

# The Marine Scout Sniper

Force Design's most needed critical capability

by the Marines of Weapons Training Battalion-Quantico

Gen Berger's *Commandant's Planning Guidance* challenges the Marine Corps to focus on future deterrence and the possibility of conflict in the Western Pacific. Marine leaders not only need to shift attention toward the Pacific but also ruthlessly examine the current force and shed vestiges of the existing structure that are not postured to be advantageous in the next anticipated fight. *Force Design 2030* provides a proposed future infantry battalion structure optimized to succeed in Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) within the Future Operating Environment. However, *Force Design 2030* does not identify a home for Marine Corps Scout Snipers and does not provide data points or experimentation to justify their exclusion. The Marine Corps

**>Weapons Training Battalion-Quantico is the Marine Corps proponent for all facets of small arms combat marksmanship and serves as the focal point for marksmanship doctrine, training, competition, equipment, and weapons.**

Scout Sniper is the infantry's organic all-weather ground reconnaissance and surveillance (R&S) asset that collects information for intelligence purposes and is highly skilled in fieldcraft and marksmanship, delivering long-range precision fire on selected targets from concealed positions in support of combat operations. Without the Marine Corps Scout Sniper, the infantry will have shortfalls in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), targeting, and precision-fire capabilities. This article will propose a modest solution to the projected future Marine Corps

infantry deficit in R&S assets. The Marine Corps Scout Sniper is imperative for the infantry to remain competitive within the contact layer and tactical zone of the future fight.

## History

Over the last century, Marine Corps history has repeatedly proven the essential need for possessing an organic sniping capability. For example, when the Marine Corps entered combat operations in 1918 during World War I, the organization lacked sniping capability. Early in the conflict, it became apparent that specially trained and equipped snipers were necessary to counter an enemy sniping capability.<sup>1</sup> The well-trained and equipped German sniper imposed high costs upon Marine leadership and key personnel.

Although a successful sniping program provided functional combat capability, the Marine Corps rapidly divested the sniper program upon post-war demobilization. It is vital to note that during this same period, the British military created their first formal sniper school known as the School of Sniping, developed by Maj Hesketh Prichard of the British Army.<sup>2</sup> While both nations utilized the asset during the war, the British maintained their sniping program while the United States' branches divested theirs.

Upon the onset of World War II, the Marine Corps entered combat against two capable foes who possessed a snip-



Scout sniper team conducting over watch outside FOB Shukavani, Helmand, Afghanistan circa 2013. (Photo by Capt Najieb N. Mahmoud.)



**Scout sniper conducts guardian angel operations near Baghdad, Iraq, circa 2021. (Photo by Capt Najieb N. Mahmoud.)**

ing capability. Senior Marine leadership assumed that every Marine could provide a sniper-like ability because of advances in weapons and training. Fortunately for the Marine Corps, the service maintained a robust competitive marksmanship program during the inter-war period. The Marine Corps marksmanship program provided training and equipment to infantry regiments that could adapt to provide much-needed precision fires capability to provide a counter-sniper ability, target key leaders, command and control elements, and weapons crew members.

Five short years later, combat experience against trained North Korean and Chinese sharpshooters forced the Marine Corps to yet again adapt and create a sniping capability—again relying upon skills and equipment available for competitive marksmanship programs. A pattern emerged that snipers were essential for combat, and when deployed, combat-experienced commanders immediately established sniper configured formations to complement their ground forces.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the restricted and compartmentalized nature of the Korean terrain, Marine Corps Scout Snipers grew their traditional roles. Marine Corps Scout Snipers evolved from providing their mission set within a combat formation to deploying troops beyond

the forward line to provide their commanders depth via observation. While still supporting their units, Marine Corps Scout Snipers began to operate independently to create a standoff for their commanders. While beyond the forward line of troops, Marine Corps Scout Snipers provided persistent observation of enemy composition, disposition, and perceived intentions. Following the Korean War and adhering to the usual cycle, the termination of hostilities resulted in the disestablishment of formal sniping.

