

Troubling Trends in Reconnaissance

by SFC Kyle West

Scout platoons are not operating to their potential capability or in their reconnaissance role in infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs). Reconnaissance is vital to any operation, and without it mission success is uncertain. Scout platoons seldom conduct true reconnaissance at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC); mission focus is more on security operations or offensive operations. While rotational units at JRTC are conducting some reconnaissance, very few are conducting effective reconnaissance.

There is hope for immediate fixes for the issues at hand without revamping the entire reconnaissance force. However, before a problem can be fixed, the cause of that problem must be identified. It is best to attack the cause and not the symptom. So what are the key factors of effective reconnaissance, and what are the root issues causing the failures?

The IBCT commander's reconnaissance philosophy for how he uses the reconnaissance squadron affects how the scouts perceive themselves. The role the IBCT commander assigns the reconnaissance unit is the first and most important factor that determines good reconnaissance – because if there is not a solid understanding of the unit's purpose, it cannot fulfill its role. The philosophy of reconnaissance is at stake both by external and internal forces.

Scouts may be pushed to be fighters from brigade and squadron commanders, who put pressure on troop and platoon leadership to engage and destroy the enemy. While most Cavalry scouts will proudly boast they are fighters and “just as tough as infantry,” it is this very mindset that is a symptom of the problem. A commander who chooses to fight his scouts is essentially removing his eyes to add a couple of extra arms. Scouts are trying to become and compete with something they are not and were not designed to be. In doing so, scout platoons lose focus on their purpose, and it reflects in training as they train more on infantry tasks than reconnaissance tasks. As a result, their reconnaissance skills, knowledge and tactics diminish.

So what is the cause of that symptom? Reconnaissance units are seen as maneuver units instead of enabler units. This viewpoint of reconnaissance units must be reversed. The fundamental role of the Cavalry squadron is to conduct reconnaissance, not offensive maneuver.¹ Yet the squadron has routinely been used as a maneuver unit to fill a gap created when the IBCTs lost an infantry battalion to make room for the reconnaissance, surveillance and target-acquisition (RSTA) squadrons. While the IBCT still had the same area to cover with one less maneuver battalion, the Cavalry squadron was the obvious choice to fill that void.

Changing recon philosophy

Over the last 10-plus years, the philosophy of the employment of light reconnaissance units slowly shifted to a more aggressive unit used to directly engage enemy forces. Scouts were forced to fight because they were the only combat power in the squadron area of operations. The focus of gathering intelligence from the battlefield and remaining undetected faded away. The philosophy changed from the top down as the BCT needed fighters, and the squadron commander's primary focus was to defeat the enemy and stabilize the area with his organic forces. Conducting reconnaissance for the BCT was no longer a responsibility for the Cavalry squadron.

This shift filtered to the lowest levels as the scouts began to see themselves as “just as good as infantry” because they were doing the same mission with less personnel. The problem with that viewpoint is that scouts are not infantry, and they should not try to be. Infantry are very good at what they do because they are trained and manned and equipped for the tasks they are given. Scouts begin patrols with 50 percent of the infantry platoon's combat power. A unit degraded by half its combat power should report that it is combat-ineffective, yet scout platoons have come to think they can still accomplish the infantry mission with understrength manpower. They cannot.

Also, scouts can only fight with up to four personnel at the team level and up to 12 dismounts at the platoon level² before it becomes a troop fight (if you are in a fair fight, you are wrong). This is hardly the making of a maneuver unit. There needs to be a focus on scouts conducting reconnaissance from the IBCT down to the platoon.

