D. Lundy, "Meeting the Challenges of Large-Scale Combat Operations Today and Tomorrow," *Military Review Special Edition* (September-October 2018): 118.

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Photo by 1LT Ian Fischer

Soldiers from the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division load onto a CH-47 Chinook in Estonia on 8 May 2021 as part of Swift Response 21.