Modern Application of Mechanized-Cavalry Groups for Cavalry Echelons Above Brigade

by MAJ Joseph J. Dumas

The Army faces a dilemma much like it did at the onset of World War II: although the war provided an opportunity to rapidly codify cavalry organizations and doctrine, the Army squandered the opportunity to do so in the period before the war, when the branch bifurcated and the Army's mounted arm floundered. This bifurcation had repercussions on the United States' warfighting ability as we entered World War II, as branch identity then – tied to the platform known as the "noble companion" (the horse) – stifled organizational and doctrinal development right up to our nation's entrance into the war. Consequently, mechanized-cavalry formations entered combat with theoretical concepts about their employment and their vehicle platforms underpowered against the Axis.[1]

As an example of this mismatch in theoretical concepts, early mechanized-cavalry doctrine peddled stealthy reconnaissance, but combat experience in North Africa during Operation Torch didn't validate pre-war doctrinal theory.[2] However, organization of the mechanized-cavalry groups (MCGs) created effective formations (see Figure 1)[3] even if the platforms they fought from were not always optimal.
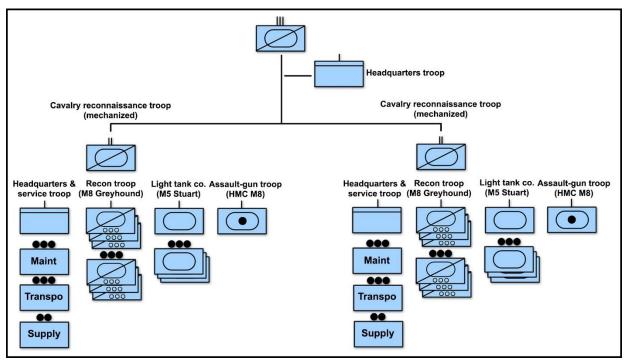

Figure 1. MCG structure in World War II.

In spite of these problems, the MCGs' performance in the European Theater of Operations (ETO) during World War II made a profound impression of operational relevancy on Army senior leaders who fought in the ETO.[4] As noted by Armor Branch historian Dr. Robert S. Cameron, MCGs – enabled with combined-arms attachments – became capable combat organizations able to execute a broad range of mission sets for their assigned corps headquarters.[5]

Like its World War II predecessor, it seems as if today's Army has some capability gaps and some relevancy concerns regarding cavalry organizations and doctrine. Just as we missed the mark on filling these the gaps correctly after World War II, the Army needs to ensure history does not repeat itself. This article looks back on historical concepts, then forward with some ideas to consider.

'Back to the future'

Just as the "past can be prologue" to today's operations, MCG experiences in the World War II ETO provided many doctrinal lessons at operational level during large-scale ground combat.[6] When the Army published its post-World War II assessment of mechanized-cavalry operations – General Board Report Study Number 49, "Mechanized Cavalry Units" – in November 1945, the study encapsulated the nuanced differences of cavalry doctrinal utility at corps and division levels, among many other operational- and tactical-application lessons. The study showed that, at echelon, mechanized-cavalry units executed the traditional range of cavalry missions, but depending on the echelon, the frequency of those type of missions varied greatly.[7]

Noted as a "continuation of cavalry," the Armor Branch was officially established in 1950 as a basic branch of the U.S. Army,[8] but concepts of cavalry organization have not remained static. In fact, since the mounted branch's redesignation, institutionally the Army has continued to revisit the echelon, force structure and capabilities of cavalry organizations. This is not to say that cavalry-organization concepts are considered a failure; in fact, this is a clear indication of their effectiveness and utility across transformative periods within the Army. The last 17 years of persistent conflict have been such a transformative period, in which the Army has optimized cavalry squadrons for modular brigade combat teams (BCTs) that execute limited contingency operations.

