

Do Armored Cavalry Regiments Make Cavalry Divisions Obsolete?

by Michael McCabe

Armored cavalry regiments (ACRs) are a proven asset on modern battlefields, but do they make cavalry divisions redundant or obsolete? This is not a question of whether armored cavalry itself is relevant, but it's rather an administrative/managerial question that simultaneously addresses the pride and prestige of cavalry's heritage.

This article will make the case that generic armored cavalry divisions are indeed unnecessary, but that cavalry divisions can still fill an important, yet hard to retain in peacetime, role without sacrificing their existing advantages.

Limitations for reconnaissance

The first, most obvious use for cavalry, both air and armored, is reconnaissance. Reconnaissance is the sea in which conventional forces swim, so cavalry is utterly necessary to actively shape the battlefield. This is something sniper platoons and long-range surveillance (LRS) teams have less capacity to do.¹ ACRs excel at this mission, and they currently support other brigades with their scout squadrons. ACRs are also capable of regiment-sized reconnaissance and screening operations, which will be invaluable in large-scale combat operations against a peer opponent such as Russia or China.

The problem in justifying the existence of cavalry divisions for reconnaissance work is that the regimental method works better for supplying brigades with squadrons, and most reconnaissance and/or screening in a peer conflict will not require the use of an entire cavalry division operating as a single unit. At best, the cavalry division would tie several independent regiments under one flag, but it offers nothing new or meaningful.

ACRs can still integrate anti-weaponry (particularly anti-drone and anti-missile) and non-nuclear electromagnetic pulse weapons without requiring a division-sized force, and on the open plains, armored divisions and corps will be the backbone of America's armies. Any gaps large enough to require a division of cavalry to plug are a serious enough threat to require the use of an armored division. Attempting to strengthen cavalry divisions by adding more tanks would not ameliorate the situation; it would merely make the cavalry into a cheap, redundant imitation of said armored divisions. Armored cavalry as it is today simply cannot replace armored divisions on a large scale and thus are better suited to scouting, screening and shaping the battlefield, both physically and cyber/electronically, as regiments before the tanks deliver the knockout blows.

Limitations for convoy escort

Another use for armored cavalry is in escorting columns and convoys along roads. In the Vietnam War, 11th "Blackhorse" ACR smashed many roadside ambushes, helped form cordons and broke through to units in trouble, proving the value of light armored forces in keeping road networks open. However, using cavalry divisions for this purpose full-time would relegate them to a secondary role and diminish their prestige. Convoy escort units would be better placed under the Quartermaster Corps to simplify chain of command and avoid creating the impression that cavalry now exists to babysit other units.

Furthermore, armored cavalry in cordon operations would likely remain a regimental-level task and not justify a division-sized force. As with armored divisions on the open plains, in difficult terrain any gaps bigger than what a regiment can handle should instead be plugged with light-infantry divisions. Cavalry is capable of dismounted action, but using it as an equally capable substitute for infantry divisions will ultimately make it more interchangeable with infantry and eventually justify converting all cavalry divisions into mechanized or light infantry.

Limits of strategic rapid response

A more recent proposed use for cavalry divisions is as a strategic asset that can be rapidly deployed around the globe. This proposal revolves around embracing the full capabilities of the Stryker, as cavalry divisions mounted in Bradleys or helicopters would be less useful as a strategic rapid-response force due to fuel requirements. The idea

is to offer a middle ground between airborne divisions, which are the most deployable, and infantry/armor divisions, which are less deployable. This is a task which would merit the use of a division or more, but it would lack institutional longevity since it ultimately rests on an equipment-centric division of labor.

The entire proposal would fall apart if the United States chose to instead mount its airborne divisions in Strykers, mimicking how the Russian airborne troops ride in *boyevaya mashina desantas* (BMDs); Strykers are air-droppable, and a modern airborne division would become capable of landing with or without them. This would make them cavalry's equal as a light-mechanized rapid-response force but with vastly superior strategic mobility. In the end, it would justify converting cavalry divisions into more airborne divisions to gain the dual-purpose benefits and make the peacetime Army more cost-effective. Simply put, modern cavalry divisions have no viable equipment-based roles that can't be filled by infantry, armored or airborne divisions.

Cavalry's best option

With so many arguments against cavalry divisions' usefulness vis-à-vis cavalry regiments and non-cavalry divisions, it may seem as though there are no places left on a modern battlefield for cavalry divisions to be uniquely relevant. However, there is one more role available that the American military traditionally struggles to fill: terrain specialization.

Cavalry regiments, infantry divisions, armored divisions and airborne divisions can beat out cavalry divisions in generalist roles. However, this generalist nature makes it next to impossible for any of them to retain terrain specialization in peacetime. Every time the Army attempts to raise jungle, Arctic and/or desert-specialized infantry or armored divisions in peacetime, these initiatives rarely last more than a few years. Priorities and budgets change, and the wider culture worries about veering too far toward overspecialization and "preparing for the wrong war." If cavalry divisions stepped in to fill the gap, they would resolve the seeming contradictory needs between adaptability and specialization overnight.

The first advantage of terrain-specialized cavalry divisions is that it would not rob them of their ability to carry out any of the previously mentioned missions. Cavalry divisions could still carry out deep reconnaissance and cordon tactics in extreme terrain/climates and could still be a strategic response force. In all three cases they'd be better prepared and acclimated for the extreme terrain than general-purpose infantry, armored or airborne divisions. The cavalry's expertise would furthermore assist in bringing these general-purpose divisions up to speed once the latter arrive in-theater, should generalist divisions be needed. Strategically, if America faces multiple crises simultaneously in both mild and difficult terrain/climates, then the general-purpose forces can more readily deploy to the mild climates while the cavalry tackles the harsh climates without being forced to make compromises, improvise *ad hoc* solutions or reinvent the doctrinal wheel.

The second advantage of terrain-specialized cavalry is that it is not an equipment-dependent niche, despite appearances. Instead of coming up with a single cavalry table of organization and equipment (TOE) that must be shoehorned into radically different extreme terrains/climates, cavalry divisions would be free to custom-tailor TOEs for each specific extreme terrain/climate without losing their distinction from infantry, armor or airborne divisions. It doesn't matter if jungle cavalry uses light armored ground vehicles or not, or whether desert cavalry uses helicopters or tanks, etc., equipment for difficult terrain comes and goes, but the cavalry divisions remain. Cavalry divisions would wear special jungle/desert/Arctic uniforms that stand apart from standard woodland camouflage as their standard, everyday uniform, their vehicles would look different, and these visible distinctions from general-purpose troops can consequently enable the cavalry to retain an *esprit de corps* that is not purely historical and contributes to readiness.

As a bonus, terrain specialization would not be a break with American cavalry's heritage. Unlike Old World cavalry, American cavalry spent most of its horseback years in the Wild West rather than in chivalric contests. While cavalry in the American Civil War did fight like European cavalry of the day, for decades afterward it fought in underdeveloped, trackless wilderness as expeditionary forces with no continuous supply lines.

This culture of embracing difficult terrain continued into the 20th Century. When motorization began in 1940, many horse cavalymen opposed the idea, not because they opposed new ideas, but because they wished to retain their cross-country mobility and not become road-bound and fuel-dependent.

The arrival of the helicopter in Vietnam was also initially seen as a cavalryman's tool; even though infantry and airborne troops used them frequently, their choppers were essentially transport battalions. The infantry/airborne did not see them as any different from five-ton trucks and armored personnel carriers. They were much less a central part of the unit's identity.

In contrast, 1st Cavalry Division was truly a modern cavalry force with exclusive organic lift capacity that allowed it to overcome Indochina's formidable terrain with a dual-purpose mindset of aerial and dismounted action, something that would have been familiar to its 19th Century predecessors. Terrain specialization would keep this unique cavalry heritage alive, and as long as America must fight in jungles, deserts and Arctic terrain, cavalry divisions will remain relevant no matter what technological/equipment changes occur.

Tripling cavalry divisions

At the moment, America has one unspecialized cavalry division, has trained 25th Infantry Division in jungle warfare, and 11th Airborne (at the time of this writing) is slated to become an Arctic force. The simplest route (to be minimally disruptive in a physical sense) would be to convert 1st Cavalry Division into a desert-specialized force, then convert 25th Infantry and 11th Airborne into cavalry divisions.

However, there are many good reasons to keep 11th Airborne Division, as well as reinstating 101st Airborne as an airborne division.² Three or more Stryker-mounted airborne divisions paired with three terrain-specialized cavalry divisions would be a formidable strategic quick-reaction force in peacetime. In this latter scenario, 1st Cavalry Division would become a jungle-warfare division due to its heritage in the Philippines and Vietnam, while 2nd Cavalry Division would be a desert cavalry division, and 3rd Cavalry Division would be the Arctic division. Although 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions never saw action, 2nd Cavalry Division was assigned to patrol the Mexican border after Pearl Harbor and was intended for the North African Campaign.

Today this could be accomplished with a swap of banners: 25th Infantry would become 1st Cavalry and the existing 1st Cavalry would become 2nd Cavalry. The 3rd Cavalry division would need to be built from scratch if neither 11th Airborne nor 10th Mountain Divisions are touched.

Closing thoughts

This article has been written in very broad terms, and there are doubtless details that have been skimmed over. But the principles remain. The overall goal of making each division permanently relevant is a long-term solution to readiness concerns.

Cavalry, both in its regimental and divisional forms, can play two very distinct and necessary roles in the age of drones and precision munitions without treading on anyone's toes, and it can round out the Army's toolbox. Most of America's enemies have the luxury of specializing their entire armies to fight in one or two particular terrains/climates and believe that this is a permanent advantage over American troops. Cavalry divisions embracing terrain specialization would rob our enemies of a significant X-factor advantage and be a natural, rather than arbitrary, division of labor that stands up to peacetime scrutiny.

*Michael McCabe is a draftsman/designer at Newport News Shipbuilding in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. He has been published on **Small Wars Journal** under the pen name Michael Gladius, and some of his essays have been reposted on **RealClearDefense**. He holds a bachelor's of arts degree in biochemistry-molecular biology from Carroll College.*

Notes

¹ Sniper platoons and LRS teams are more passive compared to armored or air cavalry.

² Generalist air-assault needs would be best filled by the National Guard, and the proposed cavalry divisions would likely also possess this capability.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ACR – armored cavalry regiment

BMD – *boyevaya mashina desanta* (Russian combat vehicle of the Airborne)

LRS – long-range surveillance

TOE – table of organization and equipment