To Fight or Not to Fight? The Saga Continues

by Robert S. Cameron, Ph.D.

In 1996 I started my civil service career in the Armor Center. While documenting and observing key Armor Branch activities, it soon became clear that a recurring point of debate lay in the nature, organization, and operation of cavalry. In the post-Cold War era, longstanding beliefs associated with the importance and role of reconnaissance and security organizations were sometimes tossed aside in favor of new technology-based concepts. Novelty garnered attention and funding, while Old School concepts enshrined in Field Manual 1795, ***Cavalry*** faded.

Yet these trends marked only the latest development in this recurring debate that often fixated upon the scout's need for combat power at the platform and organizational level. This issue sooner or later emerged in doctrine, training development, and force design. The inability to resolve it stymied efforts to articulate the role of reconnaissance, security, and surveillance assets at echelon. No definitive and timeless framework of ideas existed to guide the incorporation of new technology or adaptation to an evolving operational environment. Hence, cavalry development boomeranged between the extremes of maximized versatility based upon organic combat power and aversion to hostile contact. Force structure decisions, senior leader ideas, deployment experience, or new technology often triggered the shift from one extreme toward the other.

The absence of an overarching set of principles left reconnaissance, security, and surveillance assets stranded "in the moment," continuously reacting to rather than managing changes that threatened their very existence.

Great reconnaissance schism

In 1938, the ***Cavalry Journal*** published an article advocating unarmored reconnaissance vehicles. In the author's view armor increased the tendency to use the platform for combat, raised its silhouette, reduced mobility, decreased visibility, and complicated maintenance. Freed from an armored shell, the scout would not be emboldened to forgo information collection and engage in combat. Therefore, an unarmored platform was preferable to either the scout or armored cars then in service.[1]

Figure 1. Mechanized cavalry column in France, August 1944. *(Photo from the U.S. Army Armor and Cavalry Collection)*

This view contradicted the reconnaissance principles developed by the 7th Cavalry Brigade (Mechanized), the Army's only mechanized cavalry unit. It emphasized rapid information collection to enable a high maneuver tempo. Its leaders believed that scouts operating near the enemy required the means to survive sudden contact situations and when necessary, engage in combat to complete their mission. Therefore, scouts relied upon turreted, armored cars. COL Charles L. Scott considered advocacy of an unarmored reconnaissance platform "…the most inane, asinine proposal that's ever been submitted. To take such action would be the most backward step the Cavalry could possibly take."[2] He wrote a rebuttal article outlining the principles governing mechanized cavalry reconnaissance and associated them with more traditional and historical employment of the mounted branch. He accepted the possibility that scouts might have to fight to accomplish their mission and should be so trained, equipped and organized. After all, "a scout who is not trained and equipped to fight but, on the contrary, told to avoid combat under all conditions will always be a spineless adjunct to the regiment."[3] These two viewpoints became the range fans governing the debate over the nature and purpose of cavalry.

Vacillating force structure decisions, confusion

World War II marked the creation of division cavalry organizations with infantry formations receiving a mechanized cavalry troop and armored formations including a cavalry reconnaissance squadron. Army and corps commands relied upon cavalry groups of at least two squadrons. The initial design of these units anticipated the broad range of missions traditionally associated with cavalry. However, when Army Ground Forces became responsible for training, doctrine, and force design, it reduced the size of these units and narrowed their focus to reconnaissance. The mechanized cavalry's unofficial motto became "sneak, peak and retreat."[4]

When the mechanized cavalry went to war, it found few opportunities for the singular mission of reconnaissance. Field commanders needed old-fashioned cavalry more than just information collectors. The mechanized cavalry thus abandoned their one-trick pony status and performed the full range of missions originally intended—even though they were no longer configured and equipped to do so. At corps and army levels, combat and security operations predominated, while security missions constituted frequent actions at division level.[5]

The maneuver battalion scout platoons deployed in jeeps, prepared to conduct stealthy reconnaissance without combat. These platoons experienced considerable success when they could establish a dismounted observation point without detection, but such an accomplishment proved difficult in the face of hostile combined arms, counter reconnaissance teams. Jeep scouts found their ability to collect information impaired by even a minimal enemy presence. Armored battalions attempted to resolve this issue by integrating light tanks with their jeep scouts to provide both security and the means to overcome light resistance.

