

Restoring Tactical Mobility to the Light Infantry Division

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“The Army is boldly transforming to provide the Joint Force with the speed, range, and convergence of cutting-edge technologies that will be needed to provide future decision dominance and overmatch for great power competition.”

— GEN James McConville
Army Chief of Staff

The centrality of large-scale combat operations remains ground combat. The Army needs that capability in order to bring the close combat force to bear to close with the enemy. This is the only way to effectively defeat enemy ground forces. The ground maneuver team, as the leading edge of the joint force, is and will continue to be the defeat mechanism for enemy ground forces into the foreseeable future. The Army accomplishes this as it always has: with fire and maneuver against enemy formations to defeat them, seize critical terrain, and to control populations. Doing this delivers sustainable political outcomes for our nation. As the author T.R. Fehrenbach famously quoted in his book *This Kind of War*, “You may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, atomize it, and wipe it clean of life — but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilization, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman Legions did — by putting your soldiers in the mud.”¹

Modernization of infantry formations with the Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV), Light Reconnaissance Vehicle (LRV), and Mobile Protected Firepower (MPF) provides the tactical mobility required for success against peer enemies.² The increasing range, precision, and lethality of the modern battlefield demands increasing the tempo of operations, thereby enabling freedom of action against peer enemies. Moving infantry formations via ISVs allows commanders to greatly increase the tempo of operations by moving quickly over extended distances, out of contact with the enemy, to positions of advantage. Securing the movement of mobile infantry formations requires scout and cavalry organizations equipped with an effective LRV, enabling the appropriate combination of mounted and dismounted reconnaissance and security. MPF provides precision, long-range, direct fire lethality to defeat crew-



Soldiers take cover behind an Infantry Squad Vehicle and return fire during the Initial Operational Test at Fort Bragg, NC. (Photo by Tad Browning)

served weapons, field fortifications, and light vehicles, permitting the rapid transition of infantry from movement to maneuver. It also supports infantry in the close fight. The ISV, LRV, and MPF are essential components of infantry force modernization, providing required mobility, security, and firepower to defeat peer enemies.

The U.S. Army is undertaking its largest modernization effort in a generation. Not since the development of AirLand Battle and the Big 5 has the Army pursued a comprehensive modernization effort for how we fight (doctrine), force design (organization), and equipment (materiel).³⁻⁴ Central to the entire modernization effort is moving the force from the counterinsurgency (COIN)-centric force of the past 20 years to a force developed to succeed in large-scale combat operations. Whether in Europe or the Indo-Pacific, the Army is changing to meet the threat.

Historically, the U.S. Army has been a division-centric force consisting of a combination of maneuver brigades, cavalry regiment, multiple field artillery batteries, engineer battalion, and various signal, medical, and support organizations. This design evolved over time between World War I and Operation Iraqi Freedom in early 2003. Operations field manuals in the 1930s and 1940s described the division as the unit that corps use to execute maneuver and the basis of organization of the field force. Today's infantry division performs a number of roles, most of which center around consolidating Joint capabilities, task-organizing maneuver brigades and a headquarters around which a Joint task force is formed.⁵ After 20 years of employing modular brigade combat teams, the Army is moving forward with divisions as the tactical unit of action. The Army's concept for multi-domain operations describes the division as a tactical headquarters that conducts maneuver and commands multiple maneuver brigades and enablers to dominate the close fight.⁶

The Army must continue to focus on our pacing threats: peer enemies who can contest us in all domains. We must refocus both training and doctrine on how to defeat them. In doing this, the Army must be clear-eyed in how it would confront the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) mechanized brigades on the landmasses in the Pacific as well as how it would close the last mile against a Russian battalion tactical group on Eastern European terrain — both done in concert with our friends and allies. China and Russia are the most capable peer threats that face the United States and currently possess capabilities that are comparable to those of the United States. Both China and Russia have spent the recent decades investing in modernization efforts that close the gap with the United States with capabilities that span all domains. In the tactical fight, both Russia and China specifically use integrated fires to provide stand off and avoid close combat.⁷