The Vietnam War saw the usual pattern of reinstating Marine Corps sniping programs because of jungle and urban combat demands. When the Marine Corps deployed to Vietnam, the Commanding General assigned Capt Edward “Jim” Land Jr, from the Marine Corps Shooting Team to establish a scout sniper school in Vietnam to develop the assets for service in the new conflict. Sniper companies formed at the regimental level, and the snipers were employed based on the Area of Operation (AO) requirements. Once again, Marine Corps Scout Snipers demonstrated their adaptability by changing their mission profile based on Vietnam’s dense terrain and the Viet Cong’s fleeting nature. From hunter-killer missions to overwatch for the infantry to R&S

missions, scout sniper teams quickly established the continuous need for a team of well-trained marksmen who could operate independently from massed formations. Adding to their versatility, scout snipers also provided psychological effects within an AO; the mere threat of a sole scout sniper team would constrict an enemy’s freedom of movement and limit their operations.<sup>4</sup> Even after scout snipers departed an AO, there would be substantial time before an enemy returned to its normal operations.

The Vietnam War resulted in scout snipers providing R&S as a part of their mission set. As the Marine Corps emerged from the Vietnam War, the Service began the ordinary course of a warfighting organization in a post-conflict period, attempting to determine the future environment, shaping the force to be relevant, all while experiencing post-conflict funding and resource drawdowns. The United States pulled its military out of counterinsurgency in the jungle and focused on great power competition/conflict with the Soviet Union. The Marine Corps saw the value of scout snipers in a peer-on-peer conflict and established a formalized scout sniper program that would provide doctrine, equipment, manning, and training. In the post-Vietnam War era, the formal scout sniper concept became known as the Surveillance and Target Acquisition (STA) Platoon. Scout snipers, ground sensors, and night observation devices were placed into one unit to effectively man, train, equip, and employ the asset beyond the Marine Corps formal school. This program served the Marine Corps well in Lebanon, Operation DESERT STORM, and the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The modest standing force of scout snipers has evolved little in size since but has expanded immensely in capability. Marine Corps Scout Snipers have continued to significantly augment the combat power available to commanders via their collection capability and economy of force in the targeting cycle.<sup>5</sup>

### Partner and Enemy Snipers

U.S. partner nations are investing in scout sniper capabilities even in a

resource-constrained environment and against significant competing priorities. The United Kingdom, particularly their Special Forces and Royal Marines (RM), have been developing to deal with a more capable insurgent sniper and a peer threat such as Russia. The RM created a Scout Sniper Specialization/Branch from the entry-level Marine up to Warrant Officer Class 2/ Sergeant Major. An indicator of how the Royal Marines value the importance of scout snipers and countering modern threats is that they have also created a thirteen-week RM Scout Sniper Officer Course. The officer course ensures these Marines are employed and managed adequately, and that their utility/capability is knowledgeable at the highest level of operations.

The Royal Marines have not only created a scout sniper career specialization, but they are acquiring new sniper rifles, new calibers, new optics, communications systems, and they are also increasing their scout sniper table of organization by 400 percent. Per doctrine, RM Scout Snipers carry out their three main functions of find, fix, and strike on behalf of the commando strike company commanders. Additionally, the RM Scout Snipers are assigned to conduct surveillance, provide reporting that supports the intelligence cycle, and destroy selected targets via organic precision or joint fires. Their capability to infiltrate small teams beyond the forward line of troops while utilizing minimal communications presents a minimal footprint for the enemy to find and target. Additionally, since the units are equipped with various all-terrain vehicles (Skidoos in Arctic environments), they possess the ability to provide self-lift and retrograde quickly, which mitigates the effects of an enemy response/counterattack. The command of the RM recognizes the need for an enhanced sniper capability against any peer enemy threat because of its cheap production and the economy of force it provides.<sup>6</sup>

Like U.S. partners, potential U.S. adversaries are heavily investing in sniping capabilities. Russia has acquired western rifles, optics, and ballistic computers from western organizations

through neutral nation straw purchases. Russian tactics in Eastern Ukraine have demonstrated their continued sniping capability investment.<sup>7</sup> One can logically attribute this to the Russian's experience against the Chechnyan snipers they faced during the multiple battles of Grozny. The Russians view this warfighting capability as an effective economy of force asset that has provided them success and military/political opportunities. The Russians prefer en-mass sniper employment and routinely utilize their snipers in a tiered system. A large sniper unit employed en-mass between a platoon and company-level formation allows commanders to build cost-effective depth into their offensive and defensive formations. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian-backed separatists had effectively used en-masse tactics with precision weapon systems to combat Ukraine Infantry formations in the Donbas and Crimea region since 2014.<sup>8</sup> Separatist fighters equipped with sniper rifles, such as the ORSIS T-5000, and match-grade ammunition in all calibers outperform what is available to Marine Corps Scout Snipers. The Russian and separatist combination of tiered en-masse sniper formations and modern precision weapon systems/ammunition will put Marine Corps infantry

formations at significant risk without a credible counter-sniper capability.