After the war a restructuring of cavalry organizations occurred that reflected the wartime preference for a more versatile unit with increased organic combat power. The basic building block became the combined arms reconnaissance platoon with light tanks, scouts, a mortar team, and a rifle squad. It constituted the smallest combined arms team in the Army and the basis for the infantry division's reconnaissance company and the armored division's armored reconnaissance battalion. At the corps level, the armored cavalry regiment replaced the wartime cavalry group. The new regiment included three armored reconnaissance battalions bolstered by tanks and assault guns. In this manner, the Army recrafted its tiered reconnaissance structure around a common platoon organization.

In the Korean War the mobility differential among the tracked and wheeled vehicles of this unit hampered its employment and complicated command and control. The jeep's lack of survivability triggered improvised armor protection, unofficial guidance to dismount immediately when fired upon, and personnel transfers into tank units. Nevertheless, jeep supporters highlighted the vehicle's small size, lightness, quietness, and ease of maintenance — characteristics that encouraged stealth.

Following the war, the maneuver battalion scout platoon alternated between the wartime combined arms configuration and a scout platoon with only jeep-mounted scouts. These shifts generated confusion, disrupted training, and ensured the dissatisfaction of both those who favored versatility and combat power as well as the advocates of stealth and greater reconnaissance coverage. The scout platoon lacked survivability and combat power, but nor did it possess the complexity of the combined arms platoon with its four vehicle types and eight different weapons.[6] This complexity constituted a significant drawback in an era in which "a unit commander is fortunate indeed to receive a scout who is able to find himself on a map." Similarly, platoon leaders possessed little preparation other than the tank training received in the Armor Officer Basic Course.[7]

More generally the advent of the atomic battlefield in the 1950s resulted in the Army's embracement of mobile, dispersed operations and recognition of the related importance of reconnaissance, security, and surveillance.

The increased dimensions of the battlefield and accompanying demands for intensified intelligence effort, target acquisition and surveillance of the enemy — emphasize reconnaissance. To meet this demand we must have reconnaissance, which is improved in penetrating ability, protection, and possesses the facility for fighting for information in all conditions of terrain and weather. This means armored reconnaissance ground elements in close coordination with air-transported reconnaissance and battle surveillance units.[8]

This characterization suited the versatility and combat power of the division cavalry squadron and the armored cavalry regiment, which gained a further

Figure 2. Jeep scouts practicing stealthy observation. *(U.S. Army photo)*

boost in capability through the addition of helicopter-based air cavalry.

'Find the bastards, then pile on!'

In Vietnam the overriding role of cavalry lay in finding and fixing an elusive enemy. Cavalry organizations often lacked the luxury of simply locating enemy forces and leaving their destruction to friendly maneuver units. Such an approach ensured that the enemy simply withdrew before they could be engaged. Hence, reconnaissance in force missions sought to locate and engage the enemy long enough for other friendly forces to attack and destroy them. Similarly, when contact occurred during a reconnaissance sweep, every unit in the area received notification. They raced to the point of contact, effectively piling on combat power to ensure the hostile force's destruction. This concept found expression on the vehicles of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, with each one carrying the carefully stenciled note "Find the bastards, then pile on!"