Since the late 1970s, the PLA has moved to transform its military from a mechanized, infantry-heavy force to what PRC President Xi Jinping calls a "world class" force by 2049. The PLA continues to develop better fire support systems from sensor-to-shooter capability as well as move away from aging, towed artillery and mortar systems.⁸ Russia's military continues to use large and extensive exercises, such as Zapad 2021, to test and refine its military concepts. Zapad 2021 was a combined exercise with the Belarusian military that included the introduction of new robotics and air-mobile capabilities.⁹ These are the same concepts that were on display during the Russian military's actions into Ukraine in 2014. Despite these advances, both China and Russia continue to find challenges with their abilities to develop the reconnaissance capabilities necessary to integrate effective targeting.¹⁰

Recognizing the United States' peer threat's advancements in combat operations compared with U.S. COIN and stability operations, it was clear that the PLA and Russian militaries were closing the capability gap. In 2019, the Combined Arms Center conducted a study of large-scale combat operations that identified the need to significantly change how the Army approaches conflict against peer threats.¹¹

Achieving success in the complex operational environments against peer threats like China and Russia requires a comprehensive approach to combat operations across multiple echelons. One significant problem to overcome is enemy anti-access and area denial (A2AD) which limits our freedom of action.¹² One approach is for a formation to be able to conduct movement and maneuver out of contact. Field Manual 3-96, *The Brigade Combat Team*, explains a turning movement is best suited to a formation that has a high degree of tactical or operational mobility. The publication goes on to define a turning movement as "...a form of maneuver in which the attacking force seeks to avoid the enemy's principle defensive positions by seizing objectives behind the enemy's current positions thereby causing the enemy force to move out of their current position to divert major forces to meet the threat."

There are a few historical examples illustrating this idea. The Inchon landings, during the early months of the Korean War, are one example at the operational level. GEN MacArthur enjoyed the freedom of maneuver, out of