The Russian snipers leveraged multi-spectral imaging technology and signals intelligence assets at the tactical level to present a combined-arms dilemma across the electromagnetic spectrum, which had devastating effects on the Ukrainians. Russian employment of small unmanned aerial surveillance devices within their organic sniping units exceeded that of any DOD sniping program while also freeing up Russian combat power with their ability to bring a more significant force into a smaller unit. As Ukrainians attempted to match a sniper with a sniper, the Russians birthed their tiered employment system where their more novice snipers were stationed on the immediate forward line of troops. More senior snipers carrying weapons with greater standoff would observe the first tier and provide overwatch. This more advanced level of cat and mouse allowed the Russians to evolve their programs and capabilities well beyond the United States. In addition, as they were intimately familiar with our weapon systems, they ensured their most recent sniper rifle was capable of outranging any modern fielded sniper rifle within the DOD's arsenal (a method once utilized by the United States against the Soviet Union).



**Scout sniper uses advanced optics to assist in close air support missions. (Photo by Capt Najieb N. Mahmoud.)**

China's sniping programs have also sought to outrange the Marine Corps' capability. Both Russia and China's sniping programs had unfettered access to the Marine Corps' sniping doctrine, which has been on open-source forums for over a decade. They perfected the manning, training, and equipping to a much higher degree than the Marine Corps was ever able to achieve and focused further on increasing the asset's lethality and integration across their infantry formations.<sup>9</sup> Heavy bore rifles with armor-defeating cartridges define the Chinese threat as a relatively large, mechanized force. It is critical to note that U.S. adversaries have a trend of assessing Marine Corps capability very seriously and investing in developing a counter to it through their organic means. They have surpassed their development phase and are now producing snipers to not merely counter the Marine Corps' formation but rather enable Chinese larger-scale tactical operations against a peer adversary. Our highest-priority adversary takes sniping seriously, and the Marine Corps needs to take appropriate action before a critical capability is gone.

In Iran, their sniping program best exemplifies where snipers originated from—necessity born from limited resources. Commanders seek to cultivate their best infantrymen and house them in a sole platoon where they could be effectively trained and equipped at a pace that suited their performance. As Iran faces economic hardship and remains a developing nation, snipers allow flexibility through economy of force—match a more capable infantry by utilizing their snipers in delaying methods to provide their commanders time/space to achieve a decision. While not as robust as Russia or China, Iranian snipers are frequently and continuously used in their asymmetric warfare doctrine. Snipers are propagated throughout the Iranian ranks to provide a cheap and easy-to-use asset against Western powers' more robust and expensive technology. They supported and arguably participated as an antagonist during the GWOT against coalition forces and saw the efficiency of snipers against U.S. friendly formations. Most importantly,

they observed the psychological impact a sniper had on troop morale and its effects on the country's society. In the psychological realm, Iran took sniping a step further during the GWOT as circulating videos of insurgent snipers executing coalition targets were essential in their recruiting campaign. Young males throughout the Middle East were inspired by the video footage of jihadi snipers fighting American forces and seen as more valuable to the recruiting and psychological effort than just pure combat power alone.

### ***Force Design 2030 Requirements***

A force conducting maritime EABO will have to possess an all-weather ground ISR asset in a multi-spectral denied environment, protect itself from an enemy sensing and targeting capability, and destroy selected targets with decisive precision and speed. It will still be the responsibility of a highly trained professional to achieve the capability of all-weather ground R&S, increase the speed of the Marine Corps' targeting cycle, and maintain the ability to provide precision fire. The ability to man, train, and equip a unit for this task will ensure that the Marine infantry bat-

the MAGTF Warfighting Exercise and the Divisions' Infantry Battalion Experiment 2030 campaigns highlight a lack of all-weather ground ISR assets to serve as the base unit for the targeting cycle (ground ISR assets are the first utilized and most reliable sensor at the tactical level).

