

SEE THE ENEMY

SNIPER OPERATIONS IN IRAQ

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The purpose of this article is to give readers some insight into current sniper operations in two different types of terrain in Iraq. My intent is not to write a manual on sniper operations; this work is meant to give snipers a base from which they can develop their own tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs).

One thing needs to be said from the start — check your ego at the door. Remember, just because you are a sniper school graduate and have been doing this kind of thing for a while does not mean that you are the best or that you can't learn new things. We are 75-percent student and 25-percent teacher. If you are not constantly learning new things, you will be left with outdated tactics.

In order to ensure mission success you must first establish mutual trust between the chain of command and yourself.

This allows the command to understand the team's

capabilities and limitations. The single most important thing that allows me the freedom to operate is the trust of my battalion commander and the officers below him. This trust is gained by actions, not word of mouth. We started by gaining his confidence during planning and then validated his confidence by actions in the field. Additionally, it is imperative that you gain the confidence of your fellow Soldiers. If you don't have respect from them, you'll never be anything but an amateur punk regardless of what you have seen and done! You are a professional — act like one.

See the Terrain

Our sniper team spent a total of 12 months in Iraq. Our first six months were spent in the farmlands, where the six-to-eight IEDs a month didn't leave much to hunt; if your element is in a vast open area such as rural terrain, good luck finding the IED emplacements. The caches, however, were enormous.



Photo by Technical Sergeant John M. Foster, USAF

The enemy used this area to supply the large cities nearby with the shells and mortars to make their IEDs. Most of the caches we found were underground and had been there for at least a rain, but you will disrupt the smugglers and possibly even discover the insurgent safe-houses and training/staging areas. Let the side of the road hides go to the tankers and Bradley guys that have the capability to look and shoot a lot farther.

The majority of our operations occurred in the final six months spent operating in eastern areas. Several factors worked in our favor here. First, the area was fresh. Potential hides were not spoiled by prior coalition presence. Second, we discussed our potential actions in dense urban terrain before we ever left the States, and we continued to learn every day based on analysis of our experiences in combat.

See Yourself: Selecting the Team

Your personnel selection should be very strict. There should be no favoritism. Leaders need at least two full weeks to train and oversee candidates to properly evaluate their abilities prior to selecting anyone. Leaders also need to watch the individuals' conduct within the group. You want a tight-knit team of Soldiers who think on the same wavelength and see different views at the same time. Keep in mind that you can teach anyone to shoot, and the job is only 10-percent shooting. What you are looking for is a clear thinker who can take a situation apart one problem at a time and make rapid decisions. Once you have chosen your crew, rank distinctions need to be relaxed so you can put everyone on the same playing field, using your group members' individual characteristics to their full advantage. When you can do this and retain proper leadership respect, you have an advantage that no enemy can counter.

See Yourself: Selecting Equipment

Most of our engagements are conducted with an M4/ACOG combo. I also suggest a drop in match trigger. We acquired a few Bushmaster triggers and they work wonderfully. Try to talk your unit into purchasing a few flash suppressors; not because they can't be heard (because they can), but because they hide your position by throwing the sound off and because a well made one hides your muzzle flash completely (which is great for night

engagements).

Principles of Operation

Our experience is that most people in our area are inside during the night. Once we find our hide location, we enter the building and clear. There are details you need to consider when doing this. The majority of people are streetwise and will immediately spot anything that looks out of place.

Make sure that everyone has an M16/M4-type weapon; we don't use crew-served weapons. In the hide, we usually keep one Soldier looking at the entrance and on the radio, and two in different loop holes. The others are resting. If you do more than this, you are not going to make it long enough to keep good observation. When it is your time to rest, REST!

Leave nothing in the middle of the room; everything needs to be up against a wall including weapons and water bottles. You don't need to be moving to try and get a shot on some guy or a better angle of observation and boot a half-empty bottle of urine across the room letting every one in the country know where you are! (Besides, you could fall).

Our unit maintained a static outpost (OP) charged with overwatching a vital main supply route (MSR) in the middle of the city. Additionally, this OP served as a staging area for operations deeper in the city. This position was decisive to our effective sniper operations. The fixed site mission is often despised by many snipers because they feel that they are being used as mere guards. However, 80 percent of our targets come from observers, RPG teams, and riflemen operating around this OP. We disrupted weapons deals, IED hand offs, and insurgent meetings by simply observing and engaging from this site. This building became the highest priority target of the insurgents in our area, and after a series of failed attacks the insurgency gave up and began targeting other places in town simply because of their fear that "the American Qunas will shoot you in the head." We used a room that was originally used as a junk room, but we established it as the best room in the building simply because we made the effort to clean it up. There were existing windows to the north and south. From this location we could see into the traffic circle from the highest place in the area.

Like every good infantry Soldier, as soon

as the shooting stops we reestablish security, check weapons, change magazines, and clear our sectors of fire. The more the enemy adapted, the more aggressive we became.

If you are going to operate from another echelon's fixed site, you need to once again establish a rapport with the chain of command there; they are in charge of the building, so if they don't think you are a positive influence on their area you are going to have a hard time. When you establish your area, you should have a place there that is all your own. Snipers have cool guns and gear that everyone wants to play with; reduce the visual on your equipment and it won't get broken needlessly. When working with other companies, you need to talk directly with that commander. If there is a flaw in the overall plan, you need to address it. As I said before, if you don't earn the commander's respect he will give you a look of disgust and dismiss your knowledge as hot air. We have enjoyed good success engaging insurgents that come from other areas and assume that because U.S. forces are not at that intersection right now it will be safe to move there. We have seen groups of fighting-aged males gather, converse, and move out just on the other side of buildings, and shooters positioned to move, shoot, and peek at unsuspecting Soldiers trying to figure out how to better breach a wall or door.

I know this article covers a lot of disparate topics; however, I wanted to get as much out as soon as I could. Take what you can out of this article. Mind your manners with the populace, stay focused, keep a cool head, and always remember that no matter what, at any given time before or after an engagement there are still insurgents out there that only want to kill you. I am sure there are things I have forgotten and as I think of them I will write them down and update this article.

At the time this article was written, **Staff Sergeant Jim Gilliland** was serving as sniper section leader for Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 69th Armor, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. SSG Gilliland's previous assignments include serving with the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, and NCO Academy. His next assignment will be with the 5th Ranger Training Battalion in Dahlonga, Georgia.
