

The Need for an Advanced Sniper Course

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Editor's Note: *This article was written based on input from the following U.S. Army Sniper Course cadre members: SFC Kenneth W. Howell Jr., SFC Jacob L. Pharr, SFC Charles F. Reynolds, SSG Joseph Germain, and SSG Charles S. Riegel Jr.*

Of the roughly 280,000 active-duty personnel in the U.S. Army, fewer than 1 percent are sniper qualified. Only the cream of the crop is selected to go to the U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC) at Fort Benning, GA. During the seven-week course, Soldiers are expected to shoot with deadly precision, infiltrate enemy positions, and remain undetected by both the human eye and unmanned aircraft. The snipers who graduate are some of the best Soldiers the Army has to offer.

Is it enough to meet the needs of large-scale combat operations? Some would say no. They believe the seven-week course does not cover the requirements for an evolving Army; there are too many skills needed to be taught and not enough time to teach them.

Much of what it takes to be an effective sniper consists of reconnaissance and planning; only about 10 percent is actual shooting. A sniper needs to be able to plan a route, infiltrate and exfiltrate, and debrief a commander, and as the modern battlefield changes, training must also evolve to include stalking and infiltration in relevant environments, including urban. All these requirements cannot be properly reflected in the current seven-week course. There is simply not enough time to properly teach all the skills needed to produce a sniper with training spanning the full spectrum of war.

An advanced sniper course could address these issues and more. Many USASC cadre members agree the implementation of an advanced sniper course would be beneficial to the Army. Through the creation of more advanced snipers, the Army would be gaining a twofold asset. These snipers would have the capability of disrupting the enemy and could also be useful as reconnaissance units. Their abilities in recon could help any commander gain useful knowledge of the battlefield. They could prove indispensable, especially during large-scale combat operations. The implementation of an advanced sniper course would allow for students to fully learn both mission sets.



A sniper assigned to 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, engages targets during a live-fire exercise in Slovenia on 26 February 2020. (Photo by Paolo Bovo)

This advanced course could begin with a week of refresher training consisting of a group and zero, a record fire, and a stalking assessment. Towards the end of the week, new topics and environments could be introduced to the students. Week two could consist of long-range engagement training, culminating with an 800 to 1,500-meter qualification event. The third week could be spent learning about thermal optics and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). Students would not only become familiar with this equipment and how to use it to positively identify targets, but also how to avoid detection by enemies using similar equipment.

During week four, students could be trained in urban operations, which would put students into a new environment with different challenges and approaches. This week would also end with a live-fire assessment. In the following week, students could be taught mission planning, which would incorporate aspects of the previous weeks' training and get students comfortable with planning and debriefing missions. Week six could cover angle firing, firing up or down angles of 25 degrees or more, and culminate in a qualification. At the conclusion of this week, Soldiers would be fully qualified in advanced sniper operations and mission sets.

To ensure the attendance of snipers in the advanced course, all graduates of the sniper basic course could automatically be enrolled in a future class of the advanced course. This would alleviate much of the burden on a Soldier's unit to schedule this course later. It would also allow for longer retention of snipers.

By ensuring that Soldiers are enrolled in future advanced courses, units will be incentivized to leave Soldiers in sniper positions. These Soldiers will become more experienced even as they wait for their advanced course, ensuring greater numbers of more competent and experienced snipers in the force.

A challenge to the creation of an advanced sniper course is the question of location. The current USASC location has neither existing training space nor structures to spare, and the high-angle requirements would necessitate construction of a tower or land with appropriate elevation features.

An advanced course would allow snipers to get more experience and improve the quality and number of expert snipers in the U.S. Army. The increase in snipers' expertise would greatly benefit any unit in which they are assigned.

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A sniper engages targets during the 2022 International Sniper Competition on 4 April at Fort Benning. (Photo by SPC Ethan Scofield)