Currently, the legacy infantry battalion can better incorporate this new targeting cycle because they possess an organic Scout Sniper platoon to serve within this facet.<sup>10</sup> Because of the perceived nature of an EABO environment within a peer competitor's weapon engagement zone, the efficacy of the targeting cycle above the tactical level will be highly scrutinized due to the signature it will emit once utilized. The ability to affect an enemy system from a concealed position is critical when discussing the denied environment and adversarial advancements in reconnaissance, sniper, and counter-battery radar capabilities.<sup>11</sup> Weapons to target match will be vital. Scout snipers can prosecute selected targets with minimal signature while allowing commanders to mask their more expensive and less available assets/resources. Scout snipers can provide R&S of a commander's priority

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tion that emerges from *FD2030* can integrate with the joint force and initiate the targeting cycle at the tactical level. Proprietary multi-spectral equipment, overhead ISR, remote measurement and signature collection assets, and Marines trained in the operation of this equipment will be essential. The targeting cycle being developed in concert with *FD2030* is impressive but overly reliant on unmanned technology and the command, control, computers, communications, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C5ISR) ecosystem. Current after-actions from

intelligence requirements, employ indirect fires and close-air support, communicate to adjacent units separated by distance or significant terrain, and deliver precision fires from 1.5km to 2km. Scout sniper employment will play a key role for commanders executing EABO who can utilize scout snipers in this capacity by masking the critical assets that allow a competitive advantage. Masking critical assets is not a new operating concept. Marine Corps Scout Snipers have regularly masked various weapon systems on high-value targets, which creates gaps within an

adversary's ground and defensive air system for Marine Corps and joint DOD assets to exploit.

In the Donbas region of Ukraine, separatist snipers have honed their masking techniques. They routinely utilize their precision fires and military deception techniques to illicit an impulsive response from the Ukrainian military, which compromises the location of their indirect fire assets or guided missiles. Consequently, Ukrainians have employed their snipers with devastating psychological and physical effects against Russian troops. Reportedly on 3 March 2022, the Deputy Commander of the 41st Combined Arms Army of Russia's Central Military District, MGen Andrey Sukhovestsky, was killed by a Ukrainian sniper on the battlefield. At the time of this article, MGen Sukhovestsky has been the highest-ranking of three general-level officers killed in the conflict, which confirms that a sniper in a modern and future battlefield can instantaneously affect the area of operations in places that regular infantry and technology cannot, despite Russian forces' technological advances and superiority.

Regarding R&S, the application of proprietary optics and observation methodologies in the surveillance of an objective for specific information requirements is equally important as the ability to enable a targeting cycle and provide precision fires. Today, long-range multi-spectral observation devices are too expensive for mass fielding but incredibly effective at locating and targeting enemy formations. Many observation devices can identify people or equipment based on short-range infrared, midrange infrared, long-range infrared, optical augmentation, the electromagnetic spectrum, or even the radiance of human skin. The Marine Corps can acquire advanced observation devices in limited quantities and field these devices to scout snipers as utilization as an advanced sensing capability. During the GWOT, the DOD, through the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, fielded scout snipers long-range thermal video systems during the GWOT, and scout snipers effectively matched the

observation capabilities of tanks, light armored vehicles, and combined anti-armor teams at a fraction of the cost and in a man-portable configuration. As signature management continues to gain momentum within the Service, a focus needs to be placed on signature detection. The Marine Corps is beginning to lose the competitive advantage in this category at the tactical level. One example of signature detection tools is the optical augmentation device that



**Scout sniper engages multiple targets from aerial platform during multinational exercise in Darwin, Australia, circa 2021. (Photo by Capt Najieb N. Mahmoud.)**

can be fielded to Scout Sniper units. The optical augmentation device is a high-powered laser that can detect high-density glass or high-resolution devices typically in the form of high-powered optics owned by ground R&S assets, mechanized assets, small unmanned aerial surveillance devices, and ships.

The 2021 infantry ground board specifically identified the need for a manned organic, all-weather, day and night ground R&S capability that thoroughly understands the elements of maneuver and fires. Decision makers from across the Marine Corps say that technology will enable the average infantry Marine to observe large areas and engage targets with the effectiveness of a well-trained and well-equipped

scout sniper. However, the realities of the anticipated future operating environment, proven lack of lethality in the M27 Infantry Automatic Rifle, and the limitations of the Squad Combat Optic will quickly instruct them otherwise. Theories like the Arms Room Concept are often remised from an understanding of ballistics, small arms cartridge composition, and the overall characteristics of a person required to conduct R&S. Scout snipers, who are birthed from the infantry Marine, take infantry skillsets to the next level by training to sustain for longer duration and with a higher degree of concealment than that of the infantry squad. The current equipment utilized by scout snipers projects sensory and combat power to over twice the effective range of the infantry squad. When integrated into a fires plan, scout snipers become the ultimate force-multiplying asset, freeing up infantry maneuver elements to do what they do best, close with and destroy the enemy. Future investments in developing the scout sniper will only increase the lethality and depth of the Marine Corps weapon engagement zone.

