



Paratroopers from 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, move out on patrol into the Ghorak Valley of Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan, 6 March 2007.

(Photo by Spc. Matthew T. Little, U.S. Army)

Bringing Mobility to the Infantry Brigade Combat Team

Capt. Nathan Jennings, U.S. Army

The U.S. Army has a critical, yet largely unaddressed, capability gap. America's primary land force has reduced operations in Southwest Asia and the Middle East after more than a decade of diverse combat operations that ranged from a massed combined arms invasion into Mesopotamia to decentralized mountain patrols in the Hindu Kush. During this time, the infantry brigade combat team (IBCT), the lightest of the Army's maneuver brigades, has been revealed to be an organization of severely limited tactical and operational utility.¹ This deficiency stems

mainly from a dearth of organic vehicular transport within the light fighting formations. It results in rifle battalions and companies that are ill prepared for the diverse challenges of warfare in the twenty-first century.

The mobility deficit limits the combat potential of the Army's 14 infantry brigades (approximately 62,000 soldiers) expected to remain after overall brigade combat team reorganization. The deficit will stem from an equipment allocation that will provide a minimal quantity of unarmored high mobility multipurpose wheeled

vehicles (HMMWVs) and light medium tactical vehicles to move rifle companies to a given tactical line of departure for dismounted operations.²

As evidenced by the recurring need to equip every IBCT that was fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan with varying sizes of theater-provided, up-armored vehicle fleets, IBCT formations remain ill prepared for operations requiring rapid and secure mobility. This deficiency will be a liability to readiness in an era when urban combat environments are becoming increasingly common, requiring teams to have some degree of protected transport. While hasty augmentation may have been acceptable with the expansive force structure of recent decades, a smaller Army with fewer maneuver brigades will need each of its brigade combat teams to maintain the option of independent ground dominance that only multifunctional mobility can provide.³

The answer to this dilemma is relatively simple: the fighting formations of the IBCT must be organically

equipped with armored and digitally networked wheeled platforms that can rapidly transport infantrymen to a tactical point of departure. While the residual fleet of mine-resistant ambush-protected trucks could serve as an intermediate and cost-effective solution (and the M1126 Stryker infantry carrier would be a viable candidate), the Army needs to develop a more effective troop carrier that offers troop protection, less weight, increased mobility, and more passenger space. Equipped with such vehicles, the resulting motorized IBCT would benefit from marked tactical enhancement to internal capabilities while allowing graduated ranges of operational utility.

Enhancing Tactical Mobility

The first benefit of organically equipping the light IBCTs with increased numbers of armored transportation assets would be immediate enhancement of rifle battalion protection and maneuverability. Of the 132



U.S. Army Stryker combat vehicles make their way across a flooded street as they patrol in Mosul, Iraq, 14 February 2006. The Strykers were attached to the 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, 172nd Infantry Brigade.

(U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. John Foster)

maneuver battalions and squadrons—that under current plans will constitute the Army’s force by 2017—42 will be nonmechanized and non-Stryker infantry that will rely on support companies to provide an anemic allocation of soft platforms to facilitate likely tasks such as attack, defend, and secure.

Instead of using the steel or composite armored hulls typically used for modern combat, the U.S. light infantryman now, according to doctrine, rides to battle in the bed of a cargo truck covered with canvas.⁴ In the contemporary security environment, where improvised weaponry has increasingly reached unprecedented lethality across nonlinear zones devoid of front lines, American forces must be better equipped than that.

The technological advances made by the Army—compelled by practical experience over more than 13 years of nearly continuous combat—have shown that integration of protected and digitally interfaced wheeled platforms is a critical capabilities multiplier in most operational settings. Beginning with the functions of network-centric command, a generation of infantry leaders has become accustomed to leveraging logistically intensive technology in vehicles and forward-deployed command-and-control elements to digitally enhance situational awareness. While soldiers have operated and will continue to operate without robust electronic support, it is difficult to imagine maneuver leadership exercising sustained battlefield control in twenty-first century operations without some degree of such enhancement.

This vehicular augmentation would have greatest tactical impact at lower echelons where dismounted platoons are currently constrained by their soldiers’ “rucksack” load-bearing capacity. As demonstrated during stability operations in recent conflicts, enablers such as the Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2) digital mapping and messaging systems, in addition to amplification of FM (frequency

modulation) radios by engine generators, allow action elements to remain better interfaced with higher echelons at distance.⁵ The habitual integration of tactical vehicles—and their communication systems—within rifle platoons, as opposed to reliance on external units for transport, would afford more responsive coordination between headquarters and maneuvering soldiers.

