# Shaping the Battlefield: A Framework for the Cavalry

**by MAJ Mark Sargent**

The Cavalry Leader's Course (CLC) teaches that cavalry conducts reconnaissance and security (R&S) operations to enable commanders in making timely decisions to achieve a position of relative advantage.[1] The cavalry does this by answering the commander's critical information requirements. Indeed, Field Manual (FM) 3-98, ***Reconnaissance and Security Operations,*** states that the cavalry squadron's primary purpose is to answer the brigade combat team (BCT) commander's priority intelligence requirements (PIR).[2] However, what is missing in this current framework is an appreciation for the "relative" in "position of relative advantage."

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, ***Operations***, states: "The side that best understands an operational environment, adapts more rapidly and decides to act more quickly in conditions of uncertainty is the one most likely to win."[3] There are few who would disagree with this statement or doubt the importance of the cavalry in this process. However, in the current framework, all focus is on the Blue side of this ledger, with the cavalry reducing uncertainty (answering PIR) for the supported commander. The intrinsic contest in this statement – that the enemy is also seeking to learn about the operating environment, adapt to changing circumstances and make swift decisions – is ignored.

This is the significance of the "relative" in "position of relative advantage." Increasing the enemy's uncertainty (or increasing its certainty of a false understanding of the situation)[4] has the same benefit as decreasing the uncertainty of the supported commander. To put it another way, forcing the enemy to make a bad decision, a late decision or no decision at all makes as great a contribution to its defeat as enabling the supported commander to make a sound and timely decision. Therefore answering PIR can only be half the answer to achieving a position of relative advantage – shaping and disrupting the enemy is the other half. The cavalry can do more to focus on this neglected half of the equation.

## Shaping battlefield

FM 3-98 states that the cavalry "shape[s] the battlefield for the commander." However, there is little explanation of what it means to "shape the battlefield" or how the cavalry might go about this task. There is some discussion of shaping as part of information operations, as well as what might be called *physical shaping* – for example, shaping the enemy onto one axis of advance instead of another. However, there is little if any discussion of

what might be called *cognitive shaping*: disrupting the enemy's command-and-control system, disrupting planning and slowing decision-making. This is a significant omission because targeting the enemy in the cognitive dimension is part of the U.S. Army's operational art.

ADP 3-0 states that *cognitive defeat* is "disrupting decision-making and depriving the enemy of the will to fight." Closely linked to cognitive defeat is the defeat mechanism of disintegration, which seeks to "disrupt an enemy's command-and-control system, degrading its ability to conduct operations and leading to a rapid collapse of the enemy's capabilities or will to fight."[5]

What these definitions describe is degrading an enemy's cohesion. The term *cohesion* in this context is not defined in U.S. doctrine. The U.S. Army concept of multi-domain operations details that cohesion has physical, virtual and cognitive components, but it neglects to include a definition.[6] For purposes of this article, *cohesion* is defined as the ability of a force to exert effective command and control through a combination of planning, execution and adaptation.

From this, one might conclude that to shape the battlefield to achieve a position of relative advantage for the commander, the cavalry should seek to degrade the enemy's cohesion. However, there is little emphasis on this task in the current framework for the cavalry.

## Evolving cavalry framework

FM 3-98 and related publications detail an extraordinarily clear vision of how the cavalry squadron conducts R&S operations in support of the BCT. However, I would contend it is an incomplete vision of the cavalry's purpose and utility. I propose evolving this vision to one that elevates "shaping the battlefield" to the same importance as answering PIR. This shaping effect must extend across the physical, informational and cognitive dimensions. The primary method employed by the cavalry to shape the battlefield would be to degrade the enemy's cohesion. The cavalry would apply deliberate effort to reduce the enemy's freedom of action, slow and shape decision-making, and pre-empt employment of critical capabilities. This evolved framework would retain its unity of purpose with the current framework, enabling commanders to achieve a position of relative advantage. However, the relative advantage gained would be greater in magnitude, as both sides of the "relative" equation are addressed.

Such a framework is also likely to be more successful when applied within the practical constraints of the battlefield. In particular, it will assist the cavalry to overcome what is consistently the greatest obstacle to mission success: a lack of time. The current framework of answering the brigade commander's PIR as the cavalry's primary purpose works very well – but only when the cavalry squadron is given timely intelligence requirements, linked to actionable decisions. Experience from the combat-training centers (CTCs) shows this is rarely the case. It is common for cavalry squadrons to commence their R&S operations at a CTC without an information-collection (IC) plan. In an uncertain and rapidly changing environment, where the commander is seeking to achieve a high operational tempo, this is probably unavoidable.

However, this new framework will effectively provide the brigade more time. By slowing and shaping enemy decisions, the brigade forces the enemy to protect its own critical capabilities and exposes its contingency forces earlier than it would wish. Thus, the enemy's freedom of action is reduced. As a result, it has less opportunity to devote the cognitive and physical effort needed to advance its plans against the supported force. Consequently the supported force has more time to develop the situation, complete its plan and exploit the position of relative advantage.

