

# More Than a Marksman:

## *How and Why Commanders Misuse Snipers*

CADET KNOX WATSON

Since 2014, the Ukrainian armed forces have learned the hard way that modern armies must not overlook their snipers — will the U.S. Army do the same? The U.S. Marine Corps made headlines last year when it announced it was cutting scout sniper platoons and supporting programs from line units, reflecting a broad divestment from these specialized warfighters.<sup>1</sup> The Army has not made any similar announcements about its sniper sections, but interviews with 10 active-duty snipers illustrate how and why the Army also underutilizes and under supports these assets.<sup>2</sup> In Ukraine, however, two years of warfare since the 2022 Fall issue of *Infantry* have revealed the importance of snipers to combat operations — especially the benefits of investment and usage of snipers for unique roles. The Army must therefore refine doctrine, practice, and investment in its snipers in order to benefit from the outsized intelligence and kinetic value snipers provide on the modern battlefield.

Although commonly known for their expertise in employing firearms, snipers provide an even greater benefit through their unique intelligence collection capabilities. In conventional warfighting, the type of tactical intelligence which can quickly drive maneuver units in the field comes from a multi-source enterprise of assets organic and non-organic to the unit. From embedded human intelligence collectors to agencies controlling satellites from the homeland, all sources play a role in giving the commander a full spectrum understanding from which to make decisions. Army snipers, who are doctrinally organized into sections under each battalion commander, can provide not only a critical redundancy but a unique source of battlefield intelligence for commanders.

How do battalions otherwise collect information? According to Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.20, *Infantry Battalion*, battalions doctrinally collect information using a few unmanned aerial systems (UAS) at



Snipers with 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), conduct sniper field training at Camp Adazi, Latvia, on 20 September 2023. (Photo by SSG Oscar Gollaz)

the company level and a scout platoon attached to the battalion commander.<sup>3</sup> Doctrinal scout platoons, however, are not versatile or hidden enough to gain detailed intelligence on the battlefield, especially in mechanized units. The Bradleys, Strykers, or Joint Lightweight Tactical Vehicles organic to the scout platoon can be seen or heard from kilometers away in the right conditions and are not likely to conduct detailed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). As ATP 3-20.98, *Scout Platoon*, notes, the purpose of the scout platoon is to conduct broad zone, route, or area reconnaissance and other related tasks.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the time dedicated to vehicle maintenance and conventional fighting in mechanized formations significantly reduces a scout platoon's ability to train for its role in collecting information. Scout platoons, without the training received by snipers, do not have nearly the same capabilities to conduct extended stealthy operations beyond logistical support — or shoot from afar. Thus, while they can function as effective combatants and collect intelligence on significant developments beyond friendly lines, scout platoons in both mechanized and dismounted platoons may leave a hole in intelligence collection for the battalion commander.

Although there are more sources of intelligence for the battalion commander, none have the specific capability snipers can provide. For instance, satellites above Ukraine may allow NATO to photograph broad enemy maneuvers or capture area imagery, but these satellites are subject to several limitations. These include the time needed to capture imagery, level of detail, and likelihood that a peer adversary would counter satellites in open conflict with the U.S. As a result, the Army is already training to operate in their absence.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, UAS in Ukraine have evolved to play a key role in ISR as well as in kinetic operations. The use of these systems at a tactical level also decreases the time needed to analyze, disseminate, and act on collected information — better integrating intelligence and operations. Thus, the Army is and should be adapting UAS into doctrine.<sup>6</sup> No good tool remains uncontested, however; the U.S. and its allies must be prepared for an operational environment in which effective counter-UAS measures are widely used. The Ukrainians already lose an estimated 10,000 drones a month at a 10-percent long-term survivability rate, according to the Royal United Services Institute. Only a third of aggregate UAS missions are successful at accomplishing their goals, and both sides are working on 10-kilometer electronic warfare complexes along front lines to improve C-UAS capabilities.<sup>7</sup> Other avenues of intelligence collection such as human or communication sources add to the diverse spectrum of information coming from the environment. It is here that snipers can provide not only critical redundancy but unique access to battlefield information.