In addition to improvement of command and control functions, the employment of the proposed vehicles would allow infantry leadership to retain an expanded package of enabling equipment in close proximity for dismounted support. Again recognizing the requirement to execute a diverse set of complex tasks in modern combat, rifle companies must habitually posture to operate

with a variety of assets at their immediate disposal. The systems, which could all be held in the mounted sections until needed, could include electronic countermeasures, remote-controlled weapons platforms, unmanned aerial systems, satellite communication devices, explosive ordnance disposal assets, mines, and, heavier breaching equipment. Organic vehicles likewise allow greater ability to bring human enablers—such as interpreters, civil affairs personnel, civilian

advisors, and members of the media—to decisive points while also serving as ready transport for detainees and prisoners.

Combat support is another area of tactical operations where internal mobility would improve light infantry formations. Just as armored and digitally networked assets can efficiently and rapidly deliver rifle platoons to a point of debarkation, they would, conversely, enable more extensive medical support on-site and provide immediate ground casualty evacuation. In addition to saving lives, armored transportation vehicles would also allow action elements to carry forward greater quantities of nearly every class of supply. Resupply of such vital commodities as ammunition,

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food, water, obstacle material, medical packages, weapons, replacement radios, and life-support equipment would become less frequent. Forward-deployed echelons would have greater flexibility to conduct operations in any contingency.

Apart from the justifications offered above, the major advantage of integrating a reasonable number of the proposed vehicles into rifle battalions moves beyond enabling and logistical aspects of operations and directly into combat application. Serving as a kind of mobile firebase, these platforms and their ability to offer protected machine-gun and antitank fires transform the traditional infantry platoon into a far more impactful fighting unit. While infantry always will retain its primary purpose of delivering assault teams to defeat an enemy at close quarters, the organic option of fixing or attacking with mounted elements would be a significant combat multiplier. Similarly, with increased ability to transport mortar systems to direct support of tactical operations, rifle companies could upgrade from their current 60 mm mortars to 120 mm, the caliber currently enjoyed by their reconnaissance counterparts. Barring that, at a minimum, rifle companies would be far more lethal due to their enhanced ability to emplace organic, indirect, crew-served weapons of any caliber without the time and human limitations resulting from having to transport mortar tubes and rounds on the backs of soldiers.

Due to improved situational awareness, sustainment, and lethality, the motorized rifle battalion would become far more versatile when trained and given the option of integrating motorized transport. In addition, each light company could structure mobile quick-response forces by task-organizing mounted sections. As a result, companies would operate with far more self-reliance—though with added logistical constraints—and would be equipped to carry the panoply of equipment now needed to meet complex challenges.

Moreover, vehicle distribution throughout the light formations would negate the need for the heavy weapons company now in the IBCCT structure, which is the only mobile combat element in rifle battalions. However, the company is incapable of efficient troop transport with HMMWVs. Instead, each motorized rifle company would have similar firepower



and mobility, combined with traditional infantry strengths.⁶ Similar to the proven utility of Stryker formations, the revamped IBCCT would offer the best of both worlds: maximally equipped shock troops that get to the battlefield much more efficiently and quickly, but still retain the indispensable qualities that only assaulting infantry provide.

Increased Land Power Dominance

The second major effect of empowering IBCCTs with integrated and protected ground mobility lies in the operational dimension at higher echelons. Since light infantry, both ground and aerial, will comprise 42 percent of the Army's maneuver brigades, they are a potential strategic liability when the United States is pressed to deploy heavier, large-scale combat power to achieve sustained land dominance. While campaigns



An amber luminous glow caused by the filtered light of a sand storm is accented by the search lights of mine resistant ambush protected vehicles from the 573rd Clearance Company, 1st Engineer Battalion, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division. The vehicles were staging before departing on a convoy route-clearing mission near Tikrit, Iraq, 22 February 2010.

