

# Uncertainty and the Reserve: Updating a Fundamental of Reconnaissance

by MAJ Ragan T. Rutherford

A current fundamental of reconnaissance is “do not keep reconnaissance assets in reserve.” Taken literally, this would imply that a cavalry squadron should not keep any of its assets, such as a scout platoon, in reserve. Yet in all other offensive, defensive or enabling operations, a reserve is not only permitted, it is required.

Field Manual (FM) 3-90-1, *Offense and Defense Vol. 1*, highlights that a reserve exists to deal with uncertainty: “The size of the reserve is relative to the commander’s uncertainty about the enemy’s capabilities and intentions. The more uncertainty that exists, the larger the reserve.”<sup>1</sup> As the force that operates with the most uncertainty, why would the cavalry be forbidden from maintaining reserve during reconnaissance operations? To do so would breach the combined wisdom in all other doctrine.

The Maneuver Center of Excellence Cavalry Leader’s Course (CLC) proposes that this fundamental of reconnaissance has been framed incorrectly. The issue is not whether the cavalry can maintain a reserve; the issue is maximizing the employment of reconnaissance assets on reconnaissance tasks. The fundamental should be updated accordingly.



Figure 1. Not keeping recon assets in reserve is a fundamental of reconnaissance. (From the Maneuver Center of Excellence “Fundamentals of Reconnaissance” poster series, <https://www.benning.army.mil/armor/fundamentals/RF-2.html>)

## The problem

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, defines reserve as “that portion of a body of troops that is withheld from action at the beginning of an engagement to be available for a decisive movement.”<sup>2</sup> It serves

as a means to retain the initiative, take advantage of unexpected success and/or counter tactical reserves.<sup>3</sup> ADP 3-90 goes so far as to say “a successful commander retains a reserve.”<sup>4</sup> So why should cavalry formations be handcuffed?

Considering that the cavalry serves as the primary asset for developing the situation, operates in ambiguous environments and has the least amount of time to plan, it is the cavalry that most requires a reserve. For instance, if a squadron is conducting a reconnaissance-in-force to determine an enemy’s strength and reaction, the commander should allocate a reserve to support a retrograde, reinforce friendly forces or exploit its success. If the cavalry came into contact with superior forces without an internal reserve, it would not be able to extricate itself without external support. Furthermore, if the squadron identifies a gap, such as a lightly defended portion of the enemy lines, it could use the reserve to penetrate the seam before the enemy has an opportunity to react.

As the Army reorients toward large-scale combat operations (LSCO), the cavalry will find itself in greater need of a maneuver unit to quickly react to a rapidly changing and complex operational environment. Without such a unit, cavalry will routinely fail to achieve all the other fundamentals of reconnaissance due to its inability to retain its freedom of maneuver.

## **The solution**

The answer is to update cavalry doctrine to promote the employment of a reserve in reconnaissance and security operations. Cavalry doctrine should also include new concepts for structure. The tank company within the armor brigade combat team (ABCT) squadron and the weapons troop within the Stryker brigade combat team provide the squadron with options for organically generating a reserve. Within the infantry brigade combat team, the brigade commander should consider using a platoon from one of the weapons companies to serve as the squadron reserve to maximize the number of assets available to answer brigade priority information requirements (PIR).

Besides updating employment considerations, doctrine should retain the fundamental concept to “not keep reconnaissance assets in reserve.” Doctrine should continue promoting the idea of maximizing the employment of reconnaissance assets through all phases of an operation and through the reconnaissance-management options of cueing, mixing and redundancy. The updated description should establish that cavalry units should not keep an asset available in case another asset observes something, in case another asset is destroyed or just in case another reconnaissance opportunity presents itself.

Instead, cavalry units should maximize their ability to collect information by planning and employing the necessary assets appropriately in time and space, with all assets having a task and purpose. The definition should specifically differentiate how a “reserve force” is separate from “keeping reconnaissance assets in reserve,” and how employing a reserve force may be necessary to facilitate mission accomplishment.

## **Conclusion**

The current fundamental of reconnaissance “do not keep reconnaissance assets in reserve” and its description will not facilitate the cavalry’s necessary actions as the Army focuses on LSCO. Therefore the fundamentals of reconnaissance need to be rewritten to promote the maintenance of a reserve that enables maneuver options for the cavalry commander while also conveying the requirement to use all reconnaissance assets as needed. This adjustment will help the cavalry answer PIR and aggressively shape the battlefield while adhering to the rest of the reconnaissance fundamentals.

The other option is to retain the fundamentals as written and risk having the cavalry operate in an overly cautious manner due to the necessary requirement to maintain freedom of maneuver.



**Figure 2. A Bradley Fighting Vehicle from Troop A, 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> ABCT, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, participates in a training event at Fort Bliss, TX. (U.S. Army photo)**

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> FM 3-90-1, *Offense and Defense Vol. 1*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> ADP 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## **Acronym Quick-Scan**

**ABCT** – armored brigade combat team

**ADP** – Army doctrine publication

**CLC** – Cavalry Leader's Course

**FM** – field manual

**LSCO** – large-scale combat operations

**PIR** – priority information requirement