Today's leaders should adapt to the current transformative period and not be enamored of expunged cavalry organizations of the past, but now must recalibrate their thinking in organizing cavalry formations for success during large-scale ground-combat operations (LSGCO).[9] Converging intellectual efforts with the Army's current operational capstone doctrine, Field Manual (FM) 3-0, **Operations**, will attest to the ingenuity of cavalry leaders and their ability to enable operational capacity during LSGCO.

As the Army continues to realign itself along its four strategic roles as part of the joint force (shape operational environments, prevent conflict, conduct large-scale ground combat and consolidate gains), it is forcing institutional change, both culturally and doctrinally, focused on large-scale combat operations. As leaders address readiness gaps, historical precedence can serve as a start point – the World War II MCG organizations can serve as a framework to fill current cavalry organizational gaps in the Army for echelons above brigade (EAB).

Current R&S challenges

Corps and division commanders are forced to rely on passive intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms to gain and maintain contact with enemy formations. The over-reliance on passive ISR is a carryover from our combat experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, our adversaries have invested ample effort into building their military capacity to challenge our organizational gaps and, in some cases, have exceeded U.S. Army capacity.

Army senior leaders have made strides to institute cultural, training and doctrinal changes to address today's complexities. However, technological reliance and organizational optimization hinder success against a peer or near-peer threat. For example, corps and division commanders no longer possess an organic cavalry organization at echelon to execute tactically enabling functions to create favorable conditions that would allow BCTs success in the close area.[10]

Current doctrine clearly states considerations for employing a BCT to fulfill the reconnaissance and security (R&S) role at EAB. This includes allowing the designated BCT to train for this mission to increase proficiency. The risk associated with rotating the R&S BCT duty between brigades is also identified.[11] Both theories are outlined in FM 3-98, **Reconnaissance and Security Operations**, published in 2015. As articulated in current doctrine, corps and division commanders can elect to task a subordinate organization to execute R&S missions.

Training includes warfighter exercises (WfX), which provide corps and divisions the opportunity to prepare for LSGCO. The Mission Command Training Program facilitates these exercises across the Army and annually produces key observations published through the Center of Army Lessons-Learned (CALL). It should not be a surprise that in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 observations, divisions participating in WfXs struggled to continuously plan R&S operations tied to commander's critical information requirements (CCIR) to enable operations.[12] During WfXs, divisions generally executed tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) by forming an *ad hoc* cavalry formation.

Results vary on the application of *ad hoc* cavalry task forces created to mitigate loss of organic division-cavalry squadrons. At division level, leaders lack understanding about the application of cavalry organizations to reconnaissance, security and economy-of-force missions. This is primarily because the Army hasn't had to practice application of EAB cavalry operations. Therefore, command support relationships are not optimized for EAB operations, and staff planning ends after the initial orders production for operations. Leaders must move beyond the over-reliance on passive ISR. The application of *ad hoc* division-cavalry organizations often varies in size, scope of tasks and success facilitating command decision-making.

With that in mind, commanders should consider the following to enable a greater degree of success if electing to form a cavalry organization at EAB:

- Define command support relationships with reconnaissance organization to the higher headquarters;
- Provide clear R&S guidance, focusing early to drive active multi-domain collection to answer CCIR;
- Continuously refine beyond the shaping phase to enable operational flexibility;
- Organize the staff to enable continual R&S planning; and
- Task-organize for combat early and focus training toward R&S tasks at EAB.

Effects of R&S gaps

Today's operating environment is far too complex to wait for organizational concepts such as the R&S strike group, a cavalry organizational theory described as part of the multi-domain operations concept.[13] Senior Armor Branch leaders are now addressing the cultural-gap issue. For example, Armor Branch officers are now being encouraged to professionally track themselves to a specific BCT type.[14] This effort starts with platoon-level leaders as a way to target increased lethality among BCTs. The path needed to increase readiness among combat formations is a degree of branch specialization that incorporates additional skill identifiers, updating Department of the Army Pamphlets 600-25 and 600-3, and developing tracking systems for assigning officers to inform the best placement of troopers based on experience.[15] This guidance is a step in the right direction, cultivating greater institutional knowledge among leaders, but it still doesn't address the current experience gap at EAB.

