

Scouts Vs Snipers:

Combining the Craft to Survive LSCO

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Modern technology has ushered in a shift toward low-risk, unmanned robots to accomplish the central tasks that define a sniper. Snipers are often viewed at times as relics of yesterday's wars, using rags and flora to disguise themselves amongst the trees. However, as history has demonstrated, the importance of properly employed snipers in military conflicts cannot be minimized, and today's snipers continue to constantly seek opportunities to conduct the tasks they are experts in to increase a unit's lethality on the battlefield. The difficulty modern snipers encounter is compounded by four major factors: **sniper training, sniper experience, force structure, and effective employment by battalion-level operations planners and commanders**. These four components combined play a large part in inhibiting the developmental progress of the next generation of snipers. If changes are not made to the institutional force to create and enable snipers, the Army could lose one of the most effective force multipliers necessary in large-scale combat operations (LSCO).

In the 1980s, the U.S. Army recognized the need for a scout platoon in addition to a sniper squad/section at the battalion level in mechanized, light, and airborne units. This led to formalized doctrine on the organization of sniper squads within infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs). Light infantry battalions often attach snipers to the scout platoon for accountability purposes, administrative needs, and leadership



Soldiers from the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division conduct sniper training on 21 March 2024 at Fort Stewart, GA. (Photo by SSG Noah Sladek)

development. Squad leaders are typically sergeants (in staff sergeant positions) who are recent graduates of the U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC). They are often overwhelmed as newly minted squad leaders, and current structure sets these young NCOs up for failure. Sniper squad leaders often lack sniper experience and training but are placed in position by battalion leadership with assumptions of their competency. After gaining crucial experience, they then fall victim to a system that requires them to have “line time,” experience as an infantry squad leader, without being able to fully utilize the skills they have developed as a sniper. Many snipers face the dilemma of being passed over for promotion because they are told if they spend an entire career in a sniper squad, it hurts career progression. The time allowed to become subject matter experts is cut short for fear of career stagnation. However, if Soldiers spend too little time in a sniper position, their lack of knowledge, dexterity, and proficiency with precision weapon systems are a detriment to the organization and those they are meant to groom and teach. In short, units become less lethal.

Required leadership skills in a sniper squad leader role rival those needed at the platoon sergeant level. Being in this position is among the most technically demanding jobs in the U.S. Army. Sniper squad leaders must facilitate training for their teams that most officers have limited or no experience with. This makes it more difficult for the training to be approved. Squad leaders must lead the way for their snipers. They are required to work with battalion and brigade-level leadership and advise commanders competently so assigned snipers can best integrate into the combined arms team and achieve intent. Further, sniper squad leaders must communicate with battalion and brigade operations officers to develop, plan, prepare, resource, and execute individual and squad training that sustains and improves their Soldiers’ sniper skills. Any shortcomings could lead to the underutilization and mismanagement of this critical resource. Leadership skills are one of many pillars critical to an effective sniper squad. The easy solution would see them included as part of the scout platoon. Within those ranks, a squad leader can benefit from the direct leadership of a platoon leader and a platoon sergeant.

Snipers are essential to improving mission command by helping paint a picture of the battlefield for commanders, allowing them to effectively employ each of the unit’s available assets and have successful command and control. Snipers must understand the bigger picture, the scheme of maneuver, information requirements, and decision points. Substandard sniper squads induce risk to mission and personnel, preventing commanders from using them effectively. The root of this problem is the lack of trust and knowledge commanders have with their sniper squads. Accreditation is key; real experience drives realistic and effective training. It is difficult to imagine any commander ignoring a highly experienced and formally trained sniper squad.

Scout platoons will continue to envelop the sniper squad until institutional changes can be made to the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) and avenues of funding for the sniper and reconnaissance skillset are available. Combining scout and sniper roles could solve many of the problems inherent in the current administration of the two functions. It is paramount that scouts and snipers understand scouts rarely assume sniper duties, yet snipers are always able to perform scout tasks as part of their mission set. This dual-purpose mission would also mean that scouts must be fluent in the seven fundamentals of reconnaissance and the five fundamentals of security. Snipers train in maneuvering their small elements around objectives while remaining undetected; however, scouts do not have the same level of training and proficiency as snipers in infiltration techniques. Conversely, snipers must understand the linkage of priority intelligence requirements (PIRs) to a commander’s decision to seize, retain, and exploit initiative and achieve positions of relative advantage.

