MILES sniper training

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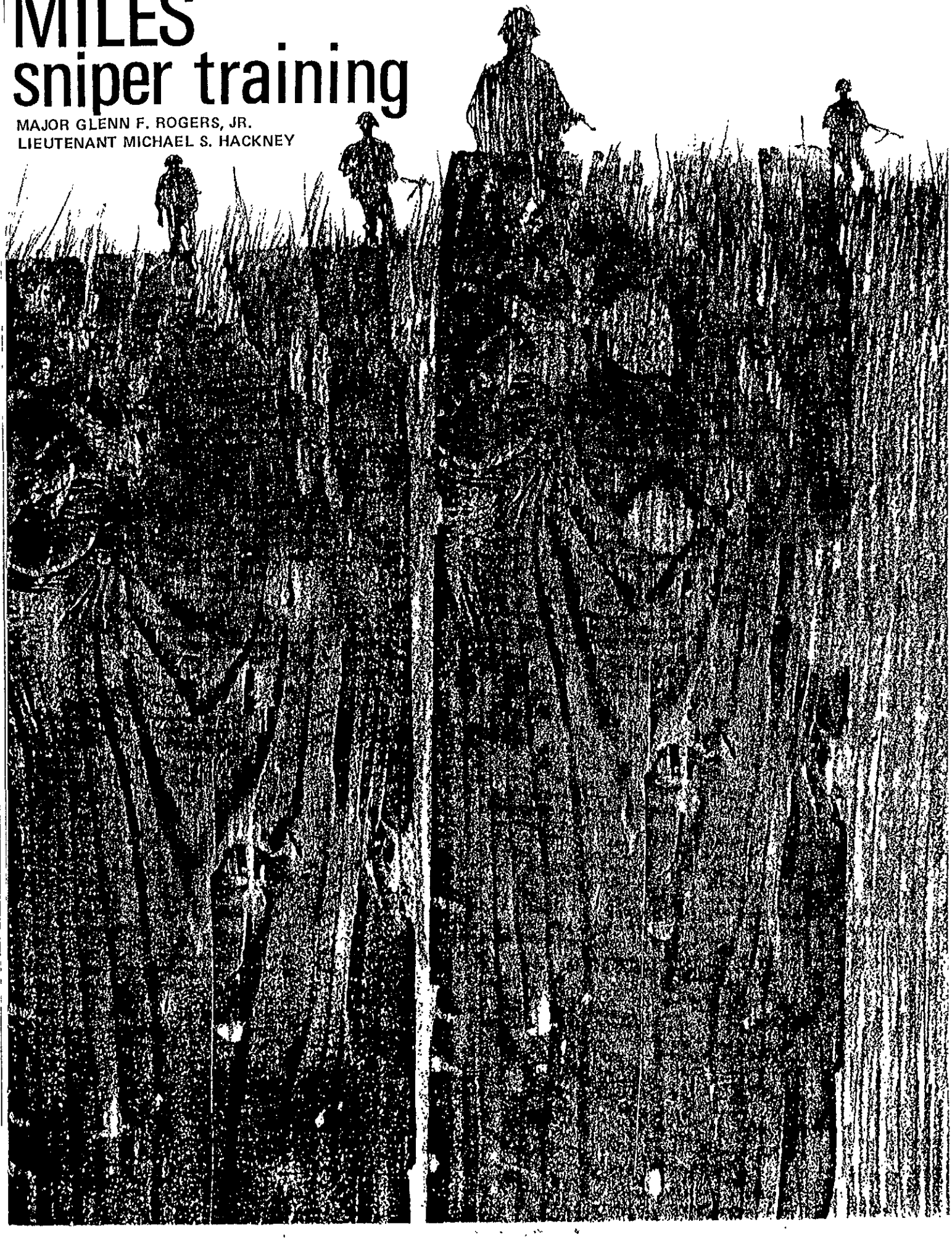

The primary emphasis in any sniper training program, obviously, has to be marksmanship, and that alone presents enough of a challenge (the marksmanship of our infantry soldiers is clearly not what it once was). But such a program should also include training in sniper employment — in the tactics and techniques that distinguish a sniper from a marksman. For various reasons, few of our sniper training programs really do that.

In the past, sniper training in the 3d Armored Division suffered from these problems. Consequently, in 1980, the division obtained 50 M1D sniper rifles and charged its 2d Brigade with improving the division's sniper training program. The aim was to turn out soldiers who could kill with one shot at ranges not possible with the M16. (The M1D is a .30 caliber M1 Garand with a 4-power scope mounted on its left side.)