Because of this problem, corps and division commanders are no longer enabled by an all-weather cavalry organization with capacity to execute R&S missions. Today's leaders are forced to mitigate risk by looking within their respective formations to find solutions. Currently there is no near-term growth within Total Army Analysis 21-25, nor are funds allocated within Program Objective Memorandum 22-26 to address growing cavalry organizations at EAB. This leaves the Army without a cavalry organization to enable corps and divisions to address today's fight during LSGCO at least for the next decade.

However, this should not dissuade Armor Branch leaders from creative applications commensurate with branch heredity. Innovation has almost become an enduring attribute among Armor Branch leaders since the time of mechanization prior to World War II. For nearly 90 years, the Army has continually reinvented its approach to executing cavalry missions based on the ever-changing operating environment.

Recommended solutions

Steps have been taken to address the gap in organizational capacity. From April 2016 to April 2017, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 4th Infantry Division, executed an R&S excursion to test the feasibility of an SBCT to meet the operational R&S needs of corps and divisions. Highlighted in the Raider Brigade whitepaper following this training period, COL Curtis Taylor (then brigade commander) and MAJ Joe Byerly (then brigade executive officer) recorded the process undertaken by the brigade and the key lessons-learned during the excursion.

The whitepaper doesn't show the performance of the Raider Brigade through a rose-colored lens. In fact, Taylor and Byerly succinctly describe both the pros and cons of the SBCT during its R&S role. Organizational considerations and the cultural mindset associated with R&S were two key areas emphasized. Insights throughout the whitepaper provide a framework for SBCT R&S operations organizationally, with the required cultural investment and the training progression needed to enable future successful application.[16]

So how can the Army create solutions without force-structure growth and funding? Innovation with current force structure will have to be applied, coupled with cultural and training time investments by all leaders. The following

recommendations are "a way" for the Army to address cavalry organizational capacity gaps at both corps and division echelons.

Figure 2 illustrates the organization of the R&S BCT depicted in FM 3-98.[17] It provides a recommendation for the Army to align an R&S BCT with each current corps headquarters. This would provide a direct-reporting cavalry group (R&S BCT) to enable corps commanders with a fighting formation focused on R&S tasks. The proposal doesn't require additional force-structure growth and associated doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel and facilities considerations. As part of this recommendation, 2nd Cavalry Regiment would align itself with XVIII Airborne Corps, and 14th Cavalry Regiment would be reactivated in whole, redesignated from a current SBCT, to serve as the corps cavalry group (R&S BCT) under I Corps. This would require 1st Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, and 2nd Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, both Active-Component units, to reflag under another regimental lineage. The 3rd Cavalry Regiment would continue to serve III Armored Corps but reflag from its current modified table of organization and equipment as an SBCT to an armored brigade combat team.
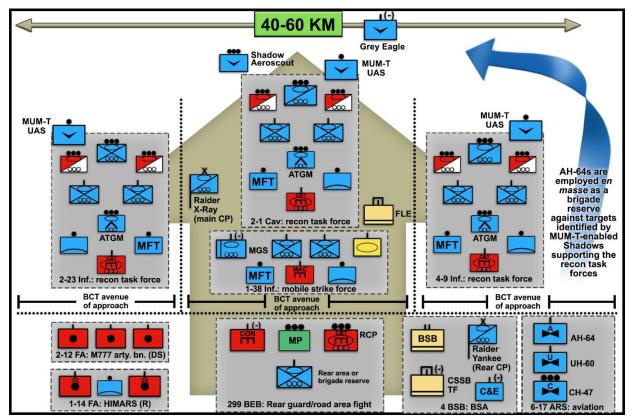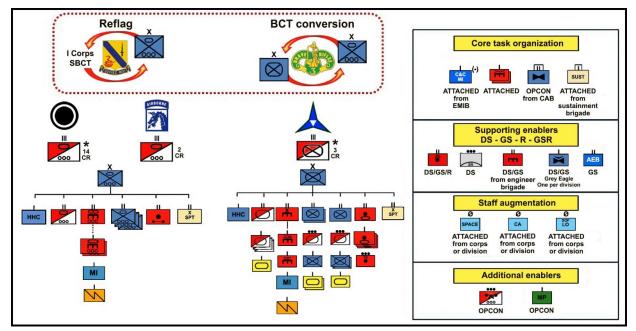

