

The Retention of Army Snipers

SFC KENNETH W. HOWELL JR.

U.S. Army snipers have faced challenges throughout the last 35 years since the establishment of the U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC). Career longevity and experience are difficult for units to manage when Soldiers rotate through positions to complete career development on time and change duty stations. Sections and battalions may struggle to maintain institutional knowledge and momentum when required to routinely rebuild formations after movement cycles. There are some ways commanders can leverage the Assignment Satisfaction Key - Enlisted Marketplace (ASK-EM) cycle to stabilize qualified Soldiers to retain talent and build a healthy cohort of NCOs to lead and train junior enlisted Soldiers. Two important ongoing issues are sniper career longevity and readiness for large-scale combat operations. These areas hinder the effective use and retention of proficient sniper elements throughout the force. As a result, the experience obtained by Army snipers can be lost through the current complex career progression system.

We can examine the ideal sniper team composition — a sergeant, specialist, and a private first class. Three teams make up a sniper section, which is led by a staff sergeant. Ideally, all Soldiers are sniper qualified and the top performers within their respective formations. Reality paints a different picture, however. Sniper classes more and more feature specialists leading sniper teams in sections trained by non-sniper qualified sergeants. This formula sets the community up to be less successful and could produce diminished returns. Instead, units could prioritize sniper course attendance

among their forces. Ensuring a culture of continuous improvement is also critical among the sniper force, and graduates should routinely reach out to the school for updated training material and information to further grow and refine their skills.

The typical pipeline of junior enlisted snipers begins with 22 weeks of learning to be an Infantry Soldier during Infantry One Station Unit Training. Once they graduate and report to a unit, Soldiers may be assigned a host of positions. They may then attend the unit selection for entry into the sniper section. This process often takes about a year. After selection, Soldiers spend a year in the sniper section preparing to attend USASC. After graduating from the course, Soldiers often return to their assigned unit for about six months before starting the permanent change of station process. Soldiers then arrive at a new duty station and often fill a position within an infantry company not related to sniper duties. The process for creating a new sniper in the Army would benefit from streamlining designed to ensure the lengthy period from arrival at first duty station to B4-qualified sniper is truncated, allowing the Army to produce a greater number of snipers and make the most of their marksmanship skills, all while improving career progression.

Commanders need to insulate the role of the sniper, allowing those qualified to make use of their training. Finding the balance at which snipers benefit the unit in their specific role and develop as NCOs is proving to be an elusive equilibrium.



A sniper team works together to destroy a target during an exercise in Germany on 2 May 2018.

Photo by CPT Joe Legros

NCOs face different challenges. Some start as junior snipers who take over a team or section and continue to hone their craft. Others, without sniper experience, take a section out of the necessity to fill the slot. Ideally, these NCOs will push to get a school slot to train their snipers more effectively. More Soldiers need to be given the opportunity to attend USASC to meet the demand for slots in sniper sections so Soldiers with the B4 additional skills identifier (ASI) may mature in the sniper role and benefit the sniper community and the unit. The next generation of snipers will always depend on prior generations for training and mentorship, but if Soldiers with B4 are never given the opportunity to gain experience in the sniper role and are relegated to the broader rifle leader career path, then the Army will receive inexperienced snipers and a degradation in quality and return on investment in snipers. Knowledge and understanding of sniper roles is crucial to ensuring the health of the sniper force ecosystem.

The Army remains fluid in manning and filling positions required to advance Soldiers' careers while still maintaining Army national defense commitments. The constant motion and progression serve a greater purpose in developing well-rounded Soldiers capable of functioning in any type of Army formation. However, this decouples many developed and knowledgeable snipers from sniper positions. There is currently no method to recapture experience lost by this decoupling. Often, we find junior Soldiers are more experienced in the craft than their section sergeants since they have served in the position for a greater period. It is important that Soldiers with B4 continue to contribute their sniper-specific skills and knowledge as they progress in their careers so there are snipers at every level of leadership. Senior NCOs with B4 can better inform and guide commanders on proper employment of snipers, mentor and train younger snipers, and ensure qualified candidates are sent to USASC to acquire B4 certification.

Sniper-qualified Soldiers cannot avoid the essentials of career progression outside of sniper-specific roles, but those same Soldiers can continue to make an impact using their B4 skills and knowledge. This would allow for the retention of their amassed knowledge and experience. Ideally, snipers would be selected as privates and progress through to become sniper section sergeants, and the top performers would return to the schoolhouse to instruct, coach, and mentor the future crop of snipers. This would ensure a force of long-range, precision marksmen capable of deploying anywhere in the world to enact the will of the commander upon the enemy.

An experienced sniper knows that only a part of the job is taking the shot — the rest is recon and planning. Recon is something all operations, including large-scale ones, require. Experienced snipers excel at acquiring accurate and relevant



Photo by Patrick A. Albright

A U.S. Army Sniper Course student takes part in the ghillie wash on 29 July 2022.

information about a mission area. In large-scale combat operations, reconnaissance snipers could prove vital to the success of missions. Any unit with a sniper section would have a dual-purpose element capable of both disrupting the enemy and conducting reconnaissance. This makes snipers a truly lethal asset for large-scale operations. It is essential that commanders are provided opportunities to obtain literacy in sniper employment and capabilities so sniper sections may be effectively utilized in the field and developed in garrison.

The challenges of sniper longevity and readiness for large-scale combat need to be addressed, but they do not need complex solutions. The current sniper ecosystem simply needs reevaluation and support from unit leadership to accommodate existing snipers with the opportunity to develop their skills further and aid in the development of other Soldiers who may be sent to USASC to continue to grow the community. Addressing the problem of manning economically, training rifle squad members as designated marksmen will generate the next cohort of snipers for the unit. With such a solution, experienced snipers will become a regularity in the Army and their readiness for large-scale combat will drastically increase. Already a deadly asset, snipers will become an indispensable part of any operation.

SFC Kenneth W. Howell Jr. currently serves as the U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC) branch chief/senior instructor at Fort Benning, GA. After joining the Army in 2005, he attended USASC in 2007 and has served for 11 years collectively in sniper positions.

This article was edited by **2LT Bennett R. Buick**.