A Commander's Sniper Operations Planning Guide

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— **snip·er** *noun*
Date: 1832
A military sniper is a shooter trained and equipped to identify and hit key enemy personnel, often from a concealed position. His targets include leaders, crew-served weapons' personnel, and artillery observers or others as directed.
— ***Infantry* Magazine**

This guide is meant to provide a general planning aid to prepare, task, and maneuver snipers — the commander's scouts and hunters. It is meant for commanders and sniper employment officers who may have limited experience with snipers and their roles and missions. It is not all-encompassing and is based solely on my experience as a sniper, light infantry scout-sniper platoon leader in the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea, and as a Special Forces ODA and company commander tasked with direct action and sniper support missions.

I generically refer to the infantry sniper unit as the sniper platoon and the element leader (whether commissioned or an NCO) as the sniper platoon leader.

I attended the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit Sniper Course at Fort Benning, Georgia, as a second lieutenant in November 1982. I based my initial unit tactical employment training on the well-documented successes and experience of the 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam, as recalled by LTG Julian J. Ewell in *Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgment* (HQDA, 1995 reprint) and *Limited War Sniping* by Peter Senich (Paladin, 1977).

The 9th Infantry Division led the Army in establishing a division sniper capability in what is generally considered the genesis of today's modern sniper teams. LTG Ewell requested the assistance of the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit at Fort Benning to build XM21 Sniper Weapon Systems specifically for the 9th Division and sniper mobile training teams (MTTs) deploying to Vietnam.

From November 1968 thru July 1969, the 9th Infantry Division's snipers totaled 1,158 sniper kills, peaking in April with 346 enemy KIA and leveling off at about 200 kills per month. LTG Ewell specifically credited battalion commander involvement for the success of the sniper program.

Snipers give the commander the ability to interdict targets and put "eyes on target" to provide real-time reporting and warning; to observe key terrain and avenues of approach and service with precision offensive, protective, and reinforcing direct fire; and/or by calling for and adjusting indirect fire on enemy units and locations.

The sniper's unique training in camouflage, concealment, and movement allow him to steal into position where he can direct supporting fires (direct and indirect) otherwise unattainable due to location and access. Snipers are a human intelligence reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition (RSTA) asset, formally or informally part of both the S-2's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) plan and the S3's maneuver and fire support plan.

Sniper planning is not an occult or dark art, but there is little doctrinal guidance. Snipers are scouts and hunters who serve as the commander's eyes before main force deployment or arrival. Lightly armed and depending on stealth for protection they cannot "secure key terrain;" however, they provide vital "on-site" intelligence for main force units, overwatch movement, and provide security throughout the mission.

The battalion commander is responsible for employing his snipers. The sniper platoon leader is designated the commander's sniper maneuver unit commander and advisor. The battalion commander specifies the supported commander with priority of support. He gives mission orders, intent, and guidance allowing sniper team leaders to prioritize targets and engagements with a clear understanding of the commander's method, purpose, and end state. He assigns operating and maneuver areas and zones to allow snipers to choose their own maneuver routes and observation and firing points. His most important guidance grants snipers

A Soldier fires a sniper rifle during a weapons familiarization course.
MCSN Zachary Hernandez, USN

SSG Sean A. Foley

A Soldier with Alpha Troop, 1st Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, scans the rooftops in Baghdad with his sniper rifle in February 2007.

clearance to engage critical high-threat/high-value targets that meet his intent. He provides the sniper platoon leader additional assets or attachments if the mission requires augmentation.

The sniper platoon leader conducts a mission analysis based on the mission tasking and the supported commander's intent. He then conducts mission planning, task organizes, and gives operations orders to subordinate team leaders (the five-paragraph operations order and the Ranger Handbook are universal Soldier formats and resources). The sniper platoon leader coordinates with the S3 and neighboring units to reduce fratricide risk. They use the principles of patrolling to help guide their planning:

- PLANNING
- RECONNAISSANCE
- SECURITY
- CONTROL

Team leaders select tentative observation and firing positions based on map and terrain analysis and the enemy's weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and most likely and most dangerous courses of action based on template, observed, or reported reactions. The sniper team selects their own routes and final firing positions (FFPs) based on the on-the-ground sniper team leader's reconnaissance. Team leaders and planners should also check for information from other units that have operated in the area, after action reviews (AARs) and patrol reports, or from local residents or sources.

Sniper teams serve in four mission roles, limited by their dismounted mobility and vulnerability:

- Scout-snipers
- Sniper-observers
- Hunter-killers
- Fire support (direct support, general support, reinforcing)

Snipers (as dismounted light fighters) can traverse slow-go or no-go vehicle terrain balanced against mission, Soldier's load, and weather. By definition their selection of hidden, masked, or concealed routes, observation posts, and firing positions requires extra time for stealthy movement to minimize vulnerability. Snipers attached to reconnaissance and cavalry teams do not maintain sustained enemy contact. In the fire support role, sniper teams may move with main force assault, support, or security elements.

The 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam task-organized snipers into four-man sniper ambush teams with two snipers and two riflemen, one armed with an M79 and one equipped with a radio. Teams usually moved into their operating areas with an infantry squad. The Marine Corps employed two-man (shooter/spotter) teams armed with a bolt action 7.62mm M40 sniper rifle and a spotter armed with an M14.

The sniper squad was integral to the scout platoon in the H-series MTOE. Scout task organization had four 2-man sniper teams between two scout sections, and mobility and security were provided by eight M151 jeeps armed with machine guns.