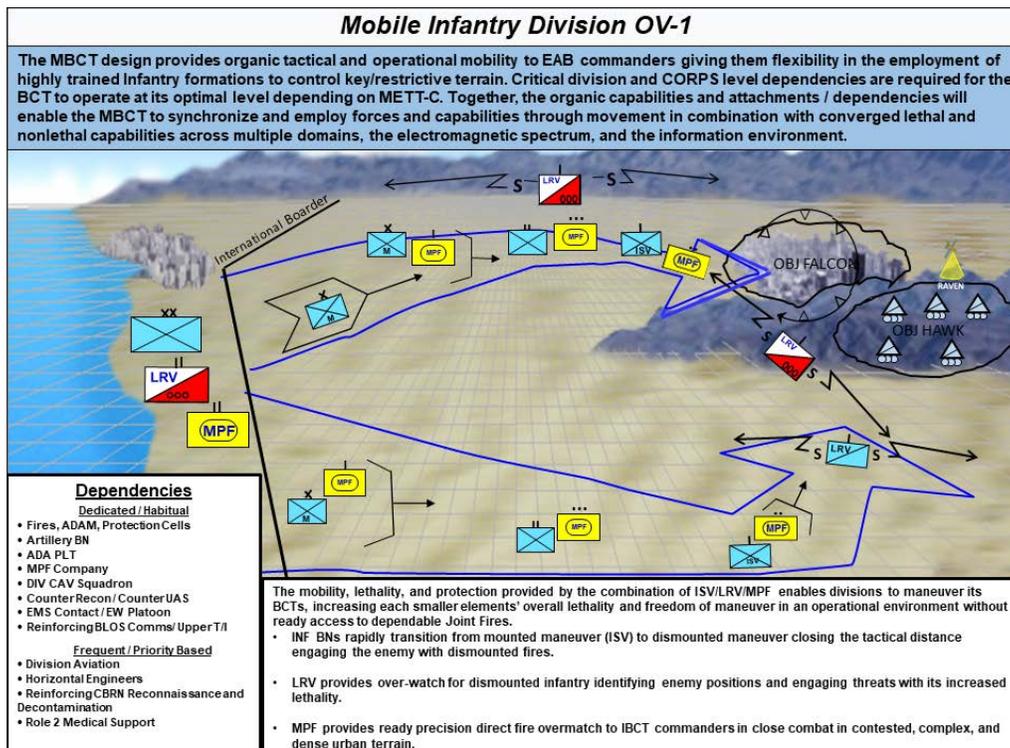


Figure 1 — Infantry Division Mobility Strategy

contact, to land a turning force behind the enemy, forcing them to leave their primary positions. Another example of maneuver out of contact to gain a tactical advantage would be the 101st Airborne Division's air assault to cut off the Iraqi army during Operation Desert Storm.

The need for infantry divisions to be able to conduct maneuver is further highlighted by COL Huba Wass de Czege in a 1985 *Infantry* article. In his article, COL Wass de Czege describes three missions, or capabilities, that are essential for infantry formations. The first is the ability to keep pace with armored and mechanized forces; next is for Infantry formations to be able to seize and hold complex terrain. And finally, they need to be "strategically, operationally, and tactically highly mobile..." He goes on to describe this last capability in detail. When conducting offensive operations, large infantry forces should be able to advance rapidly across open terrain to conduct attacks, seize key terrain, or attain positions of advantage over an enemy force.¹³

The capability of a combat force to enter an area of operation in a mobile, lethal, combat-focused formation provides theater or Joint force commanders the ability to present an enemy force multiple dilemmas. In large-scale combat operations, success of the division relies on freedom of maneuver to gain the advantage and engage in close combat. The ability for a division to outmaneuver an enemy force is contingent on employing brigades equipped with combat vehicles, mobile reconnaissance formations, and improved firepower.¹⁴

The idea of how a "light division" will fight in the future centers around three pillars: entry into the area of operation; operational and tactical movement; and maneuver against the enemy. For the purposes of this discussion, the concept of a joint forcible entry operation is set aside, and entry into the area of operation will be through an offset port of entry. Entry in this offset manner allows the force to consolidate its combat power before making contact with enemy air defense systems and indirect fires. This light force, having built its combat power, transitions to offensive operations. A combination of capabilities in the form of three vehicle platforms (ISV, LRV, and MPF) enables the light division to conduct movement and then transition to maneuver.¹⁵

Infantry battalions are enabled to move over operational distance with the Infantry Squad Vehicle. At the appropriate point, these ISV infantry formations can rapidly transition from mounted movement to dismounted maneuver and engage the enemy. Reflecting back on the infantry battalion and rifle company table of organization and equipment (TO&E), these units require 100 percent of their TO&E equipment to be transported in a single lift. The current IBCTs are only about 60-percent mobile. Meaning that only 60 percent of an IBCT's Soldiers have an



The Infantry Squad Vehicle carries a nine-man squad, packs a payload of 3,200 pounds, can be externally sling loaded under Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters, is air droppable, and provides exceptional mobility over all terrain. (Photo by Michael J. Malik)

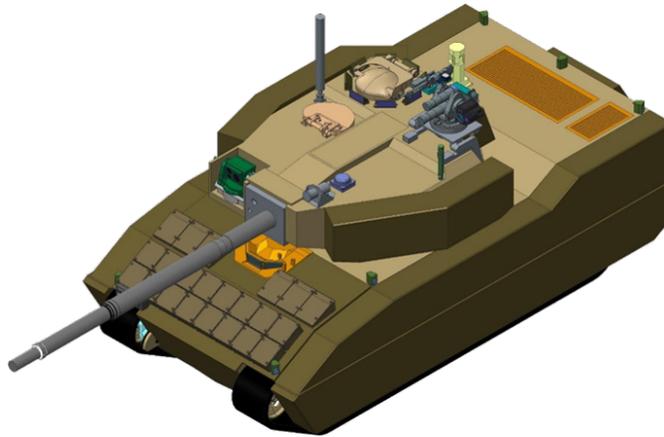
assigned seat in a vehicle. The 40 percent of Soldiers not mobile are predominantly those in the rifle companies of infantry battalions.¹⁶ Adding the ISV to infantry brigades increases operational mobility for combat formations. This capability now enables infantry formations to move rapidly over extended distances bringing enhanced survivability through improved mobility.