Napoleon once told his marshals they could ask him for anything except more time; the framework I describe here for the cavalry would provide that additional time.

## Practical application

What might be the practical changes of this new framework? Let us consider a scenario that would be familiar to CLC students: A U.S. armored BCT (ABCT) deploys to a friendly nation in Eastern Europe. The brigade mission is to advance from the point of entry to the national capital to support the legitimate government, which is threatened by a separatist movement supported by a hostile major power. A threat mechanized force has blocked the route to the capital. Therefore the ABCT will have to defeat this force to achieve its mission.

Under the current framework, the cavalry squadron's purpose is to answer the BCT commander's PIR. The cavalry squadron would almost certainly conduct either a zone or area reconnaissance to answer these intelligence requirements; a reconnaissance-in-force would be chosen only if no other form of reconnaissance would obtain the required intelligence.[7] The squadron would make contact with the smallest element possible. A reconnaissance tempo would be selected solely on the requirement to best accomplish the reconnaissance tasks.

Scout troops would be employed forward as the primary collection assets, with the tank company employed in-depth to enable local overmatch if reconnaissance assets are threatened. The cavalry squadron would not be tasked to threaten enemy critical capabilities unless the brigade has advanced far enough in the military decision-making process to have completed the high-payoff target list (HPTL).

Of note, all tasks conducted by the cavalry squadron are Blue-focused. There is little if any focus on shaping the enemy other than what is required to answer the intelligence requirements. In this framework, even if the cavalry squadron succeeds in answering the intelligence requirements within the constraint of latest-time-information-is-of-value, the brigade will have to fight an enemy that has not been degraded in any meaningful way. What would result would be a symmetrical contest of strength against strength.

Now let us consider what might change if the cavalry squadron is

tasked to degrade the cohesion of the enemy as well as answer intelligence requirements. In this framework, the squadron might conduct a reconnaissance-in-force rather than a zone or area reconnaissance, even if it is not necessary to obtain the required intelligence. This is due to the reconnaissance-in-force being the best form of reconnaissance to quickly reduce the enemy's freedom of action. The aim is to force the enemy to expend effort to shield itself from the cavalry rather than advance its own designs against the supported force.

The enemy force may be also forced to expose its contingency forces (such as the reserve) and critical capabilities (such as fires assets) earlier than it wishes, exposing it to detection and targeting. The more consistent this pressure on the enemy's freedom of action, the greater will be the impact to the enemy's physical and cognitive cohesion.

As a bonus, the reconnaissance-in-force is often more reliable than more passive forms of reconnaissance in answering threat-based intelligence requirements because it provides the ability to learn from the enemy's reactions.

Adopting this new framework would require a change to the fundamentals that require the cavalry to make contact with the smallest possible element.[8] Instead, the cavalry might seek to degrade the enemy's cohesion by making contact earlier than the enemy expects with a force larger (or at least different) than the enemy expects. This might see the tank company – rather than its being kept in-depth to rescue forward scouts from decisive engagement – being employed forward to make early contact.

It might also see enablers and other combat elements attached from the brigade's main body employed early to present a situation that differs even more from the enemy's expectations. The more unexpected the contact, and the earlier it is gained, the greater the effect on the enemy's cohesion.

Crucially, this unexpected force does not need to become decisively engaged, or even enter into direct-fire contact,[9] to achieve the desired effect. Merely being detected in uncomfortable proximity earlier than expected will focus the enemy's attention, expose contingency forces early and disrupt its planning and decision-making. Even better: If, after contact is made, the enemy loses contact with that unexpected force, this will compel it to expend cognitive and physical effort to regain contact.

To enable this, the squadron might select a reconnaissance tempo based on the desired effect on the enemy rather than only what is best to accomplish the reconnaissance task. For example, the squadron might select a forceful tempo early in the operation to force contact with the enemy before transitioning to a stealthy tempo to force the enemy to expend effort to regain contact.

In this new framework, the cavalry would also put greater emphasis on pre-empting the enemy's employment of critical capabilities (which might be fires assets, command-and-control nodes, air-defense artillery, sustainment assets, etc.). Currently the cavalry squadron will only be tasked to threaten or strike enemy critical capabilities once the brigade has completed the HPTL, which occurs no earlier than course-of-action development. As a result, there is no effort expended early in the reconnaissance effort when threatening the enemy's critical capabilities, losing the opportunity to have a disproportionate effect on the enemy's physical cohesion and decision-making.

Pre-empting the employment of the enemy's critical capabilities does not necessarily imply directly striking it in the manner of the targeting process. Instead, the aim is to force the enemy to expend effort to shield its critical capabilities rather than employ that same effort to use those critical capabilities to advance its own plans. Something as simple as holding a friendly force in uncomfortable proximity to the enemy critical capability will do this (which reinforces the desirability of making early contact with a large or unexpected force).