### Solution

While adhering to the established littoral battalion design and size limitations, the scout snipers' capability should be organic at the Littoral Combat Regiment level in a Reconnaissance, Surveillance, Target Acquisition Company (RSTAC). The RSTAC will comprise a small headquarters consisting of a company commander, executive officer, operations chief, and senior enlisted advisor that can plan, control, and advise commanders on R&S operations. Past the headquarters section, the RSTAC will comprise a Scout Sniper platoon(s), a Ground Sensor platoon, a small unmanned aerial surveillance section, signal intelligence electronic warfare platoon(s), long-range targeting devices, and C5ISR system operator(s) with the introduction of the terrestrial collection system. In this design, commanders from the unit of action up to the unit of employment may employ R&S assets against specific priority intelligence requirements in developing

plans, policies, and operations or as a force protection measure. Commanders would maintain the benefit of enhanced lethality and target acquisition with highly trained Marines for targeting initiatives.

RSTAC Marines, and specifically the scout snipers, may be employed in force to extend the supported unit's area of influence and deny adversary collections through counter-sniper and counter-reconnaissance operations. The RSTAC would be a transition from a Scout Sniper platoon to an STA concept updated for modern technological advancements and adversarial capabilities. RSTAC would facilitate targeting and assist in the establishment of local networks and communications relays in a distributed littoral environment. The Marine Corps C5ISR ecosystem and infrastructure will be critical to maintain but at an opportunity cost. Its signature and ability to be targeted are no different from a physical signature. Communications redundancy across the electromagnetic spectrum will be essential, and high-frequency communications will be a contingency net with which scout snipers are highly experienced in operating and conducting relay.

### Conclusion

Scout snipers need to be holistically evaluated and accredited by testing future formations to identify necessary skills associated and the integration of these skills in the coming fight. Scout snipers have been employed across the range of military operations conducting R&S, precision targeting with direct fire weapons, and execution of supporting arms throughout significant exercises with little to no inclusion of their effects within. Notable examples include the Integrated Training Exercise, Twentynine Palms, CA; MountainEX conducted in Bridgeport, CA; and a myriad of MEUs executing training operations overseas. Specific gaps identified through testing of future formations may identify certain requirements on scout snipers to determine their direction in future employment.

The Marine Corps cannot afford to sit still and hope that the status quo

will suffice in the future fight merely because it did in the past. Nor can we rest on established norms, programs, and occupational fields that are well established. We must retain capabilities that are still relevant and will be undoubtedly helpful in the future fight. Scouting and sniping will be critically important in the next battle, and the Marine Corps needs to continue to restructure to support training initiatives and future combat employment. It is key to note that our adversaries have invested heavily in the formation of sniper programs along with their scalable growth over time. Our adversaries' heavy investment in the professionalization of a sniping community and additional military schooling for its senior enlisted and officers has resulted in snipers' understanding and advocacy continuing to grow within their ranks. The Marine Corps has trended in the opposite direction and now potentially faces a future force with no organic scouting or sniping capability, which makes the Marine Corps the only first world power without scout snipers in its infantry formations. Limited education on the capabilities and employment of scout snipers within the officer and enlisted ranks has led to mixed opinions and ineffective utilization of the asset, which could be a contributing factor as to why it was so quickly removed during the Infantry Battalion Experiment 2030 initiative. The Marine Corps was the first branch within the DOD to formalize and sustain a scout sniping program. However, we are now poised to be the only DOD entity without the capability because of years of misunderstanding and mismanagement at the tactical level. It is perplexing how quickly the Marine Corps Scout Snipers' heavy utilization during the GWOT was forgotten, despite the repeated requests for support by the joint force and attaching directly to United States Special Operations Command. This trend sadly falls in line with the past 100 years of Marine Corps history. However, there is a future scalable model for the infantry to efficiently and effectively grow an organic ground R&S asset via an already existing one. Minor and cost-effective measures can be taken

to retain a time and combat-proven asset while expanding into capability gaps that must be filled at the tactical level for the Commandant of the Marine Corp's vision of EABO via *FD 2030*.

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### Notes

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