Reconnaissance in force and pile-on tactics encouraged cavalry organizations at all echelons to adopt a combative approach, leaving stealth to long range reconnaissance patrols. In cavalry organizations, the M113 transformed into the armored cavalry assault vehicle (ACAV) through the addition of more machine guns and gun shields. In the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and the division cavalry squadrons, the combination of air cavalry, fires, tanks, and ACAVs provided a powerful hammer with which to destroy enemy combatants. Moreover, it enabled the development of sophisticated counter-ambush tactics that necessitated surviving first contact and carrying the fight to the enemy. The organic combat power of the armored cavalry regiment also permitted its employment in more conventional combat operations, exemplified by the prominent role given the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment during the 1970 Cambodian incursion. Such combat prowess raised concerns within the broader cavalry community. Were cavalry organizations specially crafted organizations with unique reconnaissance, security, and surveillance capabilities or just another maneuver unit with a different name?

Figure 3. ACAVs in a herringbone formation in Vietnam. *(U.S. Army photo)*

After Vietnam the Army refocused upon its principal Cold War adversary — the heavily armored Warsaw Pact in Central Europe. Senior leaders proved much less concerned about the finer points of a scout's role at echelon than in maximizing combat power on the battlefield.

The forward posture of the cavalry organizations made them ideally suited to delay and attrit attacking armored columns. Hence, cavalry units in Europe experienced an increase in combat power, particularly in anti-armor capabilities.

By decade's end the division cavalry squadron of an armored or mechanized infantry division included 36 main battle tanks, 18 improved tube-launched optically tracked wire-guided missile (TOW) vehicles, and 18 M113s armored personnel carriers carrying Dragon anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) teams—in addition to air cavalry troops equipped with attack helicopters carrying still more anti-armor weaponry.[9]

Battalion scouts also acquired more combat power and ATGMs at the expense of specially trained information collectors. Collectively, these trends called into question the very essence of and need for cavalry.

No tanks, no recon

The emergence of AirLand Battle, the Army of Excellence, and the fielding of the Big 5 in the 1980s intensified the debate and confusion surrounding the purpose and structure of cavalry. The armored cavalry regiment remained a powerful capability at the corps level. The division cavalry squadron underwent significant redesign. The three ground cavalry and one air cavalry troop configuration of the preceding decades gave way to a curious mix of two ground cavalry and two air cavalry troops aligned under the division aviation brigade. Moreover, the squadron lost its tanks, and its principal mission became reconnaissance. For the light infantry divisions, this focus suited their one ground and two air cavalry troop configurations.

In the heavier formations, the loss of tanks generated concerns about their ability to operate on a battlespace populated by Warsaw Pact armor. A suite of sensors was originally intended to enhance information collection and surveillance capabilities of these units, but it was never fielded. Similarly, a planned brigade reconnaissance element failed to materialize. The fielding of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle offered some mitigation with its mix of armor protection, 25-mm Bushmaster gun, TOW missile launcher, and coax machine gun. In the heavy division

cavalry squadrons, the armored cavalry platoons abandoned their configuration. However, far from resolving issues, the nature of this vehicle created new ones. With a large silhouette, heavy firepower, and loud noise signature, it represented everything a scout platform should not be for most professional cavalrymen. Indeed, Armor Center Commander MG Thomas Tait quipped that "Reconnaissance in a Bradley is like doing reconnaissance in a Winnebago," a reference to a popular recreational vehicle.[10]

The controversy and debate surrounding the division cavalry squadron also affected the maneuver battalion scout platoon. The central issue at this echelon lay in identifying the proper role of the scout and the optimal tools needed, but it became more confused when heavy divisions adopted the pure Bradley configuration for their battalion scouts. Trend assessments at the newly opened National Training Center noted the tendency of battalion scouts to become engaged and destroyed. These observations and the dislike of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle encouraged the adoption of a pure high-mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV) scout platoon. Supporters of this new organization echoed the 1938 advocate of unarmored reconnaissance vehicles and argued that minimal armament would further encourage scouts to avoid combat and rely upon stealth for their own safety.

In 1991 Operation Desert Storm showcased the Army of Excellence's new set of reconnaissance, security, and surveillance organizations. Unsurprisingly the armored cavalry regiment proved the most successful with its array of combat power further enhanced by corps and army attachments. Armored and mechanized division commanders attached tanks to their cavalry squadrons, noting a resultant increase in their operational tempo. Battalion commanders generally marginalized their HMMWV scout platoons out of concern for their survivability on an open battlefield.