This philosophy needs to be changed at the IBCT level before it will matter at any other. As long as the IBCT uses its reconnaissance assets as maneuver units, the squadrons, troops and platoons will continue to complete those missions and, in doing so, they will think of themselves as fighters rather than scouts. Studies at the National Training Center have shown that a BCT's success is heavily dependent on how it conducts reconnaissance.³ Yet the trend at JRTC has been that the IBCT rarely uses its scouts to conduct reconnaissance where it should be, between shaping operations and decisive operations. This is where reconnaissance is most valuable, as it helps the IBCT plan for future missions by being used as a "reconnaissance push" or by helping to steer the BCT through decision points as it is used as a "reconnaissance pull."⁴

The planning of reconnaissance is lacking past the first 72 hours into the fight at JRTC. The observation is that the IBCT's use of reconnaissance is to push into the area of operation just far enough to secure a foothold while the IBCT increases its combat power. While this is a fundamental task for the reconnaissance squadron, often the trend is that this is the only point in which the IBCT plans to use its reconnaissance asset. IBCT commanders and staff have to think toward their next fight or threat and use reconnaissance early to help them understand the situation.

For the rest of a rotation, the reconnaissance squadron becomes stagnant, set in a screen or guard to secure sustainment operations while the infantry battalions push forward with no reconnaissance ahead of them. The consequential outcome is that the IBCT becomes increasingly reactionary to the enemy, with little warning when it makes contact with the enemy. By not conducting reconnaissance, the IBCT loses the initiative, the ability to fight on its own terms and the chance to set battlefield conditions. The IBCT must see the reconnaissance squadron as the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) asset that it is and plan to use it if the IBCT wants to be successful.

Reconnaissance cannot be an afterthought in planning but rather a primary consideration when conducting planning. Specifically the questions to ask are, "What reconnaissance assets do I have available, where is reconnaissance most crucial to success, what type of reconnaissance method is best used (push/pull), and when should reconnaissance be deployed?"⁵ All subsequent planning should be based off the reconnaissance. Do not keep reconnaissance assets in reserve!

Mindset

The IBCT is not the only place where the fault of good reconnaissance can be found. At platoon level, the aforementioned factors come into play in different ways. Scouts have become comfortable with and dependent on the vehicles they use, resulting in a loss of fieldcraft, tradecraft and effectiveness in harsh environments. The vehicles provide many great things such as mobility, firepower, survivability and the ability to carry optics and communications systems. Though all this is possible because of the vehicles, they also present a double-edged sword that can hurt the reconnaissance platoon if Soldiers are not aware of it.

Scouts make jokes at the expense of their tanker counterparts for "death before dismount." However, very few scouts have the right to tease tankers with that old taunt, as the comfort of uparmored vehicles has proven to keep scouts' boots clean. Scouts have grown soft over the years as staying in the vehicle became the norm;⁶ the heaters and air conditioners run nonstop in most scout platoons now. Engines are not only turned on in the assembly area (AA) to ensure the batteries don't die, but also because it is too hot or too cold. Observation posts (OPs) are seldom deployed, and while we use the excuse of manpower, it would be too easy to consolidate the platoon vehicles at an AA to be able to maximize dismounts for multiple short-duration OPs.

Also, the effect of heavily armored vehicles has made the scout platoon more eager to initiate direct contact with the enemy due to the weapon systems the vehicle platforms carry. It is easy to see how a platoon with such firepower as the M2 .50-caliber machinegun, MK19 grenade launcher, M240 machinegun and tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missile launchers could see themselves as fighters meant to offensively use such weapon systems. Being so heavily armed, combined with past experience, does not help the platoon maintain a philosophy that they are to remain hidden and only use their weapon systems to break contact, as it is stated repeatedly in scout-platoon doctrine.⁷

Having such firepower does not help the company, squadron or even the IBCT see the scouts as what they are (ISR assets) when they have more firepower than the infantry platoons in the IBCT. Scouts do not need this firepower

when their primary course of action and battle drill when engaged by the enemy is to break contact. Instead, scouts are quick to engage the enemy with direct fires, often with an equal or superior force, resulting in scout-platoon degradation to ineffectiveness.

This is a common trend with devastating results, as illustrated in studies showing that when reconnaissance assets engage in a fight, they are destroyed before they are effective in reporting useful information to higher headquarters, and the IBCT as a whole is not successful as a result.⁸ However, when reconnaissance assets remain hidden and do not engage, they survive long enough to gather significant battlefield information, effectively reporting and aiding in the IBCT's success. The result of having a highly lethal armored-vehicle platform has shown to be that the scout platoon engages with the enemy more often than the mission dictates. Scouts need to stay focused on their purpose on the battlefield, even when given the capabilities to effectively engage and destroy enemy threats.