Because the students in the program showed a general lack of marksmanship skills, at first we were forced to concentrate our efforts strictly on teaching marksmanship. We eventually succeeded in getting at least some of our snipers proficient enough to hit E-type silhouettes at 600 meters from a standing, unsupported position. But because of an extremely tight program of instruction, we did not have much time to teach sniper employment. When we were able to teach it, it was done mainly in the classroom, although we also made some use of Realtrain techniques. But neither method was really successful.

Then in 1981 the division was issued some MILES (Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System) equipment, which offered us hope for good, realistic sniper training. Unfortunately, though, this equipment included transmitters for M16 rifles and M60 machineguns, as well as for all other standard infantry and armor weapons, but none for a sniper rifle. We felt that if we could adapt one of these transmitters for use with the M1D, our sniper tactical training program could be conducted far more quickly and effectively. As it turned out, the program that resulted was even more successful than we had hoped it would be.

Our first step was to decide which of the transmitters should be used and how it should be zeroed.

It took about 10 days of research by several of our sniper-qualified noncommissioned officers to answer these questions and to adapt the MILES equipment to the sniper rifle. The obvious choice of transmitters was the one for the M60 machinegun, because its longer range approximated the range effectiveness of a well-trained sniper using live ammunition. The transmitter was mounted on the right side of the rifle's flash suppressor at the three o'clock position just in front of the front sight.

Zeroing the rifle was the next problem. Since the manufacturer of the SAAF (small arms alignment fixture) programmed it for the M16 and the M60, it will give "0-0" readings for those weapons only. We found that the approximate zero reading with the SAAF for the M1D rifle using the M60 transmitter was 9 down, 3 left. And because the angle subtended by a target at 600 meters is small, the M60 transmitter had to be zeroed with absolute precision by the best shooter available if we expected our soldiers to obtain hits at long range.

After the rifle was zeroed, we conducted a long range check by firing at a soldier wearing MILES equipment and standing at least 300 meters away.

The choice of terrain for a MILES sniper exercise is important. If the terrain defended by the snipers is too good, they may kill the attackers too easily. This will rob the snipers of the chance to use alternate and supplementary positions, to assist each other with ammunition resupply, or to practice other important sniper techniques.

On the other hand, if the terrain provides cover and concealment to the attackers, the snipers will not be able to kill at long range or to select as targets officers, radiotelephone operators, and soldiers carrying special weapons. In fact, if the attackers are given excellent concealment, the snipers will lose their effectiveness and will become little more than dismounted riflemen.

For these reasons, we chose for our MILES sniper exercise a relatively open area with scattered patches of bushes and trees. It also had a destroyed World War II bunker and the ruins of a stone house. A number of ditches, rock piles, and hummocks in the otherwise open area provided individual soldiers cover. On this terrain, we figured that the attackers would become visible to the defending snipers at about 800 meters as they came up over a ridge. From that point on, the attackers had to use fire and maneuver and take advantage of every bit of cover they could find if they were going to survive. The snipers, on the other hand, also had to take advantage of every small fold in the ground, including truck tire ruts. The ground varied laterally as well as along the axis of the attack, so that snipers positioned on the extreme flanks could not cover the entire axis of advance. Roads on three sides were used as lateral and rear boundaries.

SCENARIO

The scenario we developed called for a patrol of about 14 men to attack and attempt to kill two snipers, each with an observer. We planned to repeat the scenario three times, rotating the men through the key positions.

The defending snipers and their observers could position themselves within the general area of the attackers' objective. The snipers were told to defend the terrain at all costs; the attackers were told to eliminate the snipers.

This format guaranteed plenty of contact and opportunity to practice sniper employment techniques and to experiment. Normally, of course, snipers would not be required to defend to the death but would be withdrawn or repositioned as appropriate.

The program had two sets of objectives, one for the snipers and one for the attackers. The snipers were told to try to accomplish the following individual sniper tasks:

- Start and stay concealed.
- Select the positions that best command the terrain.
- Kill the enemy at distances greater than the range of the M16A1 rifle.

The attackers had to use fire and maneuver and take every advantage of cover they could find if they were going to survive.

- Use a minimum of ammunition.
- Select good alternate and supplementary positions, occupying each new position unobserved.
- Fire only when the attackers do (do not give away position).

The observers in each sniper-observer team were given these tasks:

- Assist in the selection of such priority targets as officers, attacking snipers, and radiomen.
- Assist in the selection of alternate and supplementary positions.
- Assist the sniper with ammunition loading.
- Cover the sniper during displacement.
- Provide close-in protection for the sniper.
- Take over the sniper's weapon if the sniper is hit.
- Detect enemy targets early.