The overall success of the Army, and armored units in particular, helped the Armor community to restore tanks to the heavy division cavalry squadrons which also regained a ground cavalry troop. Consequently, these units ended the 1990s in a greatly enhanced state. The pure HMMWV scout platoon, however, emerged from the war heavily criticized, but it remained in the force structure since it suited stealthy information collection and there was no funding for a new vehicle.

Figure 4. The Bradley Fighting Vehicle, aka the "Arsenal of Democracy." *(U.S. Army photo)*

Figure 5. HMMWV scout patrol prepares next move. *(U.S. Army photo)*

New technology, new contact paradigm

In the 1990s the rise of computer networks to manage, coordinate, and share data encouraged the Army's embracement of Network-centric warfare. A belief in the ability to attain near perfect situational awareness in turn stimulated expectation of precision employment of maneuver units. Network-centric concepts offered scouts a different way of conducting reconnaissance, security, and surveillance. The standoff capability of the Long-Range Advanced Scout Surveillance Systems (LRAS3) enabled them to gain contact with an enemy force, maintain contact, and develop the situation without ever entering the direct fire engagement range of hostile forces. Moreover, a scout could use the

network to orchestrate the destruction of a hostile force. He could focus upon watching and observing, relying upon the network and standoff capabilities for force protection. Against an aggressive enemy reconnaissance force, he could use the same capabilities to alert maneuver commanders, monitor the enemy, and move aside when combat became imminent.

This new contact paradigm altered traditional views of cavalry operations and organization. Light, digitized, and information-oriented scouts offered the allure of executing reconnaissance, security, and surveillance without the iron fist of combat power. The brigade reconnaissance troop with its handful of HMMWVs and LRAS3 constituted the first step in this direction, but it was truly embodied in the reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition (RSTA) squadron of the Stryker brigade combat team. This new brigade type emerged as part of Army Transformation and reflected the need for an organization optimized to conduct small-scale contingency operations.

Figure 6. The HMMWV-LRAS3 combination — the essence of a new contact paradigm. *(Photo from the U.S. Army Armor Branch archives)*

The RSTA squadron provided situational awareness for its parent brigade, relying upon scouts, sensors, radars, and signal detection systems while avoiding combat. Despite its specialized nature, the related doctrinal concepts quickly spread and eclipsed cavalry doctrine and force design.

The March to Baghdad in March-April 2003 paused the proliferation of RSTA concepts, albeit briefly. In the confused series of movements to contact that characterized the advance to and into the Iraqi capital, it was the lethality, survivability, and versatility of the division cavalry squadron,

Figure 7. The air-ground muscle of 3rd Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment on display during Operation Iraqi Freedom 1. *(U.S. Army Photo)*

represented by the 3rd Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, that met commander's needs. Expectations of perfect situational awareness faded amid a surprise Iraqi counterattack upon Objective Peach and the unexpected tenacity of the *Fedayeen Saddam*.[11] By the time Saddam Hussein's regime collapsed, RSTA concepts had lost their luster amid calls from the theater of operation to reevaluate their validity and utility. Cavalry versatility and combat power was in and the technology-based assumptions of RSTA were out.

Had the war ended at that point, the path of reconnaissance, security, and surveillance development would have taken a different path. But it did not. It transformed into a counterinsurgency (COIN) that lasted another eight years. In this period units remained in assigned areas of responsibility for months at a time, focused upon area security and bolstering local communities and government, while periodically engaging in combat operations to clear enemy safe havens. Similarly, the war in Afghanistan focused upon counterinsurgency, and the importance of surveillance and information collection predominated. Protracted counterinsurgency breathed new life into RSTA concepts.