To allow the enhanced mobility of the ISV-equipped formations, the division must provide a reconnaissance and security capability ahead of the ISV formations. Division cavalry formations equipped with Light Reconnaissance Vehicles provide the necessary all-weather, persistent security by identifying enemy positions, confirming or denying the division commander's information requirements, and creating decision space for the movement and maneuver of the division's infantry brigades. The LRV is envisioned as the purpose-built reconnaissance and security vehicle for the IBCT or division cavalry squadrons. When the infantry formations dismount to maneuver on enemy objectives, the LRV-enabled cavalry formations provide overwatch and security, allowing freedom of maneuver for dismounted formations.

The final element in maneuvering on enemy objectives is the Mobile Protected Firepower. The MPF provides precision, long-range direct fire to support infantry maneuver while retaining freedom of action. The MPF has the range and lethality to reduce bunkers and hardened sites, allowing infantry freedom of maneuver. This is effective in open, restrictive, and urban terrain. The MPF provides the direct fire overmatch to brigade and battalion commanders in close combat, allowing IBCTs to maintain momentum.

The mobility, security, and lethality provided by the combination of the ISV, LRV, and MPF enable infantry divisions to maneuver its BCTs, increasing each subordinate elements' overall lethality and freedom of maneuver. The infantry's tactical mobility challenges are mitigated, speed and range of action are increased, and the enemy is placed in a position of disadvantage.

The modern battlefield is changing. The use of robotics and unmanned systems to deny ground forces access to the battlefield continues to grow. As the U.S. Army moves forward toward Army 2030 and Army 2035, what will not change is the last mile of combat. It will still belong to the ground maneuver team. Rifle companies and platoons will remain at the center of our infantry formations, and Soldiers in the rifle squad will still stand on the objective.

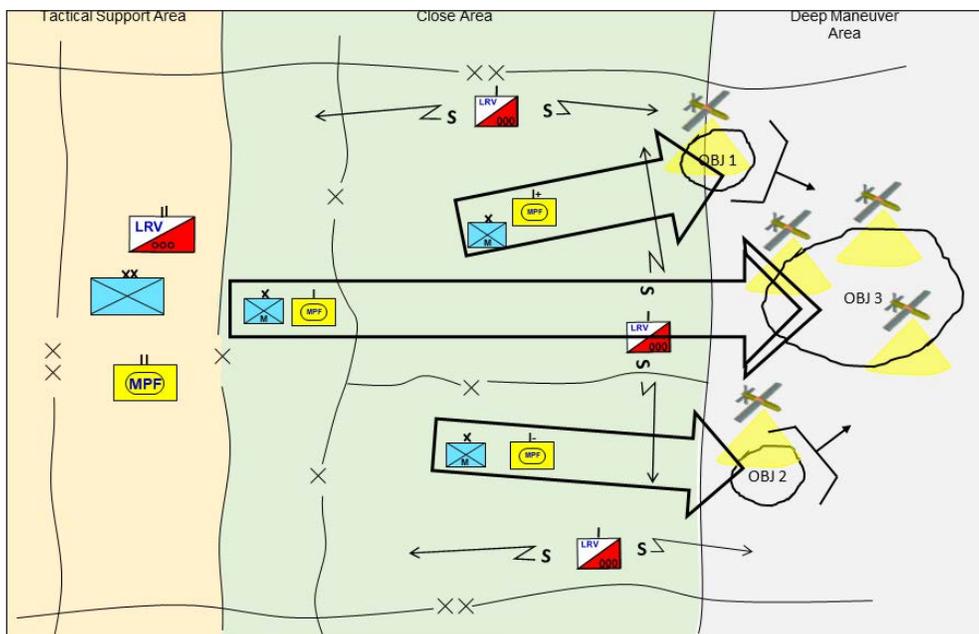


The Mobile Protected Firepower will provide IBCTs with long range, mobile, protected, precision firepower. (Graphic courtesy of Program Executive Office Ground Combat Systems)