In addition to these individual sniper tasks and sniper team tasks, the two sniper teams were told to cooperate with each other to make sure that they had chosen complementary sniper positions to cover the two most dangerous approaches; that an inactive sniper team moved to assist the other when required; that the observers were positioned to cover the approaches not covered by the snipers; that they practiced ammunition redistribution; and that they killed all of the attacking enemy troops.

For the sake of simplicity at this basic level of training, the snipers were not required (or allowed) to call for and adjust mortar or artillery fire and tactical air support, or to call for assistance.

The attacking patrol was given this set of objectives:

- Cross the LD on time.
- Attack on two or more axes.
- Coordinate the time of the attacks.
- Take action on contact.
- Locate defending snipers and observers quickly.
- Submit spot reports by radio.
- Use fire and maneuver.
- Use suppressive fire.
- Once decisively engaged, use three-to-five-second rushes.
- Practice ammunition conservation and redistribution.
- Occupy and clear sniper locations (clear the objective).
- Kill or capture defending snipers and observers.

The requirement to attack on two or more axes was designed to force the defending snipers to cover more than one axis of advance.

After the exercise, it was clear that the goals of the program had been more than met. Snipers and attackers alike had learned the lesson objectives well, quickly learning from their own mistakes and from those of others. We did repeat the exercise three times for each 18-man group, rotating the key personnel each time. Thus, six men were able to play snipers, and six more were able to play sniper-observers. In addition, we used three patrol leaders, three radiomen, six team leaders, and three attacking snipers.

We conducted an after-action review after each run-through with the players being drawn into the discussion. (The cadre personnel were careful not to let the review degenerate into a critique.) A substantial improvement was noted within each group as they went through the exercise the second and third times.

We found that snipers who had performed well on the live fire phase at long ranges also performed well with the MILES equipment. They had several kills at ranges of more than 750 meters against the attacking patrol. But once the range fell below 300 meters, the snipers lost their edge over the enemy and became no more than two additional riflemen.

The sniper teams that supported one another were usually successful in destroying the enemy patrol and suffered few, if any, casualties themselves. On the other hand, well-led patrols operating against sniper teams that did not tactically perform their mission or that did not fire effectively (that is, use mutual support) were able to kill the snipers.

As for spotting and killing priority targets, the snipers reported without exception that they could not identify officers by the shoulderboard insignia that had been provided; the epaulettes were simply too small for them to see at long range, even when they used their scopes or binoculars. But the snipers were able to identify the patrol leaders by their position within the formation, by their use of hand and arm signals, and by the attitudes and actions of other squad members, and these leaders were often the first killed. One of them, for example, was killed just as the patrol crested the initial ridge, 750 meters from the sniper position.

As the attackers came closer, it became easier for the snipers to identify the RTOs, attacking snipers, and team leaders. As the range dropped to 250 or 300 meters, the snipers quickly switched from killing priority targets to killing the most dangerous target — usually the closest enemy — for their own self protection.

One problem arose with the equipment during the exercise. Some M1D weapons would not fire the 7.62mm rifle grenade cartridges (Dragon LET ammunition) that were used. Although some weapons worked well with the blank ammunition, others would jam after a few rounds. Some weapons would not properly fire, chamber, or extract the blanks at all. All of the lots worked well in some weapons while none worked in others. This problem convinced the snipers of the need to keep cleaning equipment on hand, because a jammed cartridge could be cleared only with a cleaning rod.

Just after the MILES sniper training program was conducted, the division was issued the newer and much improved M21 sniper rifle with automatic ranging telescope (ART). Since the M21 fires 7.62mm ammunition, there should be no further problem with blanks. The MILES M60 machinegun transmitter can be mounted on the M21 and used in the same way as on the M1D.

EXCELLENT DEVICE

Soldiers and trainers alike felt that the MILES sniper program was an excellent training device for our sniper candidates, and other units that have snipers may want to try it in their own training programs. Beyond the training of the snipers themselves, the technique can be used to integrate sniper training into conventional platoon, company, or battalion level MILES exercises. Several battalions in the 3d Armored Division have since done this successfully.

It should be noted, however, that while the MILES sniper technique (like any other MILES training) is a powerful tool for use in teaching maneuver techniques and tactics, it is not a marksmanship tool. Obviously, there is a big difference between firing laser beams and firing live ammunition. And a sniper still has to be a marksman before he can be a sniper.

As a postscript, the 3d Armored Division is now enjoying the benefits of professional sniper training through the German Army's Infantry School. This intensive program includes training in both marksmanship and tactical skills, but it does not include MILES training, which must still be organized and run by a unit.

This MILES program is probably the best kind of training short of actual combat that can be used to teach snipers. With it they can master the various techniques that they will need if they are to perform their unique mission when a real combat situation presents itself.

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