



Reconnaissance Renaissance: A Survey of the Discussion

By Capt. T. Jordan Terry

Of the Army's personality traits, one is a collective nostalgia for "how we had it" or "back when we did things the right way..." We all know a Master Sergeant or Lieutenant Colonel who proudly recalls fond memories digging fighting positions, rehearsing N-hour deployment sequences, or fighting force-on-force exercises through the German countryside. Such memories often exhibit a certain level of insecurity – they can represent senior Soldiers' attempt to mask unfamiliarity with new procedures and techniques. But for those of us who think that we can smugly rest on our hard-learned lessons, tough fights and hardships through the recent bouts of the War on Terror, we must reconsider the nostalgia of our Army's senior members. When our senior Officers and NCOs recall aspects of warfighting that may seem outmoded to those of us who entered service after the World Trade Center fell, they are really reminding us that not all wars are fought with air superiority, established forward operating bases, key leader engagements, or limited violence. Our Army is painfully adapted to fight extended counterinsurgency, often at the cost of decaying skills required to fight and win in near-peer, high-intensity conflicts. That does not in any way diminish the importance of the competencies the Army of the 80's and 90's perfected. Just as we eagerly lean forward to forecast the technology, training, mindset and force structure we must attain to fight in the future, we must also, like the senior Soldiers amongst us, consider those vital proficiencies we may have lost in the pursuit of progress.

The atrophy of core competencies remains one of the most vibrant topics of discussion amongst Army professionals in the professional military journals that serve as forums to air concerns and propose solutions to emerging issues. The Army has tailored formations, adapted training and established an operational culture to meet the reconnaissance demands of the War on Terror. The associated developments have produced units capable and deadly in the counterinsurgency operating environment. As the featured writers below illuminate in Military Review, Armor and Aviation Digest, the discussion on how to ensure reconnaissance remains functional in next-generation warfare is beginning anew.

Troubling Trends in Reconnaissance¹

SFC West illuminates the dangers of improperly planning or committing reconnaissance forces. As an OC/T at JRTC, SFC West is uniquely positioned to recognize trends across the Army's operational force. The major trend he identifies in this article centers on the observation that "rotational units at JRTC are conducting some reconnaissance, very few are conducting effective reconnaissance." West's analysis centers on three causal mechanisms.

First, there is a deficiency in many commanders' mentality towards reconnaissance units' utilization. This results in the use of scouts, not as a collection asset, but as a maneuver force, often filling the role of infantry. Second, units have displayed a lack of reconnaissance integration into operations beyond the initial phase of a rotation. Third, scouts tended to exhibit an over-reliance on their vehicles and the extra firepower, mobility and comforts vehicles provide. West effectively argues that excessive dependence on vehicles represents a straying of the reconnaissance community from traditional, core competencies. He vividly describes how "reconnaissance is an art form we have lost over the last decade."²

Fortunately, West also offers potential solutions. The most important element of the way ahead revolves around how scouts see themselves – reconnaissance units must first shrug off any notion that they 'can do the job just as well as infantry.' Scouts must focus exclusively on locating the enemy and providing timely and accurate



reporting, not on direct engagement. A change in the internal mindset of scouts, West argues, will drive a shift in training focus to the 'basics' of reconnaissance, including fieldcraft, obscurity, observation post operations and breaking contact (as opposed to actively engaging the enemy). A transition of internal mindset and training focus will affect, in turn, a shift in the nature of how commanders commit reconnaissance forces. If scouts view themselves as the premier ISR platform of the BCT, commanders will begin to view them in the same light and employ them accordingly.

SFC West's article describes a mismanagement of reconnaissance assets throughout the Army. More critically, he points to an internal crisis of identity amongst scouts. Ideas of identity and purpose drive unit force structure, training, equipment, mission priorities and doctrinal techniques and procedures. The second part of this analysis will highlight two particular views on reconnaissance forces in the future.

The Lights and Heavies: Adapting Cavalry Branch to Demands of Force 2025 and Beyond³

1st Lt. McGoffin's essay approaches the trend of ineffective reconnaissance from an organizational angle, offering a reconsideration of cavalry squadron force structure and employment, given the changes in the nature of warfare over the past two decades and the transformational effort toward Army 2025. He points to a shift in the mission of cavalry formations. Where squadrons previously focused on "destroying traditional enemy reconnaissance," troopers must now provide "effective reconnaissance, surveillance, and targeting." McGoffin proposes a stark division between 'light' and 'heavy' cavalry to meet new operational demands. McGoffin asserts that the cavalry force must adapt or face anachronistic ineffectiveness.

McGoffin describes light cavalry as a conventional complement to special forces. Equipped with off-road vehicles and advanced sensors, and capable of operating in decentralized, dispersed teams, light cavalry would offer infantry and Stryker BCTs with reconnaissance, surveillance and targeting. When employed, McGoffin's light cavalry serves as a force provider, much like current brigade support battalions farm out forward support companies to maneuver and fires battalions. Platoons of scouts (even squads and teams) detached to maneuver formations would augment infantry units with their special skill sets. Just as linguists, fire support teams, JTACs, HUMINT and other specialized enablers bring maneuver units unique capabilities, so too would McGoffin's decentralized scouts.

