

# Reconsidering Division Cavalry Squadrons

## *Part III: 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, in Operation Desert Storm*

by MAJ Nathan Jennings

*(Editor's note: This is the third in a four-part series that describes the problem, history and potential solutions for the U.S. Army's lack of dedicated division-level ground reconnaissance-and-security (R&S) capacity.)*

Reconnaissance operations, like security efforts, are central to shaping favorable conditions for division maneuver during offensive, defensive, stability and even civil-assistance operations. As defined by Army division doctrine, they are missions “undertaken to obtain, by visual observation or other detection methods, information about the activities and resources of an enemy.” While adversaries often demand the most attention – especially during forcible entry in expeditionary theaters – a variety of manned and unmanned sensors also collect “data concerning the meteorological, hydrographic or geographic characteristics of a particular area.”<sup>1</sup> Similar to security efforts designed to protect main-force units, cavalry has specialized in proactive information collection (IC) and reporting since antiquity.

Divisions doctrinally execute four types of reconnaissance designed to orient “on the enemy, terrain, infrastructure and society to collect information” that is then “turned into intelligence products that influence the conduct of current and future operations.”<sup>2</sup> These tasks include conducting zone reconnaissance across a linear area with defined boundaries, area reconnaissance around a specific location, route reconnaissance along roads and highways, and reconnaissance-in-force to test enemy strengths and dispositions. Cavalry formations, depending on the habitual or *ad hoc* force mix of armored, wheeled, dismounted and aerial platforms, also execute counter-reconnaissance against enemy scouts to deprive opposing commanders of battlefield clarity.<sup>3</sup>

### **DivCav recon**

The campaign histories of 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, again include a germane case study for assessing direct-reporting scouts in support of division maneuver. As the primary ground-reconnaissance element of 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division (“Big Red One”) during the First Persian Gulf War in 1991, it executed a variety of IC tasks, counter-reconnaissance actions and even attacks to seize critical objectives as they enabled the Big Red One, and ultimately the Army’s VII Corps, to defeat entrenched Iraqi armored forces in the southern deserts of Mesopotamia. According to the squadron’s Meritorious Unit Award citation, it “destroyed 65 tanks, 66 armored personnel carriers, 66 trucks, 91 bunkers and captured 3,010 enemy soldiers” during the brief campaign to liberate Kuwait.<sup>4</sup>

The Quarterhorse Squadron received notification that it would deploy to Southwest Asia from its home station at Fort Riley, KS, while operating under the Reorganization of Army Divisions J-series design. Organically allocated two ground troops with M3A2 Cavalry Fighting Vehicles (CFVs) and two air cavalry troops with a mix of OH-58 Kiowa scout and AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters, the formation specialized in moderately contested reconnaissance. MG Thomas Rhame, the Big Red One commander, appreciated the armored profile of the Iraqi army and accordingly allocated the squadron nine M1A1 Abrams tanks, drawn from theater depots, to provide capability to execute more forceful scouting. The squadron commander also reorganized a third air troop from assigned rotary-wing assets. Upon drawing vehicles in Saudi Arabia, Troops A and B reconfigured with a mix of mechanized scouts and heavy tanks.<sup>5</sup>

The squadron task force’s first duty was to screen to protect the massing of 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division at Logistics Base Echo and then Assembly Area Junction City, along the northern border of Saudi Arabia near a town named Hafr Al Batin. Throughout January and February 1991, Troop B, and then Troops C and D, patrolled north of the division, while Troop A lagged behind in drawing vehicles. During this time, the squadron’s pilots destroyed an enemy reconnaissance vehicle, and its ground scouts captured several Iraqi soldiers, again proving the value of combining integrated air-ground teams. The squadron’s tanks, which were then untested against Soviet-grade armor, provided overwatch along the screen line.<sup>6</sup>