(Photo by Chief Petty Officer Michael Heckman, Joint Combat Camera Center Iraq.)

have arisen and will arise that require minimal vehicle support—such as jungle fighting, mountain operations, and airborne insertion—many future joint endeavors will require robust vehicle augmentation for ground brigades to be effective independently. These will range from offense and defense to stability operations. To support various contingencies, motorizing infantry formations would allow greater flexibility in a force package.

In contrast, the IBCTs now are vulnerable because they lack organic mobility. The Army will keep having

to hastily augment the rifle battalions with hundreds of armored trucks in order to project ground effects rapidly over any appreciable distance.

Foremost among the high-intensity scenarios anticipated is one where U.S. ground forces will deploy to deter, degrade, or remove hostile regimes. While some wars will require less vehicle density—as was the case in Grenada, Panama, and Afghanistan—others will require more vehicle-centric maneuver, as in Iraq. Similar to the combined arms offensives against Iraq forces in 1991 and 2003, IBCTs may be called on to follow and support the more lethal and survivable mechanized brigades that would spearhead any penetration. Based on their current equipment, light brigades are inadequate to fulfill this critical role, which would require sustained movement behind a rapid armored advance while fighting through residual resistance and securing key terrain.⁷

The most recent American large-scale offensive, the 2003 march to Baghdad, offers perhaps the most compelling example of the IBCTs' limitations. When a mechanized division with armored vehicles penetrated Iraq from the south, elements from two light infantry divisions followed in hastily assembled fleets of unprotected trucks. While the thin-skinned HMMWVs allowed an extremely inefficient crew-to-dismount ratio for transport, the light medium tactical vehicles with greater passenger capacity remained highly vulnerable to even the lightest of enemy attacks.⁸ In operational areas where enemy forces of both developed and undeveloped societies will unleash the proven lethality of improvised explosive devices and other asymmetric attacks, this manner of rifle squad transport, which remains virtually unchanged in the IBCT inventory today, is unacceptable.

Given the glaring platform deficiencies of unarmored vehicles and the overarching need for light infantry formations to participate effectively as part of combined arms and joint teams, the IBCTs should be readied for support of rapid, high-intensity operations with a modernized vehicle fleet. Decisive action requires decisive movement; and, while elements of the infantry will occasionally be selected for light operations, the majority will likely require multifunctional ground transport to move against determined adversaries. Whether supporting mechanized forces or conducting independent offensive or defensive

maneuvers, all U.S. conventional combat brigades should be equipped with organic armored transport to achieve victory.

Stability operations present another potential scenario where IBCTs may need motorized integration to achieve operational success. With global population trends moving toward greater urbanization and the proliferation of megacities, the Army will again find itself engaged among dense populations in urban environments.⁹

It should be apparent that light infantry brigades will need wheeled, networked, and protected transportation to operate effectively in urban environments. The current unarmored platforms could, conceivably, provide adequate, but highly vulnerable, mobility in an extremely low-threat environment. However, the increasingly sophisticated use of weapons in counterinsurgency campaigns necessitates vehicle improvements that would afford markedly increased survivability and maneuverability.¹⁰

The recent operational experience in Iraq, and to a lesser—but also relevant—extent in Afghanistan, validated the need to complement light infantry with protected mobility within the fighting formations of the IBCTs. For maneuver brigades to wield maximum influence over their area of operations, commanders needed the tactical versatility to project both mounted and dismounted elements over long distances to produce synergistic effects. In contrast, the current vehicular support structure employed by the light brigades limits their potential to dominate the full range of military operations. Given the design intent for IBCTs to serve as modular, independent, and conditionally self-reliant formations, they should be equipped and trained for a wider range of functions.

As light infantry units are configured, every rifle battalion needs significant theater-equipment augmentation to perform even a portion of the stability tasks previously mastered in places like Mosul, Ramadi, and Baghdad. Even in Afghanistan,

where extremely restrictive terrain often demanded steady-state foot patrols, vehicles were used extensively to buttress defensive positions and enable rapid response. For example, the famed rescue in Ganjgal Valley on 8 September 2009, where two soldiers each earned the Medal of Honor for conducting mounted casualty evacuation, centered on the use of vehicles

to add critically needed mobility to a protracted fight.¹¹

The structural and conceptual transition of IBCTs from light to motorized, from traditional infantry to mobile assault troops, would find many opponents. Traditionalists would argue against dilution of the infantry fighting spirit; however, integrated transport would enhance rather than dilute the lethality of the riflemen. Others would argue against increased attention demanded by wheeled maintenance,

but the cost would be far less than in mechanized battalions and would be worth the investment. Still others may assert that the IBCT formations are designed to deploy rapidly and operate on restrictive terrain that precludes vehicle use. This assertion is false. Instead of structuring for narrow utility, the IBCTs should be trained and equipped for a broader range of expeditionary postures, ready for offensive, defensive, and stability operations across diverse operational areas.

