



USASC Celebrates 35th Anniversary

A Short History of Army Snipers and the U.S. Army Sniper Course

DAVID SCOTT STIEGHAN

The U.S. Army Infantry School's Sniper Course commemorates 35 years of operation this year. Gathering divisional courses from other posts, a permanent sniper qualification course resumed at Fort Benning, GA, in 1987 for the first time since the Vietnam War. During the 2022 International Sniper Competition in April at Fort Benning, hundreds of current and former snipers from the U.S. Army, other American military and law enforcement agencies, and invited foreign competitors attended the dedication of Camp Powell at Harmony Church. Considered the founder of the modern Army sniping program, MAJ Willis Powell founded and led the 9th Infantry Division Sniping School in Vietnam in 1968 and returned to establish a similar course at Fort Benning. The Infantry School inactivated the course at Fort Benning following the Vietnam War, but a few divisions maintained their own courses until the Army consolidated them all at Harmony Church in 1987 as the U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC).

On 14 June 1775, the 2nd Continental Congress authorized the creation of the Corps of Riflemen composed of volunteer companies: six from Pennsylvania, two from Maryland, and two from Virginia. Each state raised more



Leaders from 1st Battalion, 29th Infantry Regiment and members of the Powell family unveil a plaque formally memorializing Camp Powell at Fort Benning, GA, on 2 April 2022. (Photo by Alexander Gago)



A Union soldier of the 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters is pictured with a sniper's target rifle, bowie knife, and Colt '49 pocket revolver. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

riflemen than their original quota and ordered them to march to join the Siege of Boston as rapidly as possible. Candidates for the new regiment brought their own rifles and the bullet mold required to cast their own shot, proved they could hit a target while standing at 100 yards, and convinced their command that they could live and fight in the wilderness. They provided all their own equipment and clothing, including the long linen or deer hide rifle frocks they customarily wore while hunting — or fighting Indians. The shortage of coats among Soldiers of the Continental Army in 1776 and 1777 inspired General George Washington to authorize the issue of the simple cloth hunting shirts worn by the riflemen to all the troops in his army as uniforms. Commanded for much of the war by Daniel Morgan of Virginia, “Morgan’s Riflemen” served as light infantry and sharpshooters on the Allegheny frontier at the battles at Saratoga, Cowpens, and Yorktown. They set the standard as American sharpshooters and performed many missions that inspired the creation of the Ranger units in World War II.

Rifle regiments of regulars and volunteers served during the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and on both sides of the Civil War. In addition to heavy custom long-range target rifles used by both Union and Confederate sharpshooters, custom Sharps breechloaders and Whitworth, Kerr, Gibbs, and other British long-range rifles caused casualties often more than 1,000 yards away. The use of black powder in rifles until the late 1880s prevented the use of the earlier muzzleloaders in stealth mode because of the inability to hide from the white cloud of smoke that appeared after each shot. The adoption of smokeless powder, repeating bolt action rifles, the increased range and accuracy of the new class of weapons, and the introduction of telescopic sights initiated the transformation of marksmen into snipers.

The static warfare of the trenches on the Western Front during World War I created the perfect environment for the genesis of true sniping. Specially selected rifles sporting telescopic sights hidden behind steel plates became the greatest daily killer behind field artillery. While initially dominated by the German Army, the “sniping war” became a deadly competition among all combatants. In 1918, following training at British Army schools in France, Doughboys armed with U.S. Model 1903 rifles fitted with Model 1908/13 Warner & Swazey scopes entered the sniping war until the Armistice in November 1918. As usual after each previous war, the U.S. Army disbanded all sniping teams and training. Rifle teams in the Regular Army and National Guard competed in national and regional matches against civilian National Rifle Association clubs and provided potential snipers in case of war.



U.S. Model 1903 Rifle with Model 1913 Sight and Maxim Silencer



Private Leo R. Hahn, a sniper and champion marksman in the 127th Infantry, is pictured in Alsace, Germany, on 27 June 1918. (Photo by CPL A. Hanson, U.S. Army Signal Corps)

Shortly after entering World War II, the U.S. Army developed a new sniper rifle, the U.S. Rifle Model 1903A4 (Sniper), which was based on the simplified U.S. Rifle Model 1903A3. The Weaver 330C 2.5 magnification hunting telescope, later renamed the M73, became the first scope mounted on these rifles. Late in the war, the M1C sniper version of the service rifle appeared mounting a modified Weaver "Alaskan" telescope as the M81 and M82 of the same magnification. Each infantry company assigned as a combat unit included one of these two rifles in the arms room, but snipers received their assignments from the company commander and usually no specialized training. At least one unit, the 30th Infantry Regiment, initiated a two-week sniper course while out of the line in Italy in 1944. The class instructors came from the rifle companies and taught the students what they had learned as shooters and survivors from combat. There are few records of assigned snipers or training programs from World War II.