Figure 2. Modern application of the corps MCG: the corps cavalry group (BCT). Task-organization of the baseline BCT would be required into three reconnaissance task forces, a mobile strike force and a consolidated area force. This TTP would be a zero-growth solution to provide corps commanders with cavalry capability. Employment recommendations include that (1) the corps retains control of a cavalry group (BCT) to execute R&S missions; (2) the corps provides tactical control of a cavalry group (BCT) to a specific division in a direct-support role; or (3) the corps provides tactical control of reconnaissance task forces to a specific division in a direct-support role. *(Illustration adapted from Raider Brigade R&S excursion whitepaper, September 2017)*

Figure 3 illustrates the task-organization undertaken by 1st SBCT, 4th Infantry Division, during its R&S excursion. The brigade reorganized itself into capability-focused task forces to enhance its overall effectiveness as an R&S BCT. Similar to the MCGs of World War II, an adaptable base formation can incorporate enablers, increasing flexibility of range in tactical function. The functional alignment of 1st SBCT, 4th Infantry Division, provides modern application of the characteristics from General Board Report Study Number 49: mobility, firepower, adaptability,

self-sufficiency and fighting ability.[18] As a corps-level enabler, the corps cavalry group (R&S BCT) would be in direct support of its parent corps headquarters during LSGCO.

Another option of using the cavalry group would be to provide it in a tactical-control relationship to subordinate divisions, especially those deemed the corps' main effort.

Figure 3. R&S BCT aligned at corps echelon ("a way"). This R&S BCT force structure is based on Army Capabilities Integration Center's operational and organizational 2016 concept, currently outlined in FM 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations***, July 2015.**

If the operational conditions are not met for a corps to provide its cavalry group in direct support of a division, then the following recommendation addresses cavalry capacity at division level. Figure 4 depicts "a way" solution that a division could resource internally to answer the R&S capability gap. Similar to the construct of the World War II-era MCG, the recommended division-cavalry group (DCG) could serve as an agile base formation easily activated to execute reconnaissance, security and economy-of-force missions for the division. Modeling the DCG in this fashion would provide a standardized organization and mission-command structure that could incorporate any BCT type based on division. Formation of a DCG would best result from habitual training opportunities, establishing relationships between squadrons and headquarters.