Trooper Down! Impact of modularity

The announcement of a Cavalry Soldier in distress is never desirable, especially when the causation stems from friendly fire. To sustain its deployment operational tempo for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army opted to increase the number of brigades at the expense of division assets. Division cavalry thus became a casualty of Army Modularity, soon followed by the elimination of the armored cavalry regiment.

With these actions the Army decapitated its tiered reconnaissance, security and surveillance structure. Moreover, division cavalry squadrons and armored cavalry regiments had served as finishing schools where skills were honed over a career and a reservoir of talent in cavalry operations established. Institutional training remained, but it became increasingly skewed toward COIN information collection and surveillance needs rather than more general cavalry operations. A growing number of cavalry leaders passed through the ranks knowing much about COIN but little about integrated air-ground reconnaissance and security or combined arms maneuver.

Figure 8. Soldiers of the 6th Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment prepare to search a village in Afghanistan's Khowst Province in 2011. *(U.S. Army Photo by Joint Combat Camera Afghanistan)*

The new brigade combat teams benefited from the acquisition of a reconnaissance squadron, but these units lacked the capabilities of the prior division cavalry squadron. Without organic aviation, their doctrine bore the imprint of RSTA concepts, and the small size of the early modular brigades often forced commanders to use the squadron as a third maneuver element. Over time the brigade combat teams increased in size, permitting the squadron to be employed more frequently in reconnaissance.

Nevertheless, a capability gap existed above the brigade. No organization bore responsibility for reconnaissance, security, and surveillance outside brigade areas of operation. Therefore, the Army created the battlefield surveillance brigade (BfSB) to collect information, refine it into actionable intelligence, and share it with other units. The BfSB possessed a range of sensors and technology to facilitate its information collection and surveillance mission, but it lacked the organic combat power to act upon the intelligence it generated. In essence, it mirrored the RSTA squadron on a larger scale, reflected in its original designation as a RSTA brigade. Still, the BSB suited a COIN environment, remaining in place for a sustained period, gathering information on enemy dispositions and networks. Once operations began to move over time and space, however, it quickly became marginalized.

By the end of the 2000s, a state of confusion blanketed reconnaissance and security. Sustained COIN operations in which units spent long periods monitoring civilian activity to detect signs of hostile action and better understand the human terrain upon which they operated eroded the traditional emphasis given to screen, guard, and cover missions. Surveillance trumped security, particularly when doctrine reduced security to the force protection, area or route security, and convoy escort missions expected of all units. Little need existed for an organization capable of a broad mission set that might entail combat when static

information collection and activity monitoring constituted the principal activities.

The term "cavalry" fell into disfavor, with too many leaders preferring the acronym "R&S" (reconnaissance and surveillance), in which the second letter denoted surveillance.

Reinventing the wheel, modifying the wheel, or building something new?

In the 2010s the prevailing emphasis upon reconnaissance and surveillance began to change in response to the Army's emphasis upon large-scale combat operations against a peer or near peer threat. In 2012, formation commanders reached a consensus concerning dissatisfaction with the BfSB and a preference for a combined arms organization capable of gaining information through direct interaction with a threat, fighting for it as necessary. Similarly, they wanted such a unit to provide early warning to its parent formation and prevent its premature deployment.[12] Cavalry was back.

A growing interest emerged in reestablishing reconnaissance, security, and surveillance units at echelon, but their composition remained uncertain. Funding constraints ensured that their creation would necessitate force structure cuts elsewhere. Hence the issue of cavalry at echelon blossomed into broader questions of force design, personnel manning, and materiel. Emerging concepts centered upon a resurrected armored cavalry regiment, a cavalry group with a mix of old and new capabilities, or the task organization of an existing brigade combat team. A campaign of learning ensued initially focused upon the corps, informed by the 2017 National Training Center deployment of 1st Brigade (Stryker), 4th Infantry Division, reconfigured and trained as a reconnaissance and security brigade.

