

AIR CAVALRY TRANSFORMATION IN THE DOWNWIND

By CPT T. Jordan Terry

Cavalry has historically served as a flexible, multipurpose force. Capitalizing upon a significant mobility advantage over infantry, cavalry performed long-range reconnaissance and security for commanders. – FM 17-95, Cavalry Operations (1996)

In his *Kevlar Legions*, John Sloan Brown outlines the sweeping Army transformations which took place in the operational identity vacuum following the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR.¹ Through the eventual progression toward Force XXI, units of employment and the brigade combat team (BCT) saw the reshaping of many elements of the Army deemed to be relics of the Cold War operational environment. Nuclear-armed elements disappeared, air defense consolidated at the corps and theater levels, and divisional artillery and engineer units transitioned into organic, subordinate enablers within the BCTs. Perhaps, though, the most significant evolution, both practically and emotionally, involved the Army's Cavalry units.

Fiscal realities and a re-visioning of post-Cold War conflict have, with spirited internal debate, seen armored cavalry regiments acquiesce their role to battlefield surveillance brigades before assuming the equipment and structure of standard Stryker BCTs. Divisional cavalry squadrons either shed their ground forces en-route to becoming OH-58D equipped air cavalry subordinate to modular combat aviation brigades or reflagged as BCT-organic reconnaissance, surveillance, targeting and

acquisition squadrons – regardless, 'Div Cav' ceased to exist.

Whether during this most recent Army transformation or during the tumult of progressing from horses to mechanized vehicles, cavalry troopers and leaders have reflected the cavalry's operational role, demonstrating mobility, flexibility, audacity, and the team-based mindset which accompanies habitual combined-arms relationships. Though more tied to the Army's present financial constraints than the post-Cold War force modernization effort, the Army Aviation Restructuring Initiative (ARI) has taken flight and is again sparking spirited conversation and major changes for the cavalry community and the Army Aviation enterprise at large. This evaluation of the air cavalry transformation at a midpoint ('in the downwind') will demonstrate that today's troopers, in spite of their understandable grief and often-vague prospects for the future, are again responding with professional flexibility and an aggressive drive to continue valuable service to the Army.

A Movement to Contact toward Utility

The announcement and initial implementation of ARI presented unique challenges to both units and individuals. Warrant officers, junior and senior, scrambled to discern their potential for future service in the aviation community: Who would get a transition? To which airframe? Would Soldiers be forced to retire or face early separation? What other opportunities existed if a transition wasn't on the table? Likewise, Kiowa

Warrior maintainers and armament specialists had to grapple with the idea of re-classing, which would require the considerable challenges of re-attaining technical expertise. And commissioned officers began to forecast potential changes regarding key developmental positions, broadening opportunities, and flying in general. Air cavalry leaders faced (and still face) a significant challenge in preventing this natural anxiety from affecting ongoing training and mission accomplishment.

Yet on the heels of the initial shock, the OH-58D community began (and continues) a movement to contact of utility into the uncertain environment of ARI. Admittedly, some viewed this as 'jumping off a sinking ship.' The truth, however, is that many scouts made an aggressive, deliberate move to continue to find ways to contribute to Army Aviation. Many senior, tracked warrant officers took on the challenge of transitioning to the unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) field to cross-level their reconnaissance, security, and air-ground operations expertise with the existing UAS operator skill sets focused on collection and surveillance. Aviators, commissioned and warrant, also took the opportunity to assess and attain positions within Army Special Operations Aviation. Company-grade commissioned officers without an immediate aircraft transition focused their efforts on opportunities to command and contribute in aviation maintenance, forward support, headquarters, UAS, air traffic services, or recruiting and training companies. Kiowa Warrior non-commissioned officer maintainers, not



immediately identified for re-training, competed to serve in recruiting, drill instructor, and other important by-name-selected positions.