As the U.S. Army deployed as part of the United Nations force in Korea in 1950, infantry companies again designated their own snipers. The bolt action sniper rifles and the earlier M1C rifle were retired in favor of the M1D rifle that featured altered telescopes and mounts. After the first year of rapid maneuver warfare, the front line settled into trench and bunker warfare similar to the Western Front during World War I. The static nature of the remainder of this war caused the long-range tactic of sniping to become a major source of casualties until the cease fire in 1953.

Following deployment to Vietnam, commanders in U.S. Army combat units demanded the addition of trained snipers for the longer shots required in the rice paddies, river deltas, and hill country. Observing the success of U.S. Marine Corps sniper teams, MG Julian Ewell, commander of the 9th Infantry Division, requested in 1968 that the Army Marksmanship Unit (AMU) at Fort Benning create a sniper course to train specialists for his division to provide precision fire along the Mekong River Delta. The AMU designated then-CPT Willis Powell, one of the best competition shooters in the country, to design and initiate a course for volunteer snipers in Vietnam. Adopting the best practices of sniper doctrine from combat since World War I, Army Olympic Shooting team coaching, and the U.S. Marine Corps Scout-Sniper Course manual, Powell and his team created a program of instruction (POI) for a course range in Vietnam. Before initiating the first class, Powell accompanied patrols into the Vietnam countryside and proved his skills and the new doctrine with his rifle. The AMU assisted in developing a specialty sniper rifle, the XM21, converted from a National Match version of the M14 mounting a variety of telescopes and the new night-vision scopes.



Then-CPT Willis Powell founded and led the 9th Infantry Division Sniping School in Vietnam in 1968 and returned to establish a similar course at Fort Benning. (Photo courtesy of Powell family)

After graduating the first cycles of sniper trainees in Vietnam, Powell returned to Fort Benning and established a sniper course at the Infantry School. The centralized course disbanded after all troops returned from Southeast Asia, but select divisions founded their own unit courses to prepare designated sniper teams. The Rangers and Special Forces initiated their own sniper training courses and maintain specialty units today. The U.S. Marine Corps developed custom sniper rifles from civilian hunting and target rifles beginning in World War II, and the U.S. Army fielded the M24 bolt action sniper rifle, which was based upon the Remington Model 700 during the 1980s. The useful M21 semiautomatic rifle remained in the hands of the spotter on the two-sniper teams to provide short engagement firepower, but the new M24 provided a weapon capable of consistent shots at more than 1,000 meters. Together with an improved night-vision capability, sniper teams became lethal at longer ranges into the night.

Transferred from the 82nd Division Sniper School at Fort Bragg, CPT Cliff Boltz assumed command of the cadre gathered for the Fort Benning Sniper Course in 1987, followed soon after by CPT Mark Rozycki. SFC William Knox served as the first NCOIC for the course, followed by SFC Lonnie Wright. Together with other experienced NCOs and retired Vietnam snipers, the new company cadre established the requirements by testing and qualifying each other before announcing readiness to start preparing and testing sniper candidates. A few instructors took



A sniper team from 4th Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, engages targets during battalion external evaluations in 1989 at Schofield Barracks, HI. (Photo courtesy of John Foley)

advantage of the opportunity to attend the U.S. Marine Corps Scout-Sniper Course to learn tactical procedures. The new class depended upon lessons learned from more than 200 years of American sharpshooting and sniping, the POI developed by then-CPT Powell, the skilled shooters from the AMU, and the experience of the assembled cadre. Instructors from the AMU and a few veterans from sniping in Vietnam provided support to establish a modern class to develop first-class battlefield shooting teams. It did not take long for the first graduates to prove their effectiveness.

Army infantry sniper teams deployed into combat during Operation Urgent Fury in Panama in 1989 and Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990 after graduation from the new Fort Benning Sniper Course. The spotters on the teams continued using the telescope-mounted M21 rifles developed during the Vietnam War, while the snipers fielded the new M24 sniper rifles modified from Remington Model 700 sporting rifle actions. The open terrain in Iraq and Kuwait proved the value of the long-range engagement of high value targets. In Mogadishu on 3 October 1993, MSG Gary I. Gordon and SFC Randall D. Shughart gave their lives while demonstrating their sniper skills and bravery. Their awards of the Medal of Honor are the only ones presented to U.S. Army snipers in more than 250 years of sharpshooting and sniping service.

Rozycki, who is the 2022 president of the Army Sniper Association, as well as several of the original 1987 Sniper Course cadre and graduates, family members, and snipers from around the world present to participate in the 2022 International Sniper Competition, witnessed the dedication of Camp Powell, honoring the contributions of the father of U.S. Army sniping. For 35 years, USASC has provided the finest combat shooters for the two-way range of the modern battlefield. It is fitting that the unveiling took place during the competition to select the finest sniper team in the world.

David Scott Stieghan currently serves as the U.S. Army Infantry branch historian at Fort Benning, GA. Currently, he is editing the Doughboy Series of original World War I Soldier reminiscences for the University of North Georgia Press. He also edited *Over the Top*, which was published in 2017, and *Give 'Way to the Right*, released in November 2018.



An instructor with the U.S. Army Sniper Course briefs students before a class exercise in 2017.
(U.S. Army photo)