Figure 9. Ukrainian drone targets Russian combat vehicles moments before striking. *(Photo courtesy of the Ukrainian Armed Forces)*

Further analysis failed to offer a viable solution, and the Army's focus shifted to division cavalry, using the pre-Modularity organization as an analytical start point. Through experimentation and analysis, a course of action emerged for the creation of a division cavalry unit through the reduction of subordinate brigade squadrons to troops. This approach solved much of the billpayer question, but it did not resolve the purpose and composition of the division organization. Rebuilding an armored cavalry organization with tanks, Bradleys, and aviation constituted a popular yet very retro approach. It remained unclear whether such an organization would possess the same operational versatility as its predecessors in a changing operational environment.

Rebuilding reconnaissance, security, and surveillance at echelon became still more complicated with the Army's adoption of multi-domain operations as its overarching warfighting concept. How would such units operate upon a battlespace subject to air, sea, land, cyber, and space threats? What multi-domain capabilities should they possess, and what constituted the optimal means of ensuring the satisfaction of commander priority information requirements? In a resource environment constrained by investments in new programs and technologies deemed vital to modernization, clearly reconnaissance, security, and surveillance units could not be all things to all people. New ideas proliferated, including cross-domain maneuver organizations with a mix of sensors, unmanned systems, and cyber and electromagnetic capabilities.

Warfighter exercises introduced new threats and capabilities, and the 1st Cavalry Division became the vehicle for the Army Reconnaissance and Security Pilot, but determination of what reconnaissance, security, and surveillance should be at corps, division, and brigade levels remained an elusive objective.

The outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 showcased the potential impact of drones on the battlefield. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine also provided a sensing of how new technologies might be employed and the challenges they posed. The conflict introduced a transparent battlefield in which drones monitored all activity and precision weapons — or loitering munitions — attacked targets identified by drones or their own electromagnetic signature. In such an environment the notion of relying upon unmanned air and ground systems to make initial contact gained traction. Nevertheless, force design solutions that embraced technology at the expense of more traditional means did not address those aspects of the Ukraine war that had more in common with World War I than the push-button warfare oft projected for the future.

Collectively, these developments create an imperative to rethink reconnaissance, security, and surveillance at echelon rather than resurrect past concepts or reintroduce them with slight modification. Even if it were possible to rebuild the armored cavalry regiments and division cavalry squadrons of the post-Desert Storm era, combat training center experience suggests that the related skill sets have atrophied. Ironically, Modularity's legacy lies in robust brigade cavalry squadrons that have no parallel since the emergence of the mechanized cavalry. Perhaps these units should mark the concentration of capabilities oriented upon the close fight, leaving the division cavalry squadron with more unmanned systems and cross domain maneuver tools for initial contact and shaping operations that are in turn informed by sophisticated information collection abilities at corps and higher levels.

Such an approach builds upon current efforts to improve brigade proficiency while aligning new skills and capabilities at higher echelons already in flux due to Army 2030 modernization objectives and the transition to a division-centric force.

Past as prologue

"You can't understand where you're going until you understand where you've been." This expression underscores the importance of understanding how cavalry arrived at its current state before attempting to chart its future course of development. The variables of field commander need, force structure decisions, combat experience, and tech-based capability assumptions that shaped the historical evolution remain in play today alongside personnel shortfalls and an adaptive threat array. Army leaders need to start managing change by articulating a set of analytically based framing principles to recraft the missions, force design, and tools for reconnaissance, security, and surveillance units at echelon. We instinctively know that consistent, all-weather reconnaissance, surveillance, and security capabilities constitute a critical requirement at echelon on the future battlefield. Regardless, absent such a conceptual framework, these organizations will continue meandering – subject to the latest perceived technological offset, shortage of resources, or theoretical debate about the future of warfare.

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Notes

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ACAV – armored cavalry assault vehicle
ATGM – anti-tank guided missile
BfSB – the battlefield surveillance brigade
COIN – counterinsurgency
HMMWV – high-mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicle
LRAS3 – Long-Range Advanced Scout Surveillance Systems
RSTA – reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition
TOW – tube-launched optically tracked wire-guided missile