A more audacious method might be to conduct a raid. A more subtle method might be to deliberately fly a tactical unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) low, slowly and overtly over enemy critical capabilities. The enemy, knowing its critical capability has been compromised, will be forced to displace or take other action to shield that asset. The more unexpected these actions, the more closely sequenced in time and widely in space, the greater the effect on physical and cognitive cohesion.

This evolved framework will place more responsibility on cavalry commanders at all levels. In particular, the new framework cannot succeed without a mature culture of mission command. Cavalry commanders must be comfortable acting before receiving a complete IC plan, and this requires a thorough appreciation of the commander's intent. Cavalry commanders must be comfortable seizing fleeting battlefield opportunities without receiving guidance from "above." Clearly, this will strain the mutual-trust aspect of mission command. Commanders must develop this trust in training and be willing to accept failure by subordinates in training to do so.[10]

## Future

This evolved framework for cavalry operations should prove more future-proof than the current one. There are many other assets besides the cavalry that can answer intelligence requirements, and as technology progresses, those assets will get better and more numerous. There is already pressure on the cavalry to justify its existence in an environment where UAVs and other technical systems are seen to be more reliable methods for informing commander's decisions.

However, no other asset has the ability to interact with the environment and the enemy in the manner of the cavalry. No other asset can provide consistent pressure to the enemy's freedom of action, force the enemy to react to the unexpected, and slow and shape decisions in the manner of the cavalry. In short, no other force can put the "relative" in "position of relative advantage."

No emerging technology, including unmanned systems, will change this. Until the enemy's forces are commanded and controlled by artificial intelligence

(many decades away, at least), the key enemy vulnerability will be between the ears of their commanders.

In addition, this evolved framework will be better suited to the future operating environment of multi-domain operations. In this future operating environment, BCTs will be expected to execute convergence (integration of capabilities in all domains) and cross-domain maneuver to defeat adversaries. In this context, the purpose of convergence is to break the physical, virtual and cognitive cohesion of enemy forces, causing their defeat.[11]

This is the same purpose as the framework for the cavalry outlined in this article. Of course, the cavalry squadron of the future will need augmentation with more capabilities to fully contribute to multi-domain operations. However, the cavalry will already have a doctrinal and intellectual framework to apply to the new environment.

## Conclusion

This article has proposed evolving the current framework of the cavalry into one that elevates shaping the battlefield to the same importance as answering PIR. The primary method to shape the battlefield would be to degrade the enemy's cohesion. This would be accomplished by reducing the enemy's freedom of action, slowing and shaping decisions, and preempting the employment of critical capabilities. Such a framework would be more effective within the practical constraints of the battlefield, particularly the lack of time for the BCT to complete a sound IC plan. It would also be more future-proof in a world of increasing technology and automation, as well as being more suited to the future of multi-domain operations.

*MAJ Mark Sargent is the Australian Army exchange instructor for CLC, assigned to 3rd Squadron, 16th Cavalry Regiment, 316th Cavalry Brigade, Fort Benning, GA. Previous assignments include commander, South Queensland Wing, Warrant Officer and Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Gallipoli Barracks, Queensland, Australia; operations officer, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, Lavarack Barracks, Queensland; tactics instructor, Royal Military College, Duntroon, Australian Capital Territory; executive officer, B Squadron, 3rd/4th Cavalry Regiment, Lavarack Barracks; and platoon leader, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, Robertson Barracks, Northern Territory, Australia. MAJ Sargent's military schools include Regimental Officer Basic Course (Armour), Captain's Course, Combat Officer Advanced Course, Major's Course and CLC.*

## Notes

[1] CPT Timothy C. Lee, "From the Screen: Why Does Cavalry Still Matter?", ***ARMOR***, Winter 2020 edition.

[2] FM 3-98.

[3] ADP 3-0.

[4] See the two types of military deception: ambiguity-increasing and ambiguity-decreasing, in FM 3-13.4, ***Army Support to Military Deception***.

[5] Ibid.

[6] U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-3-1, ***The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028***.

[7] FM 3-98.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Implied here is that the cavalry squadron has already made visual or electronic contact with this enemy force according to the R&S fundamental to gain and maintain enemy contact.

[10] L. Burton Brender, "The Problem with Mission Command," ***The Strategy Bridge***, September 2016, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/09/02/the_problem_of_mission_command_110008.html; accessed July 30, 2020.

[11] TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1.

### Acronym Quick-Scan

**ABCT** – armored brigade combat team
**ADP** – Army doctrine publication
**BCT** – brigade combat team
**CTC** – combat-training center
**FM** – field manual
**HPTL** – high-payoff target list
**IC** – information collection
**PIR** – priority intelligence requirement
**R&S** – reconnaissance and security
**TRADOC** – U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command