

# Rethinking Scout/ Sniper Employment in the Infantry Battalion

What scout/snipers should be doing

by Capt Adam M. Fountain

The purpose of this article is to address the way that we think about the role of snipers in the infantry battalion. My audience is both commanders who wish to employ snipers as well as my brothers in the sniper community who may not be familiar with some of the nuances of the capabilities that we can bring to bear that can significantly increase the decisive power of our supported units. For the purposes of this article, I focus primarily on everything that scout/sniper teams should be doing prior to engaging targets with precision fire. My hopes are to broaden the employment opportunities of sniper platoons across the Marine Corps and put the “scout” back into the term “scout/sniper.”

## The Bottom Line Up Front

The past decade and a half of war in both Iraq and Afghanistan have proven that snipers are indeed a valuable force multiplier. We supported a few conventionally styled offensive operations during these wars; however, most of our time has been spent supporting counterinsurgency operations through counter-IED missions. These missions have been very effective in saving the lives of friendly forces and damaging the morale and manpower of the enemy. Yet, this may be where we have gradually boxed ourselves in when it comes to thinking about the role of the scout/sniper and overall scout/sniper employment. If you ask any sniper who has served with an infantry battalion in a combat zone, their story will likely

>Capt Fountain is assigned to II MEF.

revolve around counter-IED missions. For Marine Corps snipers, this mindset permeates our thinking because this is the way that we have been employed in combat and “the way we grew up” as snipers. Judging from my time serving as both an enlisted sniper and as an officer commanding a sniper platoon, I think that what we believe a sniper to be has become somewhat narrow in scope compared to the full capability that we can bring to bear. While I agree

completely that we need to continue training to support counterinsurgency missions, we must not lose focus on supporting conventional operations. This is where we have missed the mark on employing to our full capabilities.

## What Infantry Battalion Scout/Snipers Are

We are taught in sniper school that a sniper is “a Marine highly skilled in fieldcraft and marksmanship who delivers long range precision fire on selected targets from concealed positions in support of combat operations.”

This definition, learned verbatim, can be rattled off by any Marine sniper at a moment’s notice. So why begin here?



The author, second from left, served as the Sniper Team Leader, V22, in Rama, Iraq. (Photo by author.)



**The author's squad supported the battalion snipers during deployment to Karmah, Iraq. The author (Santa hat) was the Squad Leader, 1st Squad, 2d Platoon Co G. (Photo by author.)**

As any of us that have supported conventional operations either in training or in combat can attest, a sniper is far more than just a guy in a ghillie suit shooting long distances from a hide site. When in support of offensive operations, we normally conduct surveillance on the objective, report on the enemy, and control preparatory fires ahead of infantry Marines in the assault. At some time during the infantry's assault, we may begin engaging with precision fire by targeting enemy personnel based on a predetermined target precedence. However, the effects of our precision fires seem somewhat insignificant when compared to the close air support, artillery, and mortar fires that we facilitate when prepping the objective ahead of our maneuver units. The precision fire from a couple of weapons systems pales in comparison to the death and destruction that we are facilitating through the infantry rifle unit. This infantry unit is the main effort—the commander's bid for success—which all other units are supporting. By our actions, we facilitate as many of the enemy killed or neutralized as possible before the infantry steps foot onto the objective. If our job has been done to its fullest capability, we have properly prepared the objective area with close air support and fires, and communicated vital information to the supported unit commanders, which has

enabled them to plan the quickest and most decisive actions possible in order to destroy the enemy and secure the objective. This is our primary mission and our ultimate goal. This should be the mindset we train to. When we think about ourselves as scout/snipers, we should see ourselves as much more than the expert handlers of precision rifles and the masters of camouflage. We should be fully aware of what we can provide to our supported units and have a well instructed appreciation for what we are in conventional combat—the *facilitators* of large-scale death and destruction.

The entire Marine Corps ultimately supports the infantry. The best way to determine the roles and responsibilities of any supporting unit is to first look at the supported unit's scheme of maneuver and then look at our own capabilities to determine how we can best support them. This is the proverbial "ted and ting" relationship (*supported* and *supporting*) that is pounded into our infantry officers daily at the Infantry Officer Course. The infantry is continuously looking for ways to be faster and more decisive in their actions. Speed, surprise, and violence of action is the name of the game and, as the infantry battalion's organic reconnaissance asset, there are a few tasks that we should be capable of conducting that will enable this.