Questioning Legacy Capabilities

The debate over the future of the IBCT should address the expense versus the viability of the airborne brigade on the contemporary battlefield. With five infantry brigades planned to be airborne, and another three as helicopter assault, the Army should reassess the feasibility of maintaining 24 percent of its maneuver force as aerial soldiers in the face of increasingly lethal anti-access technology that makes large-scale airborne insertion largely obsolete.

With threats such as third-generation infrared surface-to-air missiles proliferating, and an Air Force transport community increasingly hesitant to deliver

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insertion at low altitude over contested landscapes, perhaps the Army's airborne signature should be reduced. The savings could be applied to increasing overall IBCT mobility. As additional modifications, practical helicopter capacity could be increased, and the 75th Ranger Regiment could be expanded to adopt surgical airfield seizure operations exclusively. This would enable brigades to focus on training for more predictable and likely ground service.¹²

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the IBCT is a critical formation that needs increased armored vehicular mobility to thrive in twenty-first century warfare. Without increased organic and protected transport, IBCTs are rendered in many ways anachronistic in the face of technologies employed by enemies America will encounter on future battlefields. Options could include establishing ground mobility as the

default posture of all light brigades; motorizing all non-airborne formations; seeking balance between proportions of airmobile, light, and mounted infantry formations within each division or corps; or, at a minimum, allocating armored transport to light support battalions.

As a critical component of the Army's combat maneuver structure, infantrymen deserve and need both protected and networked transport to achieve the fullest measure of battlefield dominance. At the tactical level, this integration would make rifle formations more effective and lethal in diverse combat environments. In the operational sphere, adding motorized density to light infantry would increase the Army's potential for land dominance. For a downsizing Army that must do more with less, the decision is clear: prioritize increasing mobility and transport protection for the IBCT to empower the soldiers who need it most. ■

Capt. Nathan Jennings, U.S. Army, is a history instructor at the United States Military Academy. He has served as a cavalry scout, motorized platoon leader, cavalry troop commander, and headquarters and headquarters troop commander. He holds an M.A. in American history from the University of Texas at Austin and is a graduate of the Infantry Captains Career Course and the Cavalry Leader's Course.

Notes

1. FM 3-90.6, *Brigade Combat Team* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], September 2010); provides the doctrinal composition and capabilities of an IBCT.

2. FM 3-21.20, *The Infantry Battalion* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, December 2006); provides the doctrinal composition and capabilities of an infantry rifle battalion. The IBCT summary is based of the Army force structure before the brigade combat team realignment and reduction planned to begin in 2014.

3. Andrew Feickert, "Army Drawdown and Restructuring: Background and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service Report*, 28 February 2014. The Army plans to draw down from 450,000 soldiers to 380,000.

4. FM 3-90.6: 1-11 – 1-12.

5. FM 3-21.21, *The Stryker Brigade Combat Team Infantry Battalion* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, April 2003); provides a description of how digital networks such as FBCB2 enhance motorized infantry operations.

6. FM 3-21.12, *The Infantry Weapons Company* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, July 2008); provides a description of the mounted lethality this article advocates for integration into infantry rifle

companies.

7. FM 3-90.6: 1-11 – 1-12.

8. Gregory Fontenot, E.J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/cgsc/car/download/csipubs/OnPointI.pdf>; provides an example of the potential role of IBCTs in future Army operations.

9. CSA Strategic Studies Group, "A Proposed Framework for Appreciating Megacities: A U.S. Army Perspective," *Small Wars Journal*, 21 April 2014.

10. FM 3-21.21; provides a description of how digital networks such as FBCB2 enhance motorized infantry capabilities to conduct stability operations.

11. *Battlescape* at <http://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/swenson/battlescape.html>; Provides description of battle that resulted in award of Medal of Honor to Capt. William D. Swenson, Operation Enduring Freedom.

12. FM 3-75, *Ranger Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, May 2012).