Some air cavalrymen, rather than condemning ARI for orphaning them from their beloved aircraft, instead turned to serve as the bedrock of two key ARI efforts. On short notice, and with little preparation, a small cadre of troopers displayed traditional cavalry flexibility in taking on Fort Rucker's transitional effort from the TH-67 and OH-58 aircraft to the LUH-72 for primary, instrument, and basic warfighter skills flight training. The cell of former Kiowa Warrior instructors rapidly qualified in the Lakota, progressed to instructor and standardization pilot status, and began to serve as the train-the-trainer foundation of the flight training aspect of ARI. Likewise, field grade officers and tracked warrant officers rapidly integrated into the effort to provide a critical core of reconnaissance experience and cavalry tradition to the Army's new heavy attack reconnaissance squadrons employing AH-64 Apaches and RQ-7 Shadows.

The air cavalry community's aggressive demonstration of institutional flexibility and mobility will take time and effort to fully synchronize with the highly-technical nature of modern aircraft, maintenance, and operational support. Nevertheless, the cavalry spirit remains and troopers moving to contribute to the Army Aviation team effort will continue to draw motivation from the question that has motivated air scouts for generations: How can I provide the ground forces with the support they require and deserve? The Kiowa Warrior community does not yet fully know what future utility and support to the ground force looks like outside an OH-58D cockpit – that uncertainty, however, only heightens troopers' drive to move forward to gain and maintain contact.

Challenges Moving Forward

The ARI has taken flight – the critical decisions have been made and major shifts

in personnel and resources are underway. There are, however, several extant challenges specifically confronting the air cavalry community.

The last Kiowa squadron has not yet cased its colors. For reasons of safety, mission demands, and pride, there is no room for complacency. That the maintenance infrastructure for the OH-58D has dwindled and the training pipelines for aviators and maintainers have ceased operations calls for more deliberate management of personnel and materiel. The Aviation community must remember that for a few remaining OH-58D troopers, for a few remaining months, the fight continues on.

Second, there is an enduring demand for personnel management, specifically with commissioned officers. The warrant officers of the air cavalry community have generally enjoyed a clearly-defined, centrally-managed way ahead, including the board evaluating potential for continued service. Whether the ARI pushes an individual toward positive changes or negative, at least the Aviation Branch managers at Human Resources Command (HRC) have provided some element of predictability and expectation management. This does not ring true for the commissioned air cavalry officers. If there is a centralized plan, it has not been well-communicated. Officers are left to speculate on a varying (and seemingly inconsistent) exchange between HRC, the United States Army Aviation Center of Excellence, specific units, and individuals. Advertising that aircraft transitions will be doled out inconsistently on a case-by-case basis provides no useful reassurance to officers who have flown, fought, and led dutifully and courageously. The insufficient communication of prospects for continued service in the Aviation Branch forces capable officers to operate in professional uncertainty and doubt.

Finally, questions remain about the air cavalry community moving forward as a whole. Reflagging attack units, giving out

Stetsons and spurs, and learning Fiddler's Green are only the symbolic elements of the cavalry transition. The true substance of the transition involves the cavalryman's mindset. Of critical importance is the passing-on of the service-provided attitude, the mentality which provided decades of faithful support to the ground force. Also, the aviation community must delineate roles, responsibilities, and mission expertise between Apache-equipped attack battalions and cavalry squadrons. Significant intellectual effort must be put forth to incorporate the Apache's strengths and capabilities into the combined-arms reconnaissance and security mission sets. Thus, substantial mental agility and introspection must inevitably follow the assumption of the cavalry mantle.

Conclusion

The current situation is not unlike the Kiowa Warrior itself. The professional hurdles imposed by the ARI mirror the humbling limitations present in the aged airframe – air cavalry troopers must acknowledge and creatively overcome these drawbacks. Kiowa Warrior pilots and maintainers thrived for decades by focusing on what they could do, rather than what they could not do. The air cavalry transformation will shortly turn to final. The aviation enterprise should reciprocate the air cavalry community's honorable service by providing predictable opportunities for continued service. Former OH-58D troopers should continue to find creative ways to apply their experiences and knowledge. Every effort should be made to ensure that new heavy air cavalry units are adopting the selfless mentality that earned the Kiowa Warrior the affections of the ground forces. Air cavalry operations are not limited to an airframe and will always depend on men and women possessing the audacity, flexibility, and combined-arms expertise to provide the armed reconnaissance and security the Army needs and deserves.

Scouts Out!



¹ John Sloan Brown, *Kevlar Legions* (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2013).

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Acronym Reference

ARI - Aviation Restructuring Initiative

BCT - brigade combat team

