

# The Sniper's Role in Large-Scale Combat Operations

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Traditionally, the sniper in U.S. Army doctrine and training has been an underutilized and misunderstood asset available to the tactical level commander. Snipers are specially trained in long-range marksmanship and infiltration. Their use and effectiveness by special operations forces during the Global War on Terrorism have brought a heightened level of awareness and attention to the sniper in American culture. Simultaneously to this increase in notoriety, the U.S. Army has moved in the opposite direction by focusing on high-end fires and maneuver capabilities. These changes are necessary to ensure the Army is ready for a fight against a near-peer or peer adversary in the multi-domain environment. When commanders employ snipers effectively, they create an advantage during large-scale combat operations. Over the last 15 years, our adversaries have observed our success in ground combat at the tactical level. They have focused on developing capabilities that limit the Army's ability to maneuver and make decisions. America's military is viewed as over-reliant on technology, joint fires capabilities, and unmanned systems that provide information for kinetic effects. Our opponents

aim to deny information through anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) and target fixed American formations with fires delivered from outside our effective range.<sup>1</sup> This approach leaves a gap for commanders to empower aggressive and intelligent subordinates to operate without leveraging American technological capabilities. When the Army is not massed and needs to establish a foothold, the sniper can expose vulnerabilities and give context to unmanned aircraft system footage and collected imagery.

*"As the Army and the joint force focused on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism at the expense of other capabilities, our adversaries watched, learned, adapted, modernized and devised strategies that put us at a position of relative disadvantage in places where we may be required to fight."*

— LTG Michael D. Lundy  
Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*

*Soldiers assigned to the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 7th Infantry Division conduct sniper training alongside members of the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force as part of exercise Rising Thunder at Yakima Training Center, WA, on 10 December 2021.*

Photo by Sgt. Ayato Takei, Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force



We expect our adversaries to employ a mixture of conventional tactics, terror, criminal activity, and information warfare to complicate the battlefield and limit options. This environment will require commanders to become more comfortable assuming risk to develop a situation. It also requires a commander to exploit all assets available to provide a clear picture of the battlefield. Commanders require information to generate options and make decisions. The Department of Defense has invested billions into giving that information. There is a perception that the sniper has no place in this environment. The sniper section augments the overwatch and reconnaissance capabilities of the scout platoon at the battalion level. Gaining and maintaining contact without the enemy being aware retains freedom of maneuver for the commander. In armored and Stryker brigade combat teams, snipers should move with the mounted scout sections to maintain pace and infiltrate their assigned positions. Leaving the sniper team as an overwatch asset also allows the scout platoon to continue answering battalion priority intelligence requirements for terrain or defining the enemy disposition and composition in greater detail. A commander can effectively decide the place and time to converge maneuver assets against the enemy's most vulnerable point with a clearer picture of the battlefield.<sup>2</sup>

### Enabling Tasks

During large-scale combat operations, brigade combat teams seize ground and hold it. Utilizing snipers during these phases generates options for a commander. The sniper team leader is trained and experienced in processing information according to the commander's guidance and helps develop those options. Institutionally trained snipers learn to infiltrate and remain undetected, making them the best option to observe an enemy operating in its defensive plan. The sniper can identify breach points in buildings and routes to and from support-by-fire positions in any terrain. They confirm information with high-powered optics or unmanned aircraft systems. If needed, the sniper team provides a precision fire capability that a commander can employ against identified weapon emplacements as well as high-payoff and high-value targets. In addition, a sniper team can neutralize vehicles, equipment, and enemy leadership. It can also provide additional isolation to prevent enemy maneuver. These capabilities augment the commander's plan with a low cost to combat power and precision capabilities, maximizing the economy of force for a given task.

### On the Offense

A sniper can force the enemy to orient combat power away from the friendly main effort focusing on an objectively small shaping effort. Snipers give the commander an asset



Photo by SSG Cody Forster

*Snipers from 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, conduct training in Alaska.*

that can disrupt the enemy's defensive planning and engagement area development. Snipers provide a unique capability to disrupt, fix, and isolate small formations through precision or indirect assets. Precision fires create casualties, lower morale, and affect the enemy's decision-making process.<sup>3</sup> Employing snipers in the offense requires commanders to accept risk. Detailed and coordinated planning between the battalion staff and the sniper section helps mitigate and reduce risk.

### In the Defense

The U.S. Army conducts the defense to shape favorable conditions for returning to offensive operations. Snipers continue to offer options for the commander to disrupt, delay, and fix formations in the defense. Snipers are experts at infiltration, making them very useful in identifying enemy avenues of approach not easily seen from defensive positions. Using snipers as forward observers allows commanders to disrupt the enemy's plan and force an early deployment into their offensive plan. Snipers are experts at target detection and vehicle identification. They provide the commander the means to orient on the enemy without betraying friendly defensive positions. Snipers can provide the location and disposition of the enemy's breaching equipment, fire support platforms, and assault force from a concealed position. Snipers can delay and fix formations using direct fires from long range when unobserved. Fixing an element at the edge of the engagement area allows commanders to leverage their most casualty-producing weapons against the enemy for a more extended period.

### The Sniper's Future

Commanders may hesitate to employ snipers due to a lack of experience operating with them in a decisive action



*A student attending the U.S. Army Sniper Course trains on infiltration techniques in June 2020.*

Photo by Patrick A. Albright

training environment for various reasons. Commanders need to invest in their snipers and train sniper employment to combat this. The Soldiers' time is misused when they practice prone shooting on a static range. Sniper teams and sections should train on infiltration against skilled observers, mounted and dismounted land navigation, battle handover rehearsals, and pattern of life recognition. These skills are critical to meeting the commander's intent in the field.

With force modernization on the horizon, the U.S. Army Sniper Course cadre and supporting communities have gone to great lengths to prepare for tomorrow's conflicts. The sniper will engage multiple types of threats with a single weapon platform. The MK22 Precision Sniper Rifle will allow snipers to choose the proper system and type of munition to engage soft or hard targets. The sniper can effectively engage targets up to 2,000 meters reliably when used with the Improved Night/Day Observation Device (INOD). These additions to the inventory allow the U.S. Army sniper to continue owning the night while increasing distances to ensure overmatch and lethal effects.

The art of tactics is having a creative and flexible array of means to accomplish the mission against an adaptive enemy. Snipers have proven themselves a reliable asset throughout America's campaigns and should be considered so for future conflicts. Leaders with questions on sniper employment capabilities should start with their sniper section leader and sniper team leaders on capabilities and limitations.

Training Circular (TC) 3-20.40, *Training and Qualification – Individual Weapons*, provides the current ammunition and qualification strategy for snipers. Commanders should also include sniper teams and sections in company certification live fires and situational training to develop trust between commanders and the sniper teams that support them. TC 3-22.10, *Sniper*, provides the doctrine for sniper training and employment considerations. The cadre at the United States Sniper Course continues to update doctrine and develop new strategies to increase proficiency for sniper teams at home stations. For information regarding the United States Army Sniper Course, head to <https://www.benning.army.mil/Armor/316thCav/Sniper/>.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) Handbook 10-01, *Commander's Guide to Snipers*, October 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Army Techniques Publication 3-21.20, *Infantry Battalion*.

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