Like the R&S BCT concept, the DCG could be further task-organized by additional enablers for tailored mission requirements. The division tactical-command post (DTAC) would provide mission command to increase execution efficiencies by flattening reporting requirements from the squadrons to the division. Using one of the squadrons' staff would further enable the small DTAC staff with greater analytical ability and reconnaissance expertise.
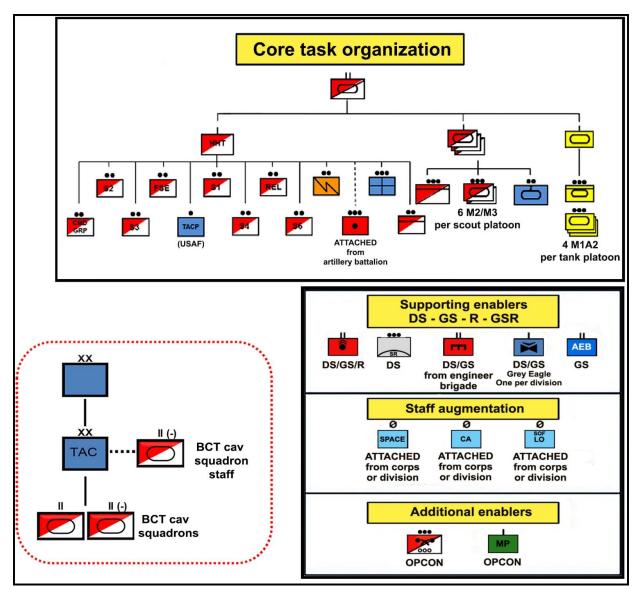
Figure 4. R&S aligned at division echelon ("a way"). This concept would require focused training and application to increase tactical success, but a major advantage is that a tailorable DCG can provide all-weather R&S capacity for a division executing LSGCO. Under this concept, divisions would form a DCG from two of its subordinate BCT cavalry squadrons. The DTAC would serve as the mission-command headquarters, with the squadrons reporting to the deputy commanding general for operations (DCG-O). The cavalry-squadron executive officer, as the R&S subject-matter expert, would provide tactical-enabling task recommendations for the DCG-O. One of the subordinate cavalry squadrons' staffs would provide staff augmentation and infrastructure for the DTAC, increasing mission-command capacity. The DCG could receive more enablers based on the division commander's R&S guidance and threat capability.

Conclusion

Complexities in today's operating environment have forced the Army to reorient itself to meet a myriad of challenges. Broadening the Army's doctrinal, training and cultural focus on LSGCO is ongoing. As an institution, the Army has identified many capability gaps to execute more than just the limited contingency operations of the past 17 years.

As part of the Army's mounted arm, Armor Branch leaders need to maintain status as the "combat arm of decision." Just as doctrinal and organizational deficiencies didn't prevent cavalry leaders from tactical and

operational success during World War II, similarly, today's cavalry leaders can achieve success through innovative solutions to address R&S gaps at EAB.

Today's concepts can inform tomorrow's doctrine and organizational structures by investing in the effort now. This will also provide greater professional development at EAB by creating experience and training opportunities for junior leaders who will undoubtedly answer the nation's call to arms if necessary. Modern application of World War II MCGs can provide the framework to optimize cavalry organizational gaps for EAB today.

MAJ Joseph Dumas is chief, Commander's Initiatives Group, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS. He previously served as a maneuver observer/coach/trainer (O/C/T), Operations Group Alpha, Mission Command Training Program, Fort Leavenworth; executive officer and S-3, 1st Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment, Fort Bliss, TX; brigade chief of operations and company commander, 5/353rd Regiment, 162nd Infantry Brigade, Fort Polk, LA; troop commander and assistant S-3, 7th Squadron, 10th Cavalry, Operation Enduring Freedom and Fort Carson, CO; staff officer and Headquarters and Headquarters Troop executive officer, 2nd Squadron, 14th Cavalry, Schofield Barracks, HI, and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF); and scout-platoon leader, 2nd Squadron, 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment, OIF. His military education includes Command and General Staff Officer Course, Air Cavalry Leader's Course, Maneuver Captain's Career Course and Armor Officer Basic Course. He holds a master's of arts degree in business and organizational-security management from Webster University and a bachelor's of arts degree in history from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

Notes

[1] MAJ E. Dave Wright, "Mechanized Cavalry Groups: Lessons for the Future of Reconnaissance and Surveillance," monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS. Also, see MAJ William Stuart Nance's master's thesis, "Patton's Iron Cavalry – the Impact of the Mechanized Cavalry On the U.S. Third Army," at https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc68023/m2/1/high_res_d/thesis.pdf.

[2] MAJ Louis A. DiMarco, "U.S. Army's Mechanized Cavalry Doctrine in World War II," SAMS monograph, Fort Leavenworth.

[3] Dr. Robert S. Cameron, *Mobility, Shock and Firepower, Emergence of the U.S. Army's Armor Branch 1917-1945*, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2008.