As a result of learned sniper field craft and training, battalion sniper sections possess a force-multiplying ISR capability unlike any other asset. According to the current active-duty snipers interviewed from multiple Army units, snipers can infiltrate ahead of friendly lines without logistical support, remaining stationary or mobile for days on end undetected. According to one interviewed sniper, “field craft is what separates us from a typical rifleman.” Another sniper related how, in each of his section's teams, one of three snipers handles intelligence, providing the commander with detailed information about the enemy. This includes key pattern-of-life information. One sniper related his experience conducting force-on-force training in Bulgaria: His three-man team infiltrated just 50 meters from key enemy leaders, listening to significant discussions and relaying them to friendly forces before leaving undetected. Details such as enemy personnel numbers, base layouts, maneuvers, potential breach points, and more are all capturable by snipers in a well-disguised listening/observation post.<sup>8</sup> More so than through satellites or secondhand reporting, snipers can distinguish a metal wall from a mud emplacement or quickly investigate signs of life in an enemy encampment. One interviewed sniper posited that he could send a live visual feed to the commander if provided with the right equipment, and with communications equipment, a sniper team can call for accurate and lethal fires at critical junctures.<sup>9</sup>

These capabilities come from the U.S. Army Sniper Course (USASC), where Soldiers are taught advanced camouflage, use of hides and terrain, concealed movement, range estimation, and more.<sup>10</sup> Upon graduation from USASC, Soldiers earn the additional skill identifier “B4,” but the training does not stop there. If given the opportunity, Army snipers will regularly practice stalking: playing hide and seek at a range of



**A student in the U.S. Army Sniper Course participates in a stalking exercise on 2 January 2023 on Fort Moore, GA. (Photo by Markeith Horace)**

just a few meters, where the glint of an eyeball is all it takes for the snipers to spot each other. Members of the sniper community also share tactics on avoiding conventional enemy assets such as UAS or thermal imagery. It is in this context that the stark difference between snipers and other ISR assets becomes clear. While human intelligence, satellites, communications intelligence, or UAS have valuable contributions, none can carve out an essential ISR niche quite like snipers.

Then, there is the sniper's rifle. Operating far behind enemy lines and oftentimes near key terrain or high-value targets, snipers can also employ precision fires to remove key individuals without warning and with detrimental impacts to enemy operations. Against a Russian or Chinese army weak in NCOs, removing key leaders could result in the operational breakdowns observed in Russian command and control early in their 2022 invasion. For example, Ukrainian snipers were famously credited with shooting Russian Major General Andrei Sukhovetsky, throwing a wrench into the operations of the 41st Combined Arms Army.<sup>11</sup> In addition to key leader removal, just two or three well-placed sniper teams could fix and destroy entire enemy battalion-sized elements. When formations take fire — and especially when they take casualties — whole columns can be fixed long enough to call in fires with lethal consequences.<sup>12</sup> One sniper summarized the previous, noting, “only [snipers] can infiltrate early to observe a target, stay on to support during an operation with direct precision fires, and stay back to observe after the operation to see how the enemy responds.”

If these capabilities are available to the battalion, why are snipers not regularly included in doctrine, planning, and operations? According to ATP 3-21.20, snipers are organized into teams under a section leader who reports directly to the battalion commander. The sniper section can also be attached to any unit in the battalion, usually the scout platoon of the headquarters company.<sup>13</sup> This doctrinal setup, although intentionally adaptable enough to attach snipers at any level, creates issues with representation. When placed with a platoon, as they often are, the snipers must compete against the priorities of the platoon leader, a situation even worse when snipers are placed with the battalion commander and his/her priorities. With representation by a staff sergeant to the battalion commander or S3, snipers are not always the first to be employed in training exercises despite their capabilities. Opponents will respond that the sniper section leader is the senior staff sergeant in the battalion, but even then, according to one sniper, “[snipers will] get an earful if we go right to the battalion level... it's considered jumping an echelon.” ATP 3-21.20

outlines a “sniper employment officer” to carry out these duties, but that task is doctrinally assigned to the headquarters company commander, scout platoon leader, or other officer with competing priorities; this half-solution does not solve the problem.<sup>14</sup> Although sniper sections should market themselves to their units, the fact remains that status quo doctrine puts snipers at a disadvantage.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, commanders may see snipers as risky assets to deploy beyond friendly lines. Beyond the obvious risk of snipers being discovered and overpowered by the enemy, commanders know that several safety measures must be emplaced when troops are sent forward of the front line. These include setting no-fire areas, preparing quick-reaction forces, and more, which can impact existing operations. Commanders must learn to work with snipers in order to mitigate the risks of deploying them beyond friendly lines. At the very least, commanders should recognize their own risk-averse biases. One interviewed sniper described how commanders can default to placing snipers on rooftops — ironically, a more dangerous position — to provide “support by fire” because of the apparent risk in sending snipers ahead of friendly lines. Without better representation at battalion, however, these issues are hard to fix and extend into how snipers are equipped and trained.

When units either don’t know how to use snipers or lack the time and energy to work with them, snipers can be left undertrained and ill-equipped. According to several interviews, snipers are often treated as Infantry Soldiers to sign for property or asked to help with various monotonous assignments. When used for recruiting (“they love throwing us in front of the cameras in ghillie”) or to coach basic rifle marksmanship, snipers may rarely be able to practice their very perishable shooting skills. Often not allocated enough ammunition, snipers may shoot an annual sniper qualifier and potentially a range every three months — hardly enough. For battalion commanders, why invest in ISR equipment or ghillie suits when tank engines need replacing? As one interviewed sniper put it, “commanders will see a [Soldier] with a high-powered optic and think they get everything a sniper section would provide.” For snipers who know the difference between themselves and a squad designated marksman, this may mean they will — but should not — cover the costs out of pocket. One sniper noted, “It’s well over \$1,000 just to stay in [my sniper] section.” These snipers are passionate, and battalions often conduct sniper section tryouts to select from the best of the unit, but underutilization and lack of support have their consequences.

When Soldiers cannot do the jobs for which they train, poor retention results. In his Fall 2022 *Infantry* article, SFC Kenneth Howell blames low training opportunities for poor sniper retention in Army units. Additionally, by rotating enlisted personnel through different positions to fulfill Army career requirements, he points out that units struggle to maintain institutional knowledge of sniping techniques.<sup>16</sup> Finally, since line platoons must relinquish Soldiers to try out for the sniper section of a battalion, officers of those platoons are not incentivized to give up their best Soldiers or encourage them to stay in sniper sections. Thus, without a dedicated Military Occupation Specialty (MOS), snipers either intentionally or unintentionally leave their roles in the battalion’s sniper section without continuity of mission — and many never join. This is potentially why the Army Sniper Association states that the Army historically demonstrates “a lack of understanding and appreciation for the effectiveness and potential that snipers could add to the fight.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the poor attention paid to snipers in peacetime has been historically revitalized in war, though at a high cost. According to David Stieghan, the Infantry Branch historian, the birth of the modern U.S. Army sniper occurred in the trenches of World War I, where snipers accounted for the second highest number of combat kills behind artillery.<sup>18</sup> The Army, however, disbanded sniper teams and training after the war, believing them to be irrelevant in a future conflict. In World War II, “the U.S. Army’s lack of familiarity with sniping tactics proved disastrous in Normandy and in Western Europe, where they encountered well trained German snipers.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, disparate programs were set up by units to leverage sniping capabilities, none of which were universally adopted after the war. In Marine Corps doctrine similar to that of the Army’s present doctrine, the Marines’ Tactics and Techniques Board suggested just before Korea that designating and training snipers was “the prerogative of Commanders.”<sup>20</sup> After Korea, in which snipers



**Snipers in the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division conduct range estimation and target detection training in Germany on 23 March 2022. (Photo by 2LT Marc Killian)**

became the most casualty-producing ground assets late in the war, the Army established a sniper school at Camp Perry, OH — it lasted only a year. Just as before, the prevailing logic was that snipers would be irrelevant in future conflicts moving too fast for these Soldiers.<sup>21</sup> In Vietnam, however, Stieghan notes that commanders on the ground demanded the addition of trained snipers in the ranks, leading to the establishment of a school at Fort Moore, GA.<sup>22</sup> Once again, it would not survive peacetime. Only in 1987 was the modern sniper school established again at Fort Moore as it exists today.<sup>23</sup>

