

TRAINING NOTES



Snipers A Neglected Combat Multiplier

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Snipers in U.S. history can be traced back to the Revolutionary War, in which Minutemen realized that killing the enemy from long range would limit the threat to their own ranks. Despite the vital role snipers have played in past wars, we are once again faced with the pain of rebuilding our sniper program. Over the years, our soldiers have become progressively poorer as marksmen and now rarely attain any true skill or proficiency with their weapons.

Marksmanship has always been an honored skill in our country, from Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett to Alvin York and Audie Murphy. Unfortunately, such men have long since perished, along with their skills in marksmanship and woodsmanship.

The Vietnam War did little to improve our soldiers' marksmanship skills, mainly because everyone was issued a rifle that had a full automatic capability. Our soldiers, therefore, often used sheer firepower instead of making each shot count. It has been estimated that during the Vietnam War, U.S. soldiers fired more than 200,000 rounds to get one confirmed kill. On the other hand, it took only 1.3 rounds for a sniper to get one kill. More significant than the number of rounds fired, a sniper

had a psychological effect on the enemy that far outweighed the relatively small outlay of resources that he represented. There are numerous accounts of Viet Cong officials altering their primary mission to seek out U.S. snipers who had inflicted a large number of casualties on key targets and consequently had lowered the morale of their units.

A sniper is one of the most valuable assets available to a commander. This is particularly true in light infantry divisions, where snipers are best used on a slow-moving battlefield, such as in a low intensity conflict. (The Vietnam War was an ideal setting for classic sniper warfare because of the almost total absence of fixed combat lines, the fluid battlefields, and an enemy that often operated in small units.) More to the point, snipers can make a critical difference in the efficiency of waging the kinds of limited war the U.S. will most likely fight in the foreseeable future. Lebanon, Grenada, and Panama are but a few pertinent examples.

This is not to say, however, that snipers would be unproductive in a mid or high intensity conflict. Historical accounts of the battle for Stalingrad most certainly indicate that ultimate victory turned on the proficiency and

persistence of large numbers of Soviet snipers.

A sniper team can be a combat multiplier when used to support any number of missions — combat patrols, ambushes, counter-sniper operations — and for information gathering. Additionally, a team can be used with forward observation elements, with the forces left in contact in retrograde operations, or with units conducting stay-behind operations.

Snipers must not be wasted, however, on tasks that can be accomplished more efficiently by other means. Their employment must be based on sound intelligence, and they must be allowed enough time to deploy to their positions using stealth and concealment.

There are essentially only two types of targets that are suitable for a sniper: Deliberate targets (confirmed enemy locations against which a sniper is tasked to kill a specific enemy) and opportunity targets (suspected enemy locations or activities that require snipers to observe an area, detect a likely target, analyze their observations, then select and kill the most important enemy in the target area).

Snipers operate under considerable strain and should not be deployed longer



than necessary to complete their task. If a sniper team must remain in a hide position for more than 48 hours, for instance, the members should be relieved regularly or augmented with another team. (If reliefs are made too frequently, though, they may give away the location of the sniper position.)

An all-inclusive sniper program requires proper training, equipment, and leadership. Unfortunately, and because our Tables of Organization and Equipment (TOEs) are still deficient in providing the basic, essential equipment, some light infantry battalions have temporarily answered the organizational problem by augmenting their scout platoons with seven-man sniper-observer squads drawn from the rifle companies.

Each rifle company identifies four candidates, two primary, two alternate. The two primary candidates make up one of three sniper teams in the battalion sniper squad. The other two candidates remain in their company as prospective alternates. To maintain their proficiency, the alternates continue to participate in all sustainment training. This, in turn, provides a feeder system to supplement the sniper program.

The acquisition of equipment and match-grade ammunition remains a serious problem. Although rifle companies now hand-receipt night vision devices and radios to make up some of the shortages, additional mission essential equipment is needed. To give our sniper squads the best opportunity for success, adjustments need to be

made in the TOEs. In addition to night vision devices and radios, each team should have at least a 20-power spotting scope, a KYK-57 secure device, and a range finder.

Even more important than equipment, however, is the man behind the rifle. It is simply not enough to be an expert marksman; effective snipers on the battlefield must meet certain other criteria:

- Psychological makeup is paramount. A sniper must have the self confidence that enables him to kill when the time comes. At the same time he must have a conscience that keeps him from killing just for the sake of killing.

- A sniper must have considerable knowledge of nature and the outdoors, a sense of belonging to the wilds, extensive fieldcraft skills, excellent physical condition and, most important, mental stability.

- He should be a right-handed shooter, because the bolt handle of the M24 is on the right side.

- He should not wear glasses, because glasses can be lost or broken, or fogged at a critical moment, or they can catch the glint of the sun and compromise his position.

- A sniper should not be a tobacco user. Smokers and chewers get nervous and fidgety when they are unable to indulge.

- Most of all, a sniper must have truly limitless patience. Nothing else must enter his mind except his job.

When we study the makeup of some

of the legendary snipers in U.S. history — such men as U.S. Army Captain Herbert McBride and U.S. Marine Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock — we see the extraordinary qualities that are so important to a sniper. We see a much higher level of innate intelligence, ability, concentration, and self-discipline than we see in the average infantryman.

Although a few senior officers have finally begun to pay more attention to the sniper issue, too many of our leaders do not understand the very basics of marksmanship, much less the refined skills required for effective sniping. They do not understand the potential combat multiplier effect this flexible and versatile asset can offer them.

Accordingly, on future battlefields, sniper teams must be used effectively, not misused. The Army's schools must develop and teach sniper doctrine and employment, and units must emphasize the use of snipers during field training exercises. The Infantry School has a formal sniper school, and its instruction should be continually upgraded. In addition, each light infantry division should have a sniper school to sustain the highly perishable skills taught by the school at Fort Benning.

The unique physical and psychological attributes of a true sniper require special handling. Snipers should have the best, most complete equipment available, should be promoted faster, and should be managed as a separate military occupational specialty (MOS). In short, snipers should be treated as a special class of warriors, for they are indeed very special and critical combat multipliers.

Sniping has great potential for use throughout the operational continuum. A continued lack of understanding and willingness to commit ourselves to supporting an effective sniper program is foolhardy.

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