### Tactical Control Measure (TCM) Reconnaissance

As far as what snipers can do to support infantry, TCM reconnaissance is our biggest shortfall. The infantry needs to move quickly and decisively onto the objective. In order to do so, they need very specific knowledge of the area they are moving into. This is done at the small unit level through a leader's reconnaissance where the unit leader and his subordinate element leaders go forward to confirm the TCMs that will be utilized when attacking the objective as well as the routes that the elements will use to infiltrate into those positions. At higher echelons of command, this sort of leader's reconnaissance rarely happens and is primarily done through overhead imagery, maps, UAV feeds, and, to a lesser degree, our ground-based reconnaissance units. Currently, the leader's reconnaissance is conducted only after the infantry is already on the deck and moving toward the objective. This constrains the infantry to using preplanned routes, assault positions, and support by fire positions as well as other TCMs, that have been selected without prior confirmation on whether or not they are actually tenable on the ground. With properly skilled reconnaissance personnel on the deck, these TCMs can be confirmed or denied well ahead of L-Hour and adjusted if needed. If the planned TCMs are not tenable, it can be of extreme importance to have men on the deck who can make educated and experienced recommendations for alternatives. Properly communicated, these adjustments to TCMs can make the infantry faster and more decisive. Having preplanned and confirmed infiltration routes from the insert points to the assault positions and support by fire positions is a game changer for the infantry on the deck conducting the attack. The time that it takes from when the ramp drops until they are conducting actions on the objective should be minimized to the utmost. This can be done by reconnaissance assets confirming, at the very least, the landing zones, dismount points, infiltration routes, assault positions, and support by fire positions. Infiltration by our infantry can be assisted by reconnaissance personnel



conducting initial terminal guidance and acting as guides once linkup has been made with the supported units on the deck. Properly communicated and executed, the attack becomes much faster and more decisive. The scout/sniper has suddenly become one of the battalion's most valuable enabling assets—without even firing a single shot.

### Prepping of the Battlespace for the Infantry

Shaping the battlespace with close air support and indirect fires ahead of our maneuver units is another important role that we play as ground recon assets for the infantry battalion. It is absolutely essential that the enemy is suppressed and fixed in position while our infantry moves to destroy them. We must also ensure that, before our infantry reach the objective, that there are as many enemy casualties as a result of preparatory fires as possible. This ensures that those young and

hard charging 0311s will have the safest situation possible for the fight. In order to facilitate this, we need shaping fires that are decisive and flexible as well as forward observers who are very familiar with controlling the assets providing indirect fires and close air support. As the infantry makes their infiltration, and the fire support teams (FiSTs) get into position to observe fires, the sniper teams initiating and observing these shaping fires should have a solid SOP for battle handover of fires with the infantry unit's FiST. The FiST, who will most likely not be able to observe fires until infiltration of the infantry has already occurred, must be able to seamlessly take over control of fires and facilitate the shifting and ceasing of danger close fires as the infantry maneuvers onto the objective. Ensuring that the infantry lands and infiltrates into position quickly and safely while inflicting the most enemy casualties as possible with preparatory

fires should be the ultimate goal of our sniper teams. Anything that we can do to make this happen quickly and efficiently should be one of the primary focuses of training.

### Advocating for Snipers

The infantry schools for both officer and enlisted do not focus very much on the employment of snipers and ground reconnaissance assets. In an infantry battalion, the commanders who get snipers attached to them do so with a fairly limited knowledge of our capabilities and methods of employment. It is on us as scout/snipers and scout/sniper platoon commanders to advocate on our own behalf within the battalion and meet with these commanders who will be tasking our teams in order to ensure that they are privy to everything that we can do for them to facilitate their schemes of maneuver. As a sniper platoon commander, this should be one of the highest priorities for you. When a

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mission comes, the sniper platoon commander should take the team leader(s) who will be supporting him to go and meet with that company commander to discuss employment and capabilities. Those team leaders should then be part of the planning with that company staff to ensure that there is a full understanding of what the company commander is looking for and that the team leader has the chance to see how the commander thinks. The team leader can then determine first-hand how he can best facilitate his commander's intent. When I was a sniper platoon commander with 3d Battalion, 8th Marines, I did this as much as possible and our ability to affect decision making and support the commanders' schemes of maneuver was significant. When advocating for my snipers, I put into words my vision for employment and pushed it out to all the officers in the battalion. This ensured that when I went to make liaison for our employment, that there

was already a base understanding of my vision and a common ground upon which we could start planning. My vision for scout/sniper employment in an infantry battalion is this:

*Snipers are the battalion's organic reconnaissance asset. We are the eyes and the ears of the battalion and the trigger finger of the battalion commander. We exist to support the infantry and facilitate their actions. When the planning begins, we consider our commander's intent and his scheme of maneuver. The confirmation of his tactical control measures, questions about the enemy situation, and sequencing of fires become our foundation for scout/sniper tasking. Before the infantry actions begin, we go into enemy territory to assess the tenability of our supported unit's TCMs and confirm or deny assumptions about the enemy situation. These actions provide vital information to our supported unit, which will facilitate their final detailed planning prior to execution. As our maneuver units move toward the objective*

*area, we become a forward offensive asset that controls preparatory fires and close air support to cover their approach. Once a battle handover of fires occurs with the infantry's FiST, and actions on the objective begin, we utilize our long-range precision fires to prosecute the enemy in the objective area. When offensive actions are complete and we transition into the defense, we again go forward in support of the next offensive maneuver.*

In conclusion, we do have some work to do in the way of training to our full capabilities and advocating on our own behalf. The end state is that our fight for relevancy is focused and well-armed with the mindset that we are facilitators of the infantry's actions and that we take an intelligent approach to making them faster and more decisive.



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