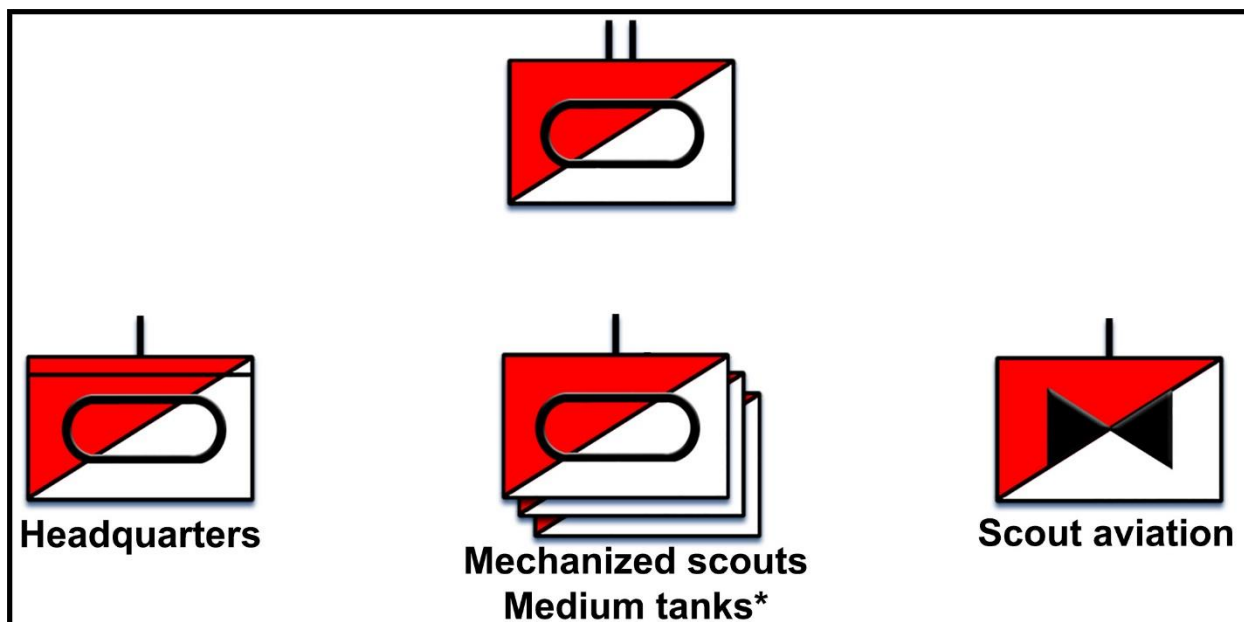


Figure 1. 1-4 Cav's organization during the first Persian Gulf War.

## Recon in force

On Feb. 24, with the Big Red One as its main effort, VII Corps began its attack north to envelop Iraq's Republican Guard Corps -- then considered to be its strongest armored force -- in defensive positions west and north of Kuwait. Quarterhorse initially moved under control of the division's 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade and subsequently followed the armor and mechanized-infantry battalions through marked breach lanes. After crossing, the squadron separated to conduct a forward reconnaissance and mobile screen along the division main body's northern flank as it advanced. Now reporting directly to Rhame, the cavalry Soldiers destroyed three anti-tank guns, two armored scout trucks and four truck carriers, and captured 145 prisoners as they maneuvered east.<sup>7</sup>

The squadron made contact with rear elements of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) Feb. 26 to coordinate a passage of lines for its parent command. The regiment had conducted an advance guard as it led VII Corps' sweeping eastward advance. While 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division was consolidating to the southwest, the ACR located the Tawakalna Division and destroyed its 50<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Brigades. Stephen Bourque, who served in 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division's headquarters during the war, said the opposing Iraqi forces "found no respite from constant ground, artillery and air attacks" as the "dragoons" prepared to "pass the attack to the Big Red One." Far to the north, 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR likewise led XVIII Corp's attack along the coalition's left axis.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the night, the brigades of 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division transitioned through 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR's positions. Four hours into the passage of lines -- considered a high-risk operation due to potential for fratricide -- the squadron emerged and launched another moving screen along its division's northern boundary with 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. By advancing parallel to the main body, the cavalry allowed Rhame to preserve his infantry and armor battalions for the impending fight. During its movement, Quarterhorse located and destroyed an isolated tank platoon. Then, discovering an Iraqi logistical base guarded by a company of armor, infantry and artillery, Quarterhorse conducted a rapid attack that left dozens of burning enemy vehicles in its wake.<sup>9</sup>

Thus far in the offensive, 1-4 Cav had performed traditional and doctrinal tasks in support of large-scale maneuver. By screening to protect the initial massing of friendly forces, coordinating with corps cavalry to allow unscathed passage to the main battle zone and reconnoitering its higher command's exposed northern flank during the subsequent advance, it had employed expanded combined-arms capabilities to shape favorable conditions. This success was in large part facilitated by integrating heavy armor into reconnaissance teams with supporting attack aviation. LTC Robert Wilson, the squadron commander during the campaign, later wrote that his tanks "were indispensable in accomplishing the mission" and that having them "in the squadron gave the division commander more options and greater flexibility."<sup>10</sup>



(Mechanized) with one CFV troop, two tank and CFV mixed troops, and two air troops. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, 17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, enabled the fast-moving 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division with a purely aerial squadron. This variance in mobility profiles allowed each cavalry force to support its parent division according to specific informational requirements.<sup>13</sup>

On March 1, Quarterhorse conducted one of the coalition's final tactical actions of the war when it seized the Safwan airfield in Iraq to serve as the site of peace negotiations. The VII Corps commander, LTG Frederick Franks, ordered Rhame (as remembered by 1-4 Cav's operations officer) to "reconnoiter the area" around the airbase "but avoid becoming decisively engaged."<sup>14</sup> Now supported by an AH-64 Apache helicopter company from 11<sup>th</sup> Aviation Brigade, 1-4 Cav accordingly moved across the border to find elements of the Hammurabi Division on-site. The Iraqis departed after a tense standoff and allowed the Americans to occupy the airbase. While no fighting occurred, the air troop conducted a useful area reconnaissance of the Iraqi positions, which allowed Wilson to position his ground troops in a credible, yet not overly threatening, posture.<sup>15</sup>

Quarterhorse completed its wartime service by moving 100 kilometers west to establish traffic-control points along the post-war demarcation line. The squadron processed thousands of refugees and paroled prisoners as displaced Iraqis civilians and soldiers struggled to return home. This final act included providing medical care to several hundred children, women and men who had suffered injuries during the conflict. On April 15, 1991, the command finally collapsed its operations and moved south to turn in vehicles at theater depots and begin redeployment to Kansas.<sup>16</sup>

## Combined-arms value

The R&S actions of 1-4 Cav in the First Gulf War, even when considering Iraqi deficiencies, demonstrated the potency of cavalry teams when empowered with cross-domain capability. Wilson wrote in *ARMOR* of the confrontation at Safwan that "tanks were indispensable in this operation, not only for their killing power but as a deterrent to a would-be attacker against an isolated force." The future lieutenant general likewise attested of the entire campaign that "the air/ground cavalry mix was very effective and enabled the squadron to move rapidly and cover a large area of operations."<sup>17</sup> These successes, stemming from Quarterhorse's unique tactical versatility, allowed it to enable their division throughout the vast envelopment operation.

Opinions like Wilson's quickly moved beyond participatory commentary and into institutional consensus. In the Armor Center's official review of Operation Desert Storm, its commanding general, MG Thomas Foley, wrote that "adding tanks enabled a faster reconnaissance tempo and added depth to the security mission." He also complained that just "two ground troops were insufficient to accomplish normal missions."<sup>18</sup> Two years later, even as it downsized, the Army established robust L-series squadrons that included three ground troops containing Abrams and CFV platoons, along with two air troops with Apaches and Kiowa scouts. After decades of vacillation over whether division cavalry should optimize for stealthy or forceful reconnaissance, it had once again chosen maximal capability.<sup>19</sup>

The next and final part of this series will employ historical lessons to explore solutions for creating division-cavalry capability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

*MAJ Nate Jennings is an Army strategist in the Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS. His previous assignments include strategic planner in Resolute Support Headquarters, Kabul, Afghanistan; assistant professor of history at U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY; Headquarters Troop commander and Troop C commander, 4-9 Cavalry, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX, and Iraq; platoon leader, Company B, 1-34 Armor, 1<sup>st</sup> BCT, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, Fort Riley, KS, and Iraq; and 19D cavalry scout in 2<sup>nd</sup> ACR (Light) with Operation Iraqi Freedom tours in Baghdad and Kirkuk, Iraq. His military schooling includes the School of Advanced Military Studies, Command and General Staff Officer's Course, Cavalry Leader's Course, Maneuver Captain's Career Course, Armor Officer Basic Course and Air-Assault and Airborne schools. MAJ Jennings holds a bachelor's of arts degree in history from Northwestern State University of Louisiana and a master's of arts degree in American history from the University of Texas at Austin. He won the Perry Prize for the best master's thesis at the University of Texas at Austin in 2013 and 1<sup>st</sup> place in the U.S. Army Armor School's 2015 Starry Writing Competition. He is author of the book, **Riding for the Lone Star: Frontier Cavalry and the Texas Way of War, 1822-1865.***

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Army Technical Publication 3-91, *Division Operations*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 3-90, *Offense and Defense*.

<sup>4</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, Meritorious Unit Award Citation, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm: Valorous Unit Award Citations, Center of Military History, U.S. Army.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Bourque and John Burdan, *The Road to Safwan: The 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in the 1991 Persian Gulf War*, University of North Texas Press, 2007

<sup>6</sup> LTC Robert Wilson, "Tanks in the Division Cavalry Squadron;" after-action report (AAR), Operation Desert Storm, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, June 20, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> 1-4 Cav operations staff, "Riders on the Storm: A Narrative History of the 1-4 Cav's Campaign in Iraq and Kuwait – Jan. 24-March 1991," *ARMOR* (May-June 1991); Stephen Bourque, *Jayhawk! The VII Corps in the Persian Gulf War*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Enclosure 3, Part 1, AAR, Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, VII Corps, June 20, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Bourque and Burdan.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson.

<sup>11</sup> Bourque, *Jayhawk*.

<sup>12</sup> Bourque and Burdan.

<sup>13</sup> John J. McGrath, *Scouts Out! The Development of Reconnaissance Units in Modern Armies*, Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Bourque, *Jayhawk*.

<sup>15</sup> 1-4 Cav operations staff, "Riders on the Storm" AAR.

<sup>16</sup> Bourque and Burdan; "Riders on the Storm" AAR.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson.

<sup>18</sup> Report, "Desert Shield and Desert Storm Emerging Observations," the U.S. Army Armor Center, Oct. 7, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> McGrath.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**AAR** – after-action report

**ACR** – armored-cavalry regiment

**BCT** – brigade combat team

**CFV** – Cavalry Fighting Vehicle

**IC** – information collection

**R&S** – reconnaissance and security