A U.S. Army Sniper School instructor aims a sniper rifle at Fort Benning, GA, on 27 February 2019.
Photo by EJ Hersom

Closing the Gap:

USASC Refines POI to Better Prepare Snipers for Modern Fight

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Sniper. Throughout history the title has unnerved fighting men the world over. Soldiers learn to react to the threat, commanders plan in order to avoid them, and Infantrymen want to gain the requisite skill to be one. The U.S. Army has learned and relearned to select, train, and employ Snipers throughout history. Until the establishment of the U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC) in 1987 by MAJ Willis Powell, snipers were always an afterthought. The utility that the sniper brings to a combatant commander was continually lost and rediscovered in every major U.S. conflict up to 1987. Once the USASC was established as an institution, it has become a source of continuing innovation, providing the Army the sniper it needs to meet the emerging threat of the day, from Cold War "Fulda Gap" scenarios, to Middle East interventions in the 1990s, to the counterinsurgency and stability operations of the 2000s. The modern sniper is a flexible intelligence collection and precision strike element, able to infiltrate forward of friendly lines and behind the enemies' looking for command, control, communications, computing, and intelligence (C4I). The sniper is poised to enter the next fight and continues to perform in the current one when trained and properly employed.

The USASC continues to refine the program of instruction (POI) to prepare snipers for the modern fight. Without leaving behind the tenets of our fieldcraft, we are focusing more on relevance and interoperability. Snipers are often an afterthought in planning, preparation, execution, and assessment of operations. As the U.S. Army transitions its focus to large-scale combat operations (LSCO), sniper and reconnaissance elements are going to be needed more than ever.

As the LSCO concept takes shape, the instructor-writers at the USASC are training the Army sniper to influence the next battle. The modern sniper is capable of fighting and surviving in a contested electromagnetic environment and employ multiple systems against an enemy working combined with infantry and cavalry reconnaissance. After training on identification and interdiction of electronic warfare (EW) systems, the teams can be used to disrupt any future adversaries' ability to use electromagnetic fires on coalition forces. This example is the beginning of a whole new host of threats that the traditional sniper team and heavy sniper team may be employed against.

Given their inherent low-tech nature, the sniper is an extremely effective counter to enemy electromagnetic capabilities. Snipers can be employed in the contested electromagnetic environment where GPS-guided unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) fail to hunt for and neutralize adversary EW systems, and snipers can also minimize their own electromagnetic signature to avoid detection. Adhering to predetermined transmission windows, sniper teams can be employed prior to the departure of main body elements to find and destroy enemy EW elements with direct precision anti-materiel fires or indirect fires and then conduct a reconnaissance handover to the maneuver element, providing them accurate, timely, and reliable information on the objective.

If not being used as a direct strike asset against EW sites, the sniper team is inherently low-tech and if provided with the right equipment and clear mission objectives prior to crossing the line of departure (LD) will be able to conduct reliable reconnaissance and reporting while being agile enough to avoid detection. Snipers can conduct infiltration prior to the assault of dense urban terrain by Army brigades. Snipers can move in 48-72 hours prior to the brigade's movement and begin disrupting enemy formations within the cities and identifying obstacles and bypasses. Working with the infantry and cavalry reconnaissance platoons, they can reduce the enemy's picture of the battlefield by eliminating listening posts/ observation posts (LP/OPs), dog teams, roving patrols, communications or retrans sites and teams, mortar firing points, and machine-gun teams; pinpointing

A sniper team moves into position during an exercise as part of the U.S. Army Sniper Course at Fort Benning.
Photo by SSG Christopher Rance

enemy armor; and controlling close air support and artillery. Historically, a small number of snipers in dense urban terrain have shown the ability to fix and attrit both mounted and dismounted formations, most recently during the Ukraine-Russia conflict in Crimea. The level of detail provided by a well-trained sniper team in a reconnaissance role is extraordinary — from detailed written descriptions, panoramic sector sketches, traditional sector sketches, or photo reconnaissance. The sniper team can integrate into any level of reconnaissance organization in order to enhance that element's capabilities whether it is utilizing optics and training in target detection, range estimation, and counter sniper operations to provide the best advice to the commander or provide precision overwatch and security to the element conducting the reconnaissance.

A common misconception is that the dismounted sniper team is ineffective against modern armor threats, or that a sniper is easily found and defeated by thermal optics-equipped armor. While it is true that current sniper weapons systems cannot penetrate certain armor, the current Army sniper has the ability to fix or neutralize enemy armor formations. Known sniper threats in an area of operations force the enemy to button up in armor and rely on their vehicle optics for situational awareness. Those vehicle optics themselves are vulnerable to sniper weapons system fire, particularly at the closer ranges found in dense urban terrain. Without the aid of their electronic sights, most main battle tank (MBT) main guns do not have the ballistic fire computers needed for long-range, accurate engagements, nor are the crews as well trained with the auxiliary sight. The MBT commander's optics and weapons station are similarly vulnerable. Even next

Photo by Patrick A. Albright

A sniper team from the 3rd Infantry Division competes during the 2018 International Sniper Competition.

generation machine learning target detection algorithms for armored weapons systems may be less effective on snipers.

Snipers will continue to develop training to deal with current and future threats. Current operational snipers are being utilized in one- and two-man teams embedded at the company level or with special operations forces (SOF) elements. Night operations see the snipers moving quickly through the operating environment. Snipers are moving with assault elements and positioning in overwatch positions to cover movements. Average engagement distances are relatively close from seated or kneeling positions utilizing tripods. The majority of these missions are occurring at night. The need for clip-on thermal sights or upgrading the PVS-30 has been highlighted. Snipers' ability to attain stability quickly, apply the shot process, and spot their own rounds during engagements is important. These snipers are operating as shooter/shooter teams. Due to the individual or team covering terrain so quickly, they do not take spotting scopes or extra equipment in order to set up and break down quickly.

Training should focus on:

a. Rapid target engagement in limited visibility without a spotter

b. Complex engagements (limited target presentations)

c. Alternate shooting positions (fight up and fight down)

d. Working snipers in as a control mechanism for movement

e. Communication and reporting to maneuver elements

Daytime sniper employment trends are more conventional.

Snipers are constructing final firing positions in an urban environment. The teams are still working in a shooter/shooter methodology with one sniper carrying the M2010 and the other carrying the M110 to allow for simultaneous shots or longer engagements. Depending on amount of time spent in sites, the teams work rest cycles with one on glass and the other resting until targets of opportunity or key targets are present. The average engagements during the day are between 300 and 1,350 meters. High-angle shots are playing a large role in engagements. Snipers are taking shots from low ground to goat paths on mountain ridges requiring high-angle adjustments.

Training should focus on:

a. Quick high angle formula

b. Wind formulas and calling wind for yourself without a spotter

c. Fight up and fight down with and without a tripod

d. Manipulation of equipment and attachments

The USASC continues to train the best snipers in the world. We are working to earn commanders' respect and trust in the employment of snipers. Snipers are a true force multiplier and when utilized in conjunction with reconnaissance elements provide them with the best information for swift and decisive action.

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