The Army prides itself in having well-rounded Soldiers who can fill a variety of roles as they climb the ranks during their career. For Infantrymen, it is beneficial to diversify unit assignments. In a perfect world, a sergeant first class would have experience serving in light, mechanized, and airborne units. This experience drives flexibility and the “well-rounded Soldier” concept, an axiom which has been at the forefront of Army training and doctrine since World War II. The ability to rapidly replace losses in battle stems from



A Soldier with Reconnaissance Platoon, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 11th Airborne Division, pulls rear security during a combined field training exercise on 21 July 2024. (Photo by CPT Jamie Cottrell)

lessons learned during LSCO. The problem with this concept is that it cannot apply to a job requiring such high levels of proficiency, knowledge, and leadership skill. The U.S. Army is one of the only armies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that employs the sniper role as a transitional position.

Recommendations

- Create a *Sniper Employment Course* taught at Intermediate Level Education (ILE) for combat arms field grade officers as well as employment seminars within the battalion and brigade pre-command courses.
- Create a shorter *Sniper Employment Course* as a prerequisite for those assigned as a squad leader/scout platoon sergeant/scout platoon leader. This would be similar to how the Infantry Mortar Leader Course (IMLC) is used to train leaders unfamiliar with the 11C (Mortarman) mission set.
- Integrate sniper-oriented curriculum into NCO Education System (NCOES) schools focused on both administrative and tactical requirements for advancement within the sniper platoon. Much like the current Basic Leaders, Advanced Leaders, and Senior Leaders Courses already in place, these could serve as thresholds for advancement and promotion by institutionally validating an NCO's ability to perform duties and responsibilities inherent of the next higher role.

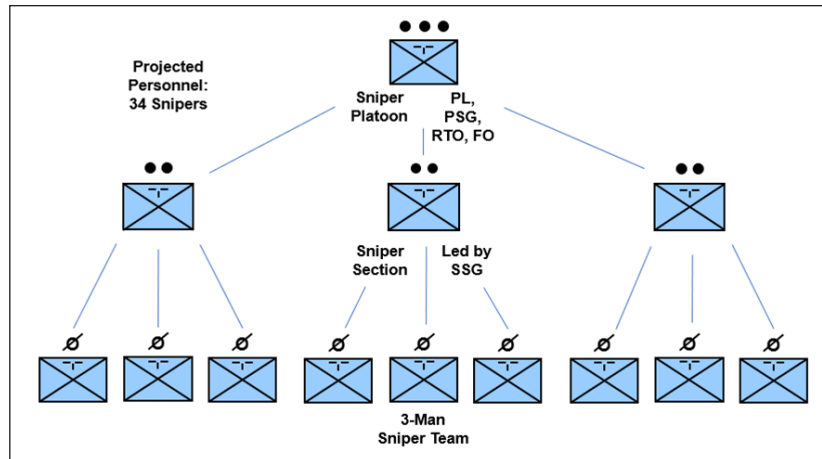


Figure — Proposed Sniper Platoon Organization

- Create a scout sniper company at the brigade level and attach scouts and snipers to subordinate units when required.
- Institute a pipeline to select scout sniper candidates at the earliest point in a Soldier's career — One Station Unit Training (OSUT). Have sniper candidates enter a pre-sniper course once OSUT basic requirements are met. Upon completion, Soldiers are assigned an 11S military occupational specialty (MOS).
- Assign Soldiers to a sniper platoon in a deployable unit upon graduation of the pre-sniper course. The Soldier must then graduate the *Basic Sniper Course* to become qualified to take a sniper team (see next bullet).
- Create a *Basic Sniper Course*. Its curriculum could contain elements of the Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leaders, Ranger, and Survival Evasion Resistance and Escape (SERE) courses and span a total of three months. Upon completion of this course, graduates will be required to attend the Scout Leader Course and hold the R7 additional skill identifier (ASI).

By resolving the current issues caused by the force structure implemented in the MTOE, senior snipers will be able to pass on lessons learned to the next generation of Soldiers and refine skills that would be lost if pushed to a line company.

Conclusion

The restructuring of snipers within the U.S. Army is necessary to preserve the integrity and employment of future snipers. This article addresses all major points currently encountered by snipers throughout the force. The organizational change will keep snipers in positions for them to truly become masters of their craft. The establishment of a pipeline starting after the completion of OSUT ensures that all sniper billets within the U.S. Army are filled and functional with the proper leaders in the most advantageous positions. This removes sergeants serving as squad leaders and places this responsibility on the shoulders of more seasoned and experienced staff sergeants. The development of NCOES curriculum ensures that the Soldiers filling sniper roles are academically prepared to serve in the next higher roles within the sniper platoon. This would also capture the sniper employment blocks of instruction to bridge the gaps seen across the force in terms of asset utilization. Sniping is an art, honed through tough and realistic training, that requires complete immersion in the craft. Snipers must possess the knowledge base to properly apply the craft and, most importantly, the trust and confidence of senior leaders to allow their snipers to take the gloves off and support them in the manner in which they were designed.

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Soldiers in the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment conduct sniper training at Camp Adazi, Latvia, on 20 September 2023. (Photo by SGT Cesar Salazar Jr.)