[4] DiMarco.

[5] Dr. Robert S. Cameron, "Into the Future with Mounted-Maneuver Reconnaissance," *ARMOR*, September-October 2012.

[6] DiMarco.

[7] Ibid.

[8] LTC G. Emery Baya, "Army Organization Act Of 1950," *Army Information Digest*, August 1950.

[9] MG Robert E. Wagner, "Division Cavalry: The Broken Sabre," *ARMOR*, September-October 1989.

[10] Based on author's observations as a maneuver O/C/T with Operations Group Alpha, executing WfX exercises and mission-command training seminars in 2017-2018.

[11] FM 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, July 2015.

[12] Bulletin 17-05, "Mission Command Training in Unified Land Operations," *FY16 Key Observations*, CALL, Fort Leavenworth, February 2017.

[13] MAJ Nathan A. Jennings, "The Reconnaissance and Security Strike Group: A Multi-domain Battle Enabler," *ARMOR*, Spring 2017.

[14] *Armor Branch Newsletter*, Spring 2018.

[15] "Chief of Armor's Hatch," *ARMOR*, Fall 2017.

[16] COL Curtis Taylor and MAJ Joe Byerly, "Raider Brigade Whitepaper – Fighting for Information in a Complex World: Lessons from the Army's First Reconnaissance and Security Brigade Combat Team," Sept. 18, 2017.

[17] Since publication of this manual in 2015, the Army has divested its EAB organizations of long-range surveillance detachments and companies.

[18] General Study Board, U.S. Forces, European Theater, Study Number 49, "Mechanized Cavalry Units."

Further references

M.H. Gillie, *Forging the Thunderbolt: History of the U.S. Army's Armored Forces 1917-45*, Stackpole Books, 2006.

George F. Hofman, *Through Mobility We Conquer, The Mechanization of U.S. Cavalry*, The University Press of Kentucky, 2006.

GEN Lucian K. Truscott Jr., *The Twilight of the United States Cavalry: Life in the Old Army, 1917-1942*, University Press of Kansas, 1989.

Harry Yeide, *Steeds of Steel: a History of American Mechanized Cavalry in World War II*, Zenith Press, 2008.

Acronym Quick-Scan for text and figures

AEB – aerial-exploitation battalion
ARS – attack reconnaissance squadron
ATGM – anti-tank guided missile
BCT – brigade combat team
BEB – brigade engineering battalion
BSA – brigade-support area
BSB – brigade-support battalion
C&E – collection and exploitation
CAB – combined-arms battalion
CALL – Center for Army Lesson-Learned
CCIR – commander's critical-information requirement
CP – command post
CR – cavalry regiment
CSSB – combat-sustainment-support battalion
DCG – division-cavalry group
DCG-O – deputy commanding general for operations
DS – direct support
DS/GS-R – direct support/general support-reinforcing
DTAC – division tactical-command post
EAB – echelons above brigade
EMIB – expeditionary military-intelligence brigade
ETO – European Theater of Operations
FA – field artillery
FLE – forward logistics element
FM – field manual
FY – fiscal year
GS – general support
GSR – general support reinforcing
HHC – headquarters and headquarters company
HHT – headquarters and headquarters troop
HIMARS – High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System
ISR – intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance
LSGCO – large-scale ground combat operations
MCG – mechanized-cavalry group
MFT – multifunction team
MGS – Mobile Gun System
MI – military intelligence
MP – military police
MUM-T – manned/unmanned teaming
O/C/T – observer/coach/trainer
OIF – Operation Iraqi Freedom
OPCON – operational control
R&S – reconnaissance and security
RCP – route-clearance platoon
SAMS – School of Advanced Military Studies
SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team
SPT – support (Figure 3)
TACP – tactical air-control party
TF – task force
TTP – tactics, techniques and procedures
UAS – unmanned aerial system
USAF – U.S. Air Force
WfX – warfighter exercise