

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Russian Snipers In the Mountains and Cities of Chechnya

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During the evolution of modern combat, the maximum effective range of most weapons has increased dramatically. Howitzers accurately fire in excess of 28 kilometers, tanks kill out to four kilometers, helicopter gunship missiles kill out to eight kilometers. The maximum range of infantry small arms engagements, however, has shrunk significantly over the past century. Some of the standard infantry rifles of World Wars I and II had sights that ranged out to more than 2,000 yards (1800 meters), and infantry soldiers trained to engage area targets even out to those ranges. But with the adoption of the smaller caliber, higher velocity .223 bullet as the infantry standard for many nations, the maximum training—and hence effective—range of infantry small arms has dropped off to 300 meters or less.

Furthermore, while the infantry rifles of the World Wars were bolt action or semiautomatic, today's assault rifles are all capable of automatic fire. The bulk of small arms rounds fired in modern combat suppress rather than kill. Various sources estimate that 20,000 to 50,000 rounds are issued for each casualty produced in modern warfare. However, there are still riflemen who engage the enemy at 1,000 meters and beyond, and who produce a casualty for every one or two rounds expended. These soldiers are specially trained and

equipped snipers, and their impact on modern combat is increasing. The Russian military recently demonstrated the value and impact of snipers on the contemporary battlefield.

A Quick Bit of History

Sniper is a term of excellence in the Russian Army. As in Western Armies, snipers are expert marksmen who hunt their prey and have special weapons and training to conduct long-range killing.

The Russian and Soviet Armies used snipers extensively in combat. During World War I, conscripted Siberian hunters—prized for their field craft—were selected for sniper duty.

The sniper tradition goes far back in Russian military lore. The Russian patron sniper was a resident of Moscow named Adam. On 24 August 1382, Tartar Mongol forces surrounded the Kremlin walls but were careful to stay out of Russian arrow range (200 paces). Adam, a cloth-maker, took his crossbow and climbed up a tower by the Frolov gate. He took careful aim, fired, and watched his bolt fatally penetrate the chain mail armor of a Tartar com-

mander—one of the sons of the Tartar Khan. The Tartar had stayed out of the 200-pace range, but the Russian heavy crossbow of that day could fire out to 650 paces (445 meters).

The Russian and Soviet Armies used snipers extensively in combat. During World War I, conscripted Siberian hunters—prized for their field craft, patience, and accuracy—were selected for sniper duty. In 1924, the Red Army founded a series of sniper schools across the Soviet Union to teach sport and combat shooting to civilians and military alike. The best shots were sent on to regional, district, and ultimately national schools, where the top graduates received “Sniper-Instructor” diplomas. The Red Army entered World War II with a number of quality snipers.

At the start of the war, there were two types of Russian snipers—snipers who were part of the Reserves of the Supreme High Command (RVGK) and snipers who were part of standard infantry units. The RVGK snipers were organized into separate brigades—such as the RVGK sniper brigade made up of women. Entire platoons, companies, and even battalions of RVGK snipers were assigned to fronts and armies to support critical sectors. Snipers were also an important element of TO&E infantry combat power during World War II, particularly on static battlefields

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such as Stalingrad. Divisions began the war with a squad of TO&E snipers but expanded their numbers with division sniper schools during the war. By war's end, there were 18 snipers per battalion, or two per rifle platoon.

Red Army snipers hunted in pairs, one spotting and one firing. Both were armed with the Mosin-Nagant 1891/1930 sniper rifle that fires a 7.62x54mm rimmed round. Although the rifle's four-power scope mount also allowed the sniper to use the standard open sights for closer-in shots, both snipers also carried PPSH 7.62mm submachine guns as insurance. The spotter used his scoped rifle to back up the fire and to fire immediately at the target if the firer should miss.

The employment of Soviet snipers in World War II reflected an earlier peacetime propaganda campaign. During the first five-year plan, Soviet workers who exceeded their production quotas were designated as "shock workers" [*udarniki*] and given special incentives and awards. In 1935 Alexis Stakhanov exceeded his quota for digging coal in the Donetz basin by some 1400 percent. The shock worker campaign propagandists latched on to his achievement, and soon the shock workers became known as Stakhanovites. The Stakhanov campaign was ill conceived however.