Scout training

Training is the cheapest, quickest and most important fix to the challenges facing the reconnaissance force. We must take a hard look at how the reconnaissance force trains and ask ourselves, "Is the training designed to conduct reconnaissance or conduct maneuver?" What is the focus when we conduct squad-/team-level training? Often that training is not focused on reconnaissance tasks but rather is focused on infantry tasks. Does the mission-essential task list or platoon collective-task list reflect a reconnaissance role or an infantry role? Another casualty resulting from a decade of using reconnaissance forces as maneuver units is the experience and expertise of our junior leaders in reconnaissance fundamentals.

When team leaders train their Soldiers, they stay in their comfort zone: white engineer-tape room to conduct Battle Drill Six (enter and clear a room). Yet doctrine states clearly that scouts "do not clear buildings." They enter rooms to reconnoiter buildings, primarily to determine suitability for potential OP locations.⁹ This is not conducted in the same manner as or is the intent of Battle Drill Six. When scout platoons conduct squad, section and platoon live fires, the emphasis is on engaging the enemy with direct-weapon systems to conduct offensive engagements.¹⁰

There must be more emphasis on break-contact drills at the team/squad/section level and displacement drills at platoon level. The react-to-contact drill at platoon level should be more focused on reconnaissance handover while the section displaces. Scout gunnery should heavily and primarily be integrated with indirect fires, aerial-weapons teams or close air support as methods of engaging the enemy – with less emphasis on engaging targets with direct-fire systems.

As things are now, a platoon that engages and kills the enemy with direct fire is more rewarded and recognized, even when that platoon was degraded or destroyed itself. Less credit is given to the platoon that does not engage the enemy directly yet reports continuously undetected. This is a result of our training, which emphasizes engaging the enemy with direct fires over reporting battlefield information. Scouts have heavily uparmored vehicles and massive firepower, which causes the crew and commanders to want to use that firepower, and we are compounding the problem by basing our training off the use of that firepower rather than reporting and remaining undetected. It is unrealistic to expect scouts to be successful at reconnaissance if we continue to focus their training on killing the enemy with direct fires and conducting infantry tasks. Scouts need to stop training to be infantrymen.

Reconnaissance is an art form we have lost over the last decade. While many would say it is because we have been fighting a counterinsurgency (COIN) fight, I strongly disagree. Scout platoons have covered down on a role they were not intended to do, and in doing so, reconnaissance platoons lost focus on their purpose. There is a place and need for actual reconnaissance in the COIN, decisive-action and hybrid-threat operating environments. The importance of good reconnaissance and its outcome on the IBCT's success must be recognized before the necessary revamping and refocusing of reconnaissance can take place.

Reconnaissance must get back to basics. It must regain its fieldcraft and tradecraft. Scout platoons must renew the emphasis on stealth and on data collection over direct engagement. IBCTs must clearly see the Cavalry squadron as their best ISR asset of choice. Being called an "enabler" must no longer be a dirty word for scouts and those in the reconnaissance community. If the philosophy of reconnaissance does not change within the BCT, squadron, troop and scouts themselves, none of the rest really matters.

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Notes

¹ Field Manual (FM) 3-20.98.

² 36-man scout platoon.

³ Rand, *Quantifying the Battlefield*, 1999.

⁴ FM 3-20.96.

⁵ FM 3-90.2.

⁶ "Breaking the Reconnaissance Code," *ARMOR*, November-December 2001.

⁷ ST 3-20.983; FM 3-21.94.

⁸ Rand.

⁹ ST 3-20.983.

¹⁰ FM 17-12-8.

Acronym Quick-Scan

AA – assembly area

BCT – brigade combat team

COIN – counterinsurgency

FM – field manual

IBCT – infantry brigade combat team

ISR – intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance

JRTC – Joint Readiness Training Center

O/C/T – observer/coach/trainer

OP – observation post

RSTA – reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition