



Mechanized Snipers On the Force XXI Battlefield

by Captain Timothy Morrow

On the armored battlefield, we plan for maneuvering tanks and Bradleys, integrating air defense artillery (ADA) and field artillery (FA), and placing logistics and engineer assets for maximum effectiveness. However, we ignore one of our most important systems — the venerable sniper team. Sniper teams can help prevent enemy infiltration, help confuse the enemy at choke points, and they make the enemy's dismounted infantry afraid to move on the battlefield.

As far back as the American Revolution, snipers have made outstanding contributions to combat effectiveness. Unfortunately, between wars, snipers are all but forgotten. During wartime, snipers are developed into lethal battlefield forces; after the war, we forget all about them while focusing attention on the acquisition of new weapons systems and combat platforms. Given this cycle, the sniper programs have to be completely rebuilt at the onset of another war. The light infantry resolved this problem through modification table of organization and equipment (MTOE) changes and the Army Sniper School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Since then, our light units have maintained permanent sniper programs manned by professional, highly trained snipers. Unfortunately, this is not the case with our mechanized and heavy armor units. Most of these units have no snipers, let alone a permanent sniper program staffed by professional snipers.

In armor units, we typically feel safe or even invincible against all but the most deadly enemy weapons. We stand tall in our turrets knowing that if the infantry enemy attacks, all we have to do is drop down inside and shoot. We do not think about our vulnerability to one well-placed rifle shot. The one shot that can come from anywhere, anytime!

Why can't we just button up and deal death? In all honesty, we all know how frustrating and confusing it is to maintain combat

formations and momentum while our hatches are closed. That confusion is almost as detrimental a deterrent as losing the tank commander (TC). Be we can force our enemy to close his hatches with a minimum of resources — just one sniper and a spotter. The enemy is not any better at driving around buttoned up than we are!

Because the snipers' most common mode of movement is dismounted, they are usually thought of as too slow to be used in mechanized infantry or armor units. It is assumed that they cannot make it to the fight in time to be of any use, and because they use small arms, they have little or no effect against mechanized enemy forces. These misconceptions have engendered most units to neglect their sniper programs. It would appear that mechanized snipers have been shoved aside by larger, faster, and more lethal technology. But, as we have seen time and time again, when we start to ignore the men with rifles and treat them as stone-age hold outs, we enter a conflict that again teaches us just how effective and necessary they really are.

With proper planning and the appropriate resources, the above-mentioned problems do not pose any disability for mechanized sniper teams. One way to overcome these liabilities is by changing the MTOE to permanently attach snipers to the mechanized battalion's scout platoon. This gives them the speed, security, and logistics support needed to maneuver and operate on a mechanized battlefield.

Doctrinal shortfalls include field manuals that address using snipers in a mechanized or armor unit. Most doctrinal attention seems to have been given to using snipers in light infantry and airborne units.

Because current doctrine lacks guidance on using sniper teams in a mechanized battalion, our battalion task force has been free

to experiment with deploying and employing sniper teams. We have used them on varying missions related to the mission essential task list of a Force XXI mechanized infantry task force (in an Armor heavy brigade), and deploying them in both defensive and offensive operations at home station and the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California.

Over the past year, we have learned several effective techniques for deploying and employing our three sniper teams in support of task force missions. We learned:

- They are extremely useful in aiding the reconnaissance-gathering capabilities of the battalion recon platoon. Their slow, silent target stalking gives them the secrecy to view and report enemy positions in great detail without being compromised.
- They are successful in attacking enemy antiarmor weapons and crews, identified by either themselves or the task force scouts. During our NTC train-up and NTC rotation 02-05, our snipers were able to destroy several "AT-5" positions and dismounted infantry antiarmor ambush positions by stalking within rifle range and engaging them with direct and indirect fires.
- They are very successful in the counterrecon phases of battle. They deter enemy scout movement in friendly sectors by watching rough terrain that may be deadspace according to thermal and infrared scanning equipment. Because they have night vision capabilities, the snipers can track and engage several enemy scouts during training. During one of these events, in conjunction with the rest of the scout platoon, they captured 13 infiltrators and "killed" several others.
- They can be used to man long-term observation posts for controlling indirect fires and gathering intelligence. During our field training exercises and our NTC rotation, the snipers were often the only "eyes on" a particular intersection or ford sight. With no vehicular thermal signature, great precision, and direct-fire capabilities, snipers made up the perfect team for this type of observation work. Our snipers destroyed many tanks and ar-

mored personnel carriers over the past year, including several TCs and drivers, with direct and indirect fires. During one of these exercises, one of our sniper teams had the highest indirect fire kill rate in the task force.

- They are very useful for causing enemy confusion at choke points. They accomplish this by shooting exposed crewmembers and by calling for indirect fires. During training, they have successfully stopped several tanks by killing their TCs or drivers while they were going through choke points. In all cases, this served to create very effective obstacles.