Soviet factories were kept in competition with one another and the success of the factory Stakhanovite was important to factory managers and their careers. Therefore, the entire resources of the factory backed the efforts of the Stakhanovite. As the Stakhanovite exceeded his quota, the quotas for all the rest of the workers were raised. In the meantime, the resources that were backing the Stakhanovite were unavailable to the average worker, who now had to accomplish more with less. This uniquely Soviet approach was transferred to the war effort in 1942. Red Army propagandists and political officers began the "sniper movement." Snipers were encouraged to participate in a macabre competition by killing more fascists than the snipers in neighboring divisions. Forty kills netted a "For Bravery" medal and the title "noble sniper." Socialist competition

thus extended to the battlefield where division commanders lavished scarce resources on their snipers in order to exceed quotas. The average soldiers were exhorted to follow the example of the snipers and to kill more fascists using fewer resources. The sniper movement peaked with the widely circulated tale of the duel to the death between Senior Sergeant Zaitsev and Major Koenig in the ruins of Stalingrad. Eventually, Zaitsev was credited with 149 kills. The highest scorer was named Zikan, who had 224 kills. Sergeant Passar of the 21st Army had 103 kills while "Noble Sniper" and Political Commissar Ilin had 185 kills.

As noted, there was a significant growth in the number of Soviet snipers deployed in army units between 1943

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and 1945. The increase in the number of snipers to 18 per infantry battalion did not reflect the growing role of snipers as much as it reflected the rearmament of the Red Army. Up to 1943, Soviet infantry was primarily armed with the bolt-action 1891/1930 Mosin-Nagant rifle with iron sights. It was accurate to 400 meters. The scoped Mosin-Nagant sniper rifle was accurate to 800 meters.

During the war, the Soviet Union replaced the infantry Mosin-Nagant rifles with submachine guns. These provided excellent suppressive fire but were seldom accurate beyond 100 meters when fired on long burst or 200 meters when fired on short burst. Red Army assaults depended on the effect of machinegun and sub-machinegun automatic fire suppressing the enemy during the advance. Battalion commanders, however, now lacked the ability to engage deeper enemy targets. Consequently, sniper rifles were issued to platoon marksmen to give infantry combat the necessary depth. These

personnel were called snipers, but they were not really used as snipers. In an earlier time, they would have been called skirmishers. The separate sniper units of the RVGK maintained the true hunter-snipers.

In 1952, the Soviet Union closed its national system of sniper schools, although basic marksmanship continued to be taught to the citizenry through the Young Pioneers, mandatory grade school and high school classes and the widespread DOSAAF (Voluntary Organization for the Support of the Soviet Army, Air Force, and Navy) civilian sports clubs. "Sniper training" was limited to conscripts in the ground forces, interior forces, and KGB, but this was really advanced marksmanship training. The ground forces continued to stress the importance of suppressive automatic fire (with its consequent shorter effective ranges). The need for longer-range small arms fire was still recognized, and a "sniper" was part of every motorized rifle platoon. A spotter, who was one of the platoon's riflemen, assisted this conscript sniper or skirmisher.

After 1963, Soviet snipers began training on the new 7.62x54mm Dragunov semiautomatic sniper rifle (SVD). This 10-shot sniper rifle mounts a four-power PSO-1 scope and is calibrated out to 1,300 meters but is not very effective over 800 meters. The SVD is nowhere near as rugged or as soldier-friendly as the Kalashnikov family of small arms. Like many Western small arms, it requires careful cleaning and will easily jam when dirt or sand gets into the mechanism. Like the old Mosin-Nagant, the SVD scope is also mounted so that the firer has the immediate option of using open sights for a close-in shot.

Up until 1984, sniper (expert marksman) training was conducted at regimental level by regimental officers who were competent shots. They taught that the main sniper targets were enemy officers; forward observers; television cameramen; crews for antitank guided missiles (ATGMs), recoilless rifles, machineguns; tank crews from damaged tanks; and low-flying helicopters.

Snipers were selected from conscripts

who were physically fit, intelligent, had good eyesight and hearing, and quick reactions. Candidates had to be consistent in hitting a 300-meter target with iron sights. Sniper candidates normally trained to observe a sector 200x1000 meters. Regimental sniper schools conducted refresher training every six to eight weeks. In the early 1970s, the refresher training could last for five or six days. These short refresher courses covered the basics and often served as the primary sniper course as well.