A four-man team provides an optimum combination for observation, security, communications, and rest (assuming all Soldiers are adequately trained). Two snipers allow one to serve as the shooter while the other serves as the observer, rotating duties to alleviate eyestrain and fatigue. The third Soldier (a rifleman or the team leader) can also serve on shift as a sniper or observer if qualified. The fourth Soldier maintains communications with the sniper tactical operations center (TOC) and relays the team's situation reports (SITREPs) and imagery.

Sniper FFPs are manned by a two-man firing team, while the team leader and radio operator may maintain position in a concealed mission support site (MSS) offset or behind the FFP. Snipers may rest and resupply in the MSS, and the radio operator may set up antennae that will not compromise observation posts and FFPs. A single MSS may support multiple sniper teams.

Sniper teams may move to and from their operating areas attached to security squads or platoons.

The sniper team is armed with bolt action or semi-automatic 7.62mm sniper rifle systems capable of delivering consistent precision fire from 200 to 800 yards during the day and 200 to 500 yards at night (depending on illumination and conditions). Special Forces and allied forces use rifles chambered for the .300 Winchester Magnum cartridge to extend daytime range to 1,000 yards, and the .338 Lapua Magnum to extend practical range to approximately 1,200 yards.

Snipers use the .50 caliber M107 as a fire support weapon to engage enemy troops behind light cover and in light construction buildings and bunkers. Its portability gives light infantry a heavy-caliber rifle fire capability, particularly for dismounted troops in mountainous or urban terrain and buildings masked from vehicle fire support. M8A1 Armor Piercing Incendiary "Payload"

ammunition allows the sniper to engage and destroy light-skinned vehicles and materiel targets.

Precision rifles with future-potential fused night vision ("Starlight" image intensification coupled with thermal/infrared imaging technology) sniper scopes aided by infrared laser pointer-illuminators and noise suppressors give the sniper team exceptional target engagement advantage and enhance team survivability.

Each sniper team is equipped with binoculars and a spotting telescope for observation, to estimate wind velocities, and to spot shot impacts. In the scout role, optics and night vision devices coupled with laser range finders, a compass, global positioning system, and radio communications provide a powerful tool to call for and adjust indirect fires and close air support.

Sniper teams in the reconnaissance role may be equipped with a digital camera, a ruggedized laptop or notebook computer with compression software, and a digital radio to allow teams to send images of target activity and conditions to the TOC to allow the commander to "see the battlefield."

Snipers directly support the commander's need to see the battlefield and shape and form conditions to destroy and exploit enemy forces through economy-of-force. Successful sniper operations are an important part of the commander's reconnaissance, intelligence, and support fires plans.

Mission Analysis and Planning Considerations

Snipers are the most reliable intelligence tool that the on-ground commander has at his disposal — they constantly observe, memorize, record, and analyze enemy habits and routines to target and exploit their vulnerabilities. Whether in an offensive or defensive role, snipers continuously observe and assess the enemy and ground using METT-TC (mission, enemy, time, troops, terrain, civilians) and OACOK (obstacles, avenues of approach, cover and concealment, observation, key terrain) to best support overwatch, suppression, and countersniper fires balanced against concealment, survivability, and resupply or relief.

Special Forces operations are recognized for their extensive planning and rehearsals. In addition to traditional planning, Special Forces use the aid memoire P-A-C-E to prepare plans applying to all facets of the mission from infiltration to exfiltration:

Primary - **A**lternate - **C**ontingency - **E**mergency

Mission

Commander's Mission 2 levels up

Supported commander's mission and intent (purpose, method, end state)

Target engagement priority

PIR and IR

Rules of engagement

Reconnaissance methods

- Point reconnaissance
- Area reconnaissance
- Zone reconnaissance
- Screen

Patrolling — All patrols, by definition, are reconnaissance patrols

Reconnaissance

Raids

Ambushes (target interdiction)

Enemy

Composition, disposition, intentions

- Most likely enemy COA
- Most dangerous enemy COA

Enemy reaction times

Enemy uniform/clothing and equipment

Time

TROOP LEADING PROCEDURES

Planning

Movement and infiltration

Reconnaissance

Site selection and occupation

"Eyes on" (eyes-on-target) time

Site improvement

Estimated mission duration

Troops

Task organization

Teams

Attachments (such as forward observers and tactical air controllers)

Equipment

Camouflage and fieldcraft help the sniper survive on the battlefield, but they will not make him invisible nor impervious to weather, fatigue, active patrolling, and electronic countermeasures.

Terrain

OACOK:

- Obstacles
- Avenues of approach
- Cover and concealment
- Observation
- Key terrain

Civilians

Other Planning Factors

Control measures

Start point

Passage of lines

- Far recognition signals
- Near recognition signals

Release points

Coordination and check points

Objective rally points

Night and position marking (Identification of friend-or-foe and friendly positions)

Mission support sites

Observation posts

Final firing positions

The Sniper TOC

The sniper platoon organizes its own sniper TOC. Sniper teams report directly to the sniper TOC, (unless they are utilizing a MSS) which may or may not be located in the supported commander's TOC or intelligence center. The sniper operations sergeant battle tracks sniper team movements and positions and analyzes the status of deployed teams.

The sniper platoon leader maneuvers his teams to cover dead space, coordinates rest, resupply, and relief plans, tracks extractions and emergency displacement routes, and coordinates normal and quick reaction force reinforcement.

The sniper TOC relays SITREPs and information to the S2 and battalion and/or company TOC to update the common operational picture and to enhance the commander's situational awareness.

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