While the light cavalry would be best employed as a decentralized enabler, the heavy cavalry would serve as the primary "fighting cavalry." McGoffin explains away the Stryker as incapable of meeting the Army's combined-arms maneuver requirement for cavalry forces. More than just accomplishing the reconnaissance missions of the brigade combat team, the heavy cavalry possessing tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles would "clear" the ground of armored threats, setting conditions for lighter forces to assume wide-area security missions. This mission set runs contrary to the projections of future warfare McGoffin references. It is difficult to justify a conventional hammer force of heavy cavalry while asserting that the future of warfare is asymmetric conflict based in urban areas against hybrid opponents. The heavy cavalry proposal seems to embrace the methods of Desert Storm, a success which McGoffin claims the world has learned to avoid.

Where West pointed to the philosophical and ideological factors affecting the effective use of all reconnaissance assets, McGoffin recommends force structure reforms that put substance onto the ideological skeleton of distinctly light and heavy cavalry formations.

Manned-Unmanned Teaming in a Heavy Attack Reconnaissance Squadron⁴

Lt. Col. Gilbertson and Maj. Spry apply the 'fighting cavalry' theory to the aviation sphere. "1-4 ARS was one of the most lethal aviation task forces observed during a rotation."⁵ The authors elaborate on the manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) that made their formation successful.



Of note, the authors recommend task organizing RQ-7B Shadow platoons to each AH-64 Troop to facilitate habitual working and planning relationships. Additionally, the authors describe the use of the UAS platforms to conduct area reconnaissance, while preserving the AH-64 combat power for when enemy contact was gained. Finally, the Shadows were employed to simultaneously coordinate engagements with the Apaches and other assets in the BCT. Based on this portrayal, there is a brilliant future for MUM-T operations in Army Aviation.

But the catch for me as an Air Cavalryman (now orphaned with the discarding of the OH-58D) centers on the focus of the article: effective engagement of the enemy. Gilbertson and Spry, focusing on engaging and destroying the enemy, relegate the UAS platforms to the 'hunter' role while the AH-64s maintain their role as the 'killer.' In essence, the Shadow performs reconnaissance while the Apache executes attack operations. While respecting the acknowledged purpose and scope of the article, I still have trouble ignoring the absence of any mention of integrated air-ground reconnaissance and security operations.

How did 1-4 ARS (Armed Reconnaissance Squadron) integrate with the ground force to detect, identify, locate and report enemy movements on the screen line? The authors deliberately recommend against integrating the ARS's assets into the overall Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) plan for fear that those assets will be unavailable to support the BCT's maneuver efforts. But isn't that exactly what an ISR plan is supposed to do?

Ground Cavalrymen certainly (according to SFC West and 1st Lt. Mcgoffin above, as well as doctrine in general) view themselves as part of the ISR concept. Should the Air Cavalry not also integrate into that effort? Perhaps this brings to light the possibility that War on Terror has lulled the Army into a perception that intelligence collection drives fires and effects targeting (e.g. kinetic strikes) rather than maneuver. Yet, even stating a desire to enable maneuver (rather than fires), Gilbertson and Spry focus on engaging the enemy directly rather than facilitating maneuver units to close with and destroy hostile formations.

Again, the article's purpose was not to describe the aviation task force's air-ground operations TTPs. But it certainly seems that the 1-4 ARS leaders focused more on the autonomous engagement mindset of an attack battalion, than the combined-arms reconnaissance, information gathering mindset of a cavalry squadron. Fighting? Certainly. But fighting cavalry? Perhaps not.

The Takeaways

These articles highlight several key insights:

There is a current, lively discussion deliberating the way ahead for Army reconnaissance in future warfare.

The variety of the discussion indicates a relative disunity of understanding of what role cavalry forces play, and will play in conflicts to come. In contrast, the infantry, aviation, or field artillery branches do not currently possess the same level of uncertainty of purpose or identity. 'Shared understanding' is a central element of the Mission Command philosophy. Can the Army expect its reconnaissance forces to operate effectively without such a shared understanding of the cavalry mission and spectrum of capabilities? A lack of operational identity can lead to inconsistency and ineptitude.

The transition of air cavalry units from lightly-armed OH-58Ds to heavily-armed AH-64s teamed with UAS platforms could lead to a shift in the way aviation troopers view themselves and the methods in which air cavalry units integrate into the reconnaissance/security fight.

There is no outspoken voice calling for serious reconsideration of organic, combined-arms, air-ground cavalry organizations (e.g. divisional cavalry, Armored Cavalry Regiments). The arguments at hand are all either from the strictly ground reconnaissance or air cavalry perspective. This runs counter to the traditional combined-arms nature of Army cavalry and reconnaissance organizations.



Nevertheless, for the Profession of Arms, optimism remains in that the cavalry community is buzzing with a call for a renaissance of reconnaissance. Hopefully, this buzz can generate concrete progress.

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NOTES

1. Kyle West, "Troubling Trends in Reconnaissance," *Armor* 126, no. 3 (2015): 43-46.
2. *Ibid.*, 45.
3. Matthew J. McGoffin, "The Lights and the Heavies: Adapting Cavalry Branch to the Demands of Fore 2025 and Beyond," *Military Review* 95.6 (2015), 45-53.
4. Stephen M. Gilbertson and Tanner J. Spry, "Manned-Unmanned Teaming in a Heavy-Attack Reconnaissance Squadron," *Aviation Digest* (April-June 2015), 16-18.
5. *Ibid.*, 16.