



# The Employment and Relevance of the Sniper

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**F**rom the earliest days of the rifled musket, the sharpshooter has been one of the most feared, and most mystifying, assets on the field of battle. Few battlefield elements have so captured the imagination as the sniper. The heritage of the sniper is one of legendary feats, master marksmanship, and impossible odds, proving even today that the sniper team is an invaluable asset capable of a multitude of tasks and mission types. It is this versatility that makes the modern sniper team the value-added force multiplier that it is.

The U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC) has worked to evolve since its founding in 1987 to provide commanders with Soldiers who have the unique skillset and knowledge to fill sniper roles. Unfortunately, the employment of sniper teams can oftentimes be forgotten during operational planning and preparation, allowing these assets to go underutilized. In response to this lack of utilization, USASC is determined to prove the relevance of snipers on the modern battlefield in large-scale combat operations. A fundamental misunderstanding of snipers, their role, and their capabilities exacerbates an already stressed Army sniper program. Further complicating matters, Soldiers who are developed

*A student in the U.S. Army Sniper Course at Fort Benning, GA, practices the art of stalking targets on 18 June 2020.*

Photo by Patrick A. Albright

through the sniper pipeline are often put into roles that allow their acquired sniper skills to stagnate or perish. For example, junior enlisted Soldiers might, after up to a year in a sniper section followed by completion of the USASC, find themselves as newly minted junior NCOs and sent to be team leaders. There is a very clear gap to bridge between operational planners and sniper employment. If the concept of the sniper is misunderstood, USASC and the Army are missing out on a pipeline with powerful potential during large-scale combat operations.

One of the sniper team's greatest contributions may be in its mobility and infiltration capabilities, providing the opportunity to conduct an array of missions, whether that is the disruption of enemy forces and activities, reconnaissance, or as a direct strike resource. The mastery of concealment and field craft, making use of both natural and synthetic resources to veil snipers from detection, allows them access to strategic positions on the battlefield to conduct their mission clandestinely. From unseen positions, sniper teams can fix enemy forces to a

given location, forcing them to react to the will of the commander. Sniper teams can also conduct reconnaissance, identifying navigable routes for the following main body of the force or providing commanders with real-time intelligence and observations regarding terrain, infrastructure, and the strength, activity, size, and materiel of the enemy. Such a detailed understanding of the enemy can also make sniper teams an advantageous resource to call for fire, guiding artillery or mortar fire upon enemy positions. All these capabilities illustrate sniper teams as a force multiplier, providing commanders invaluable advantages on the modern battlefield.

Considering these and many more advantages and capabilities that snipers can provide commanders, it is surprising these assets are often less understood and undervalued. The Army has historically lagged to describe the ever-changing role of the sniper, and as a result, struggled to find a place for them to be impactful. The inefficient employment of sniper assets, coupled with budget cuts to a relatively young USASC, leaves modernization and innovation of sniper teams to be slower than the pace of the modern battlefield. As the Army marches on focused on large-scale combat operations, leaving snipers behind would be a lost opportunity to maximize the battlefield potential of these experts. Further examination of the role of snipers is warranted, and those at USASC are hopeful for impactful solutions that allow for advanced sniper training and greater retention and career longevity of snipers within the force of the future.

## References

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# The Need for an Advanced Sniper Course

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**O**f the roughly 280,000 active-duty personnel in the U.S. Army, fewer than 1 percent are sniper qualified. Only the cream of the crop is selected to go to the U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC) at Fort Benning, GA. During the seven-week course, Soldiers are expected to shoot with deadly precision, infiltrate enemy positions, and remain undetected by both the human eye and unmanned aircraft. The snipers who graduate are some of the best Soldiers the Army has to offer.

Is it enough to meet the needs of large-scale combat operations? Some would say no. They believe the seven-week course does not cover the requirements for an evolving Army; there are too many skills needed to be taught and not enough time to teach them.

Much of what it takes to be an effective sniper consists of reconnaissance and planning; only about 10 percent is actual shooting. A sniper



Photo by Paolo Bovo

*A sniper assigned to 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, engages targets during a live-fire exercise in Slovenia on 26 February 2020.*