Over the past year, we have learned many important lessons about supporting sniper teams, and we have come to several important conclusions regarding their movement on the battlefield and their unique logistics requirements.

We found the best way to move the snipers around on the battlefield is to attach them to the scout platoon. This gives them a high mobility mode of transportation, and it also gives them the logistics, security, and evacuation support of the scout platoon. This enables the snipers to be more mobile and gives them more survivability on the battlefield should they need to be extracted or resupplied during extended operations. They can also combine with the scout platoon to engage enemy targets for hasty attacks and ambushes. This becomes very important in the counterrecon role.

We have also found that by making snipers an organic part of the scout platoon, training needs are better focused and efficient. Scout and sniper training have many similar individual and collective tasks. This arrangement better accommodates creating a training schedule that is tailored to the snipers' special requirements. This also helps incorporate the snipers into the scout platoon's training, which allows for creating better, more integrated standard operating procedures (SOPs), which make working together more feasible than would be possible if the snipers were an organic part of a line company that was only

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temporarily attached to the scout platoon. By making snipers an organic part of the scout platoon, they have integrated SOPs and training, which allows them to meet the "train-as-you-fight" standard.

Some of the most critical lessons we have learned pertain to the equipment used by snipers and the equipment needed by snipers. These include additional allocations of radios and other communications gear. We currently borrow sniper radios from scout dismount equipment and from elsewhere in the battalion. This works fine for the snipers, but it leaves the scouts with ammo shortages when it comes time for them to dismount.

As for communications equipment, the snipers need small, easily packable radios and a good directional antenna to allow for longer-range communications. A typical squad of six snipers requires at least three of these communications sets. This allows them to operate further from the parent recon platoon, while still maintaining a good communications link with the task force.

Scouts and snipers both use the all-source imagery processor. These systems are very light and do not take up much room inside a rucksack — something extremely important to snipers. Directional antennas are easily made from resistors and land-line wire. There are many types of these and they are all easy to build. In addition to being directional, which makes it difficult for the enemy to triangulate the radio's position, they often increase the radio's communication range. This allows snipers to operate even further forward, if necessary.

The weapons requirements are not as easy to acquire. A sniper fight against armored forces requires more powerful weapons than those of the snipers who train to fight light forces. Because they have to engage many targets that are vehicles (many of which are armored), the primary sniper needs a heavy sniper rifle, something on the order of the old Barrett M-82 .50 caliber. This weapons system gives the sniper the ability to engage vehicle targets at extremely long ranges and provides an additional punch to take on lightly armored enemy vehicles, such as amphibious reconnaissance vehicles and infantry combat vehicles. It is also very useful against aircraft, fuelers, radar equipment, communications equipment, and many other types of mechanical targets.

For the spotter, an accurized M-16 with a scope or an M-21 (even better) is useful for pouring out a high volume of fire aimed at exposed TCs and drivers of fast-moving vehicles.

When TCs and drivers are hanging out of their hatches (which they often are), they are very vulnerable to sniper fire. If one of them is hit, it causes utter chaos for the rest of the crew. The vehicle has to stop to remove the injured person, then they have to replace him and, while they are doing this, they are losing their combat momentum and giving the sniper team more targets. The M-24 (the bolt action rifle currently in use) is not capable of putting out the high volume of fire often required to hit rapidly moving targets at extended ranges. It also requires a good deal of movement to cycle rounds. This draws attention to the sniper's position, especially in open desert environments that may not offer good cover and natural concealment. This is very important because of the high rate of speed at which mechanized snipers move around the battlefield. They are often moving into position (via vehicle) just in time to cut off a moving target. This sort of hasty ambush does not afford them time to prepare a proper sniper "hide" that would completely conceal their movement from the enemy.

Sniper teams are very useful and are an underused asset in most mechanized units. Because of issues concerning transportation and equipment, they have been all but forgotten by most mechanized units. Although their usual equipment leaves much to be desired (for mechanized warfare), they still are a very useful addition to any task force's combat power. They are capable of improving a commander's view of the battlefield, directing indirect fires far in advance of the friendly main body, and wreaking havoc on the enemy's forces. They can add to the scout platoon's recon-gathering capabilities and can harass and even destroy the enemy at choke points. They have the ability to use indirect fires to break up the enemy's command and control of vehicle formations as they move, and they can prevent the enemy's dismounted infantry from moving freely on the battlefield.

If they are given the proper support and more powerful weapons, snipers can become a truly formidable force on the mechanized battlefield, capable of preventing many of the enemy's most critical functions and hindering their movement. Because of this potential, we need to closely consider training and equipping more sniper teams in our Army's mechanized and armor units. We also need to reroute some of our funds to pay for updated and more powerful weapons systems and equipment. This will bring our snipers in to the 21st century as legitimate members of combined operations — capable of striking fear in the hearts of mechanized enemies and preventing them from carrying out their missions. It is time to take snipers out of the history books and put them on the battlefield where they belong.



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