That trend is not limited to the U.S. Army. Since 2014, the Ukrainians have learned the hard way that snipers have a role to play in modern war. Having no distinction between infantrymen and scouts with few NATO-standard professional snipers, the Ukrainians suffered a third of their casualties due to sniper attacks early in the 2014 Russian invasion and have built a sniping program to match since then.<sup>24</sup> Graduates of the rigorous Ukrainian sniping selection and training programs have proven to be effective force multipliers since the 2022 Russian invasion by conducting reconnaissance, eliminating high-value targets at long range, and demoralizing enemy troops.<sup>25</sup>

While the Army does not seem poised to cut its sniping programs, the sniper retention, usage, and training challenges all degrade the potentially outsized impact of snipers on the battlefield. There are several adjustments the Army could make to its current doctrine and operations to remedy these problems, however. The first is through officer familiarization. By adding sniper employment to the curriculums of the Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC), Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC), and Command and General Staff College (CGSC), officers could learn how to send snipers behind enemy lines to conduct missions — doing so in a manner backed by education and experience despite the risk. Although the Army used to run the Sniper Employment Leader Course for officers, poor attendance ended it quickly: Officers cannot be expected to pause their work to attend a dedicated course on sniper utilization — especially

when schools like Pathfinder or Ranger are an alternative.<sup>26</sup> Sniper utilization must therefore be included as part of an existing mandatory school.

Another structural option is integrating an officer as a sniper platoon leader. As needed, sniper teams could be tasked out, but the sniper platoon in its headquarters company would operate more insulated against the rest of the unit. One sniper interviewed suggested using a military intelligence officer as the platoon leader, demonstrating the extent to which snipers are dedicated to their ISR mission. The Marines are replacing the scout sniper platoon with a scout platoon, a change which reflects a force intended to work on small islands across the Pacific.<sup>27</sup> The Army, likely to operate in a land war during a potential fight against a peer adversary, will find the successful Marine scout sniper platoon model another potential reform.

For the snipers themselves, several solutions exist. Creating a dedicated MOS for snipers would allow them to retain focus and continuity of mission across formations. Similar to the old Marine Corps system, Soldiers could try out for a sniper MOS at USASC after Basic Combat Training, and, if they fail, return to their Advanced Individual Training to try again in the future. While some may argue that it would become more difficult to fill sniper sections by forcing Soldiers to earn an MOS, manning sniper formations would be arguably easier if retention were better. That better retention comes from having an MOS or simply feeling more pride in being a sniper. Many snipers have an unofficial “Sniper” tab, and although needlessly risky in a combat environment, several snipers interviewed felt that being allowed to wear one in garrison would go a long way towards pride and retention. Even now, commanders can simply facilitate more sniper training and help insulate their snipers against conventional infantry or cavalry scout roles. That means more time at the range, more time practicing stalking, and less time doing other taskings.

While the extremity of a new MOS or platoon structure may be unpalatable to senior leadership, the takeaway message for commanders is that snipers need more insulation and need to be used. Any policies in support of that end state would be advantageous to the sniping community and the Army as a whole. In the meantime, as one sniper puts it, “we’ll continue to put in the legwork to make it happen.” The Army, however, cannot wait for the next major conflict to discover — at a high cost — that sniper employment is an essential tool for ISR and kinetic actions in modern warfare.



**A student in the U.S. Army Sniper Course practices the art of stalking targets on 18 June 2020 at Fort Moore, GA. (Photo by Patrick A. Albright)**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jeff Schogol, "The Marine Corps is Getting Rid of Scout Snipers," *Task & Purpose*, 27 February 2023, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/marine-corps-scout-snipers-elimination/>.

<sup>2</sup> In preparation for this article, I interviewed 10 Army snipers in a sniper section from a conventional active-duty Army unit. The snipers were interviewed under the condition that they remain anonymous. These interviews were conducted in July 2023 in person. Any references to interviewed snipers in this article refers to these interviews.