There is still a desire, even coming out of a conflict where we have been challenged in the sand and complex terrain, to look for a method of warfare that is antiseptic. This being reminiscent of the days of the Revolution in Military Affairs and the false promises of knowing all and being able to vanquish foes by precision-guided munitions against easily spotted and classified enemies. Over the last 20 years, we recognized the need of precision targeting tied to a robust sensor grid to defeat our adversaries. While this continues to hold today and into the future, it is not enough to win on the battlefield. Only by seizing terrain and controlling populations can we achieve sustainable outcomes consistent with our national interests.

At Fort Benning, our focus is on designing combat, maneuver brigades that will fight as elements of Army divisions. While we recognize that technological advantages and the rise of autonomous systems evolve the character of war, they will not sanitize the battlefield against a peer adversary, nor provide easy solutions to ground combat. There will remain the necessity of ending the firefight in close combat. It remains imperative that our Army delivers the combined arms, ground maneuver force to a position of advantage with the initiative to defeat enemy ground forces, seize critical terrain, and control populations.

Figure 2



Notes

¹ T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History* (NY: Simon & Schuster Books For Young Readers, 1994).

² The capabilities of these three platforms, which enhanced the lethality, mobility, reconnaissance, and security of infantry brigades, were collectively endorsed by the Secretary of the Army and Chief of Staff of the Army in the 2018 Army Modernization Strategy.

³ AirLand Battle was the primary doctrine implemented by the U.S. military in the early 1980s; it emphasized the coordinated offensive operations between the Army and Air Force with close and deep attacks.

⁴ The Big 5 is the common name for the core Army programs facilitating AirLand Battle in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The programs are: the AH-64 Apache Attack Helicopter, UH-60 Black Hawk Helicopter, M1 Abrams Tank, M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle, and Patriot Missile System.

⁵ Dennis S. Burket, "The Evolution of the Division Formation," in *Large-Scale Combat Operations: The Division Fight* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2019), 9, 12.

⁶ Army Futures Command (AFC) Pamphlet 71-20-1, *Concept for Maneuver in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, 7 July 2020, 45.

⁷ AFC Pamphlet 71-20-2, *Concept for Brigade Combat Team Cross Domain Maneuver 2028*, 14 August 2020, 14-19.

⁸ China Primer: The People's Liberation Army (PLA), Congressional Research Service, 5 January 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11719>.

⁹ Russian Military Exercises, Congressional Research Service, 4 October 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

¹⁰ AFC Pamphlet 71-20-2, 20-21.

¹¹ Burket, "The Evolution of the Division Formation," 11-12.

¹² U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, 6 December 2018, 16.

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

¹⁴ AFC Pamphlet 71-20-2, 26-27.

¹⁵ The Joint Warfighting Assessment (JWA) 17.1 Final Synopsis 'O' further supports this concept. Using the Combat Vehicle Modernization Strategy, the 17.1 Synopsis describes the IBCT conducting an offset insertion avoiding enemy A2AD systems; LRV cavalry formations screen ahead of infantry employing ground mobility vehicles (now ISVs) to move extended distances. Finally, the MPF provides direct fire support to dismounted infantry during maneuver onto the objective.

¹⁶ Army Comprehensive Guide to Modularity, TRADOC, Task Force Modularity, 8 October 2004, Chapter 9.

MG Patrick Donahoe served in 23 different assignments before assuming his current position as the Commanding General of the Army's Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, GA. A native of New Jersey, he attended Villanova University where he studied History and received his commission as an Armor officer upon his graduation. MG Donahoe is a graduate of the U.S. Naval War College, where he earned his master's degree in National Security and Strategic Studies, and was a National Security Fellow at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

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