The standards 1974 Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG) sniper refresher course included the following:

Usually such a program produced some excellent marksmen but not the seasoned, field-wise snipers of the World War II sniper battalions. These “snipers” did not have a true sniper mission. Other regiments developed more extensive sniper training programs, such as the 24-day sniper course.

Such courses as the 24-day course were the exception, and most Soviet snipers were really marksmen with a fancy, but not particularly effective, weapon. The war in Afghanistan emphasized the need for well-trained snipers and exposed the mediocrity of many regimental sniper schools. In 1984, military sniper schools were consolidated at army level, and in 1987 further consolidated at military district level. These usually lasted for a month. Snipers drew some lessons from the war in Afghanistan and incorporated field craft and equipment from that war. For example as a result of the war, snipers often used the bipod from an RPK light machinegun to steady their SVDs.

The Chechen Wars

The wars in Chechnya emphasized the value of snipers. The Chechens met the Russians in urban combat in Grozny and soon Chechen snipers took a toll on Russian forces. The stationary combat fought from ruined buildings resembled the fighting at Stalingrad. This time, however, the Russian “snipers” were at a disadvantage. They were trained to fight as part of an attacking combined

GSFG SNIPER REFRESHER COURSE	
	HOURS
Observation and field craft	1
Sniper team actions in the offense and defense	6
Firing on stationary targets	6
Firing on fleeting targets	7
Firing on moving targets	7
Firing during limited visibility	6
Practical exercise	3
Selecting, preparing, and camouflaging a firing position	2
Map reading, moving along an azimuth, route and point reconnaissance	2
24-DAY SNIPER COURSE	
	HOURS
Political instruction	16
Observation and field craft	4
Sniper team actions in the offense	6
Sniper team actions in the defense	4
Firing on stationary targets	23
Firing on fleeting targets	23
Firing on moving targets	22
Firing during limited visibility	16
Firing on moving and fleeting targets	17
Selecting and preparing field positions, map reading, and NBC	30

arms team that would advance rapidly against a conventional defending force. The Russian snipers were not prepared to hunt in the ruins and to lie in ambush for days on end. The Chechens, on the other hand, knew the territory and had plenty of sniper weapons.

The Russian Army left 533 SVD sniper rifles behind when they withdrew from Chechnya in 1992. Some of the Chechens and their allies who were armed with SVDs deployed as actual snipers, while others joined three- or four-man fighting cells consisting of an RPG gunner, a machinegunner and an SVD marksman, and perhaps an ammunition bearer armed with a Kalashnikov assault rifle. These cells were quite effective as antiarmor hunter-killer teams. The SVD and machinegun fire would pin down supporting infantry while the RPG would engage the armored vehicle. Often four or five cells would work together against a single armored vehicle. Once the fighting moved beyond the cities and into the mountains, Chechen snipers attempted to engage Russian forces at long distances—900 to 1,000 meters away, although terrain and vegetation often limited their engagement ranges. Away from the cities, a Chechen sniper usually operated as part of a team—the sniper plus a four-man support element

armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles. The support element usually positioned itself some 500 meters behind the sniper. The sniper would fire one or two shots at the Russians and then change firing positions. Should the Russians fire at the sniper, the support element would open fire at random to draw fire on itself and allow the sniper to escape.

The Russian military had SVD-equipped marksmen but few actual snipers available for the first Chechen War. They relied on MVD (Ministry of the Interior) and FSB (successor to the KGB) snipers from their special operations units. These snipers were well trained but used to operating in a city against SWAT-type targets. They were not well trained in site camouflage, sniping in the mountains, or sniping in the countryside. They clearly were not trained to snipe

where the other side was conducting countersniper actions or where artillery and mortar rounds were falling.

In the summer of 1999, the Russian Army reestablished a true sniper school. The army conducted an All-Army shooting competition for officers and conscripts. The army selected 12 firers from the top 52 for its initial sniper class. The course stressed marksmanship, field craft, and map reading and ended with a month-long live-fire exercise in Chechnya working in the mountains around Bamut. The average shot that the Russian snipers were