<sup>3</sup> Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.20, *Infantry Battalion*, December 2019, F-41.

<sup>4</sup> ATP 3-20.98, *Scout Platoon*, December 2019, 1-7.

<sup>5</sup> Stew Magnuson, "U.S. Forces Prepare for a 'Day Without Space,'" *National Defense Magazine*, 1 February 2014, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2014/2/1/2014february-us-forces-prepare-for-a-day-without-space>.

<sup>6</sup> ATP 3-21.20, 2-262.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of its Invasion of Ukraine," Royal United Services Institute, 19 May 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/meatgrinder-russian-tactics-second-year-its-invasion-ukraine>.

<sup>8</sup> SSG Michael Ommaha, "Reconnaissance and Security Tasks: How Commanders Control the Battlefield with Scouts and Snipers," *Infantry* (Fall 2022), [https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2022/Fall/PDF/7\\_Ommaha.pdf](https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2022/Fall/PDF/7_Ommaha.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> CPT David M. Wright, SSG Andrew A. Dominguez, and SSG John A. Sisk II, "The Sniper's Role in Large-Scale Combat Operations," *Infantry* (Spring 2022), [https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2022/Spring/PDF/3\\_ProfessionalForum.pdf](https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2022/Spring/PDF/3_ProfessionalForum.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> 316th Cavalry Brigade, "United States Army Sniper Course: Course Description," 19 May 2023, <https://www.moore.army.mil/Armor/316thCav/Sniper/Description.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Batchelor and Jane Dalton, "Russian Major General Andrei Sukhovetsky Killed by Ukrainians in 'Major Demotivator' for Invading Army," *The Independent UK*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/andrei-sukhovetsky-russian-general-killed-b2029363.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, Dominguez, and Sisk, "The Sniper's Role in Large-Scale Combat Operations."

<sup>13</sup> ATP 3-21.20, Appendix E.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Haley Britzky, "Snipers Need Commanders to Learn How to Use Them," *Task & Purpose*, 10 May 2022, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/snipers-commanders-training-combat/>.

<sup>16</sup> SFC Kenneth W. Howell, "The Retention of Army Snipers," *Infantry* (Fall 2022), [https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2022/Fall/PDF/5\\_Howell.pdf](https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2022/Fall/PDF/5_Howell.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Army Sniper Association Staff, "Army Sniper History," Columbus, GA: Army Sniper Association, <https://armysniperassociation.org/history/>.

<sup>18</sup> David Scott Stieghan, "A Short History of Army Snipers and the U.S. Army Sniper Course," *Infantry* (Fall 2022), [https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/Magazine/issues/2022/Fall/PDF/2\\_Stieghan.pdf](https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/Magazine/issues/2022/Fall/PDF/2_Stieghan.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> American Shooting Journal Staff, "History of the Sniper," *American Shooting Journal*, 2022, <https://americanshootingjournal.com/history-sniper/>.

<sup>20</sup> Army Sniper Association Staff, "Army Sniper History."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Stieghan, "A Short History of Army Snipers."

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Vera Zimmerman, "The Role of Snipers in the Donbas Trench War," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (No. 17, Issue 26), 25 February 2020, <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/2025262.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Neil Hauer, "Elite Ukrainian Snipers Describe Their War from the Shadows," *Military Times*, 3 April 2023, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2023/04/03/elite-ukrainian-snipers-describe-their-war-from-the-shadows/>.

<sup>26</sup> SFC Derek J. Brookshire, interview with the author, 15 July 2023, West Point, NY. SFC Brookshire has experience as a sniper and was able to comment on the history of the Sniper Employment Leader Course.

<sup>27</sup> Schogol, "The Marine Corps is Getting Rid of Scout Snipers."

**Editor's Note:** *As with all Infantry articles, the views expressed in this article are those of the author; they do not reflect the position of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.*

In his third year at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY, **Cadet Knox Watson** is a specialty staff sergeant major with the U.S. Corps of Cadets' 2nd Regiment.