



## Infantry and Reconnaissance: *Why Bush Hill is the Most Attacked but Least Reconnoitered Piece of Terrain on Earth*

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**Editor's Note:** On 27 February 2024, the Department of the Army announced updates to its force structure that will modernize and continue to transform the service to better face future threats.<sup>1</sup> These changes include the inactivation of cavalry squadrons in continental U.S.-based Stryker and infantry brigade combat teams. Although these brigades stand to lose much of the reconnaissance expertise that resides in the leaders of their cavalry squadrons, the reconnaissance and security mission remains. Therefore, infantry leaders must be prepared to assume the mantle of reconnaissance and security expertise previously held by their scout comrades. This article provides a timely analysis of this issue.

In his 1994 *Infantry* article "Company Reconnaissance," then-CPT John K. Carothers lamented that as a Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) observer-controller, he was beginning "to think that 'movement to daylight, then fire and maneuver' was an actual form of maneuver." After an October 2022 JRTC rotation, our brigade combat team's (BCT) second in my command, our habit of culminating short of intended objectives on the offense gave me similar cause for reflection. Our after action reviews and a subsequent

survey yielded one clear explanation — **our infantry leaders either possessed an imperfect understanding of reconnaissance, did not value reconnaissance, or both.** Plenty of evidence exists to suggest that our BCT was not alone in this pathology, and **this must be remedied to succeed in large-scale combat operations (LSCO).**

### The Survey

A survey of 12 maneuver company commanders indicated that they collectively conducted 60 discrete offensive operations during our JRTC force-on-force phase of training. However, in support of these offensive operations, the same commanders only conducted 28 reconnaissance operations, six of which failed. The survey dug deeper into the 32 reconnaissance operations that never happened — asking why? The most prevalent reason provided was a lack of **time**. The second most prevalent was that the operation was a movement to contact, revealing a common misunderstanding that a movement to contact is just one big reconnaissance. Less

*Paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division conduct operations during a Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation at Fort Johnson, LA. (Photo by SPC Luis Garcia)*

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prevalent but germane to this article were the excuses that companies and troops could not conduct reconnaissance AND keep up with the battalion or BCT **tempo** of attack, followed by my favorite reason — **enemy** contact!

But was a failure to reconnoiter causal in our inability to accomplish our offensive objectives? I argue yes because there is a path dependence to failure in the attack. When you reverse engineer a failed attack, you most often find that attacking units gained contact with the enemy in a position of disadvantage. The list of disadvantages is legion, but they all have their root in not knowing enough about the enemy's disposition, composition, and strength prior to becoming fully committed in the close fight. Is it possible for an attacking unit to stumble into contact and win? Sure, but this is what CPT Carothers was referring to. Infantry leaders must understand and value reconnaissance operations, and the best way to start this process is to dig into cavalry doctrine.

### The Doctrine

Infantry doctrine for platoon, company, and battalion operations includes relevant coverage of reconnaissance and security operations. Infantry platoon doctrine and Ranger Course tactics and procedures are less tailored to LSCO or overemphasize the reconnaissance of the higher headquarters. Infantry company and battalion doctrine stress the reconnaissance phase of offensive operations but lack the conceptual constructs that would address the concerns identified in our unit's survey. A survey of archived *Infantry* articles reveals that most articles on reconnaissance narrowly focus on the "leader's reconnaissance" or organizational solutions to scouting. Therefore, commanders must turn to Field Manual 3-90, *Tactics*, and the expertly compiled Student Text 3-20.983 issued by the Cavalry Leader's Course. Let's look at the language of these documents in light of our BCT's survey.

Company and troop commanders reported the greatest detractor to reconnaissance was time — meaning, they possessed too little time from the line of departure to the time that an objective needed to be met. The doctrine that cavalry leaders apply to this problem is focus and orient on the reconnaissance objective. These concepts compel commanders to scope the problem and prioritize tasks, thus economizing time. There are five doctrinal reasons to cease reconnaissance, and lacking time is not one of them.

As the third most prevalent detractor of reconnaissance, junior commanders described how the tempo of the broader battlefield forced them to forego reconnaissance tasks so they could keep pace with adjacent units on the attack.<sup>2</sup> Cavalry leaders obsess over this dilemma by describing tempo in terms of the level of aggressiveness and level of detail of their reconnaissance. Doctrine further describes this using the forceful/stealthy and rapid/deliberate spectrum that is often depicted as a quad chart. Infantry leaders should appreciate how these concepts suspend all assumptions that reconnaissance decelerates the tempo of battle or that contact with the enemy is bad. To this latter point on enemy contact, also one that surfaced in our unit survey, the doctrine cavalry leaders use most describes engagement, disengagement, and

bypass criteria very clearly. These are just a few concepts that prevail in cavalry doctrine but were absent in the lexicon of almost all our infantry leaders. Infantry leaders must study the reconnaissance concepts that reside in the Armor Corps' literature to win in LSCO... but knowing is only half the battle.

### Recommendations: Reconnaissance in Practice

Studying the advanced concepts of reconnaissance in the schoolhouse and in self-study is a great start. I propose two areas for further mastery of reconnaissance. First, the Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC) currently includes an adequate overview of reconnaissance and security operations in its program of instruction (POI). However, according to an interview with a current instructor, the rubric for grading students' plans does not incentivize reconnaissance planning. Further, in the military decision-making phase of the course, students do not produce an Annex L — the reconnaissance and security operations annex. This should be remedied; our infantry students will value what we grade as senior infantry leaders.

Second, the MCCC teaches students to become exceptional planners. In 56 months of field grade command including four Combat Training Center rotations and one combat deployment, I never met a maneuver captain who couldn't plan well. However, I did assess that several maneuver captains could not rapidly read the battlefield and make sound tactical decisions in real time. I propose that the MCCC incorporate tactical decision gaming into its POI and tie these games directly to the graded plans. In execution, these leaders will learn the costs of neglecting reconnaissance and enjoy the advantages gained when information requirements are tied to well-synchronized reconnaissance tasks. This could effectively double the number of simulated battles a captain experiences before completing command.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to share a diagnosis of one BCT's failures in the attack at JRTC and encourage infantry leaders to frame their thinking on reconnaissance through the study of doctrine most used by our cavalry forces. Current infantry doctrine and discourse omits important reconnaissance language at its own risk given the dubious future of some infantry BCT's cavalry squadrons. Embracing reconnaissance as a cornerstone will underscore its indispensable roll in informed decision-making on the battlefield.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Army White Paper, "Army Force Structure Transformation," 27 February 2024, <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2024/02/27/091989c9/army-white-paper-army-force-structure-transformation.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> This article does not address the second most common detractor, which reveals a misunderstanding of movement-to-contact operations. *Infantry* has published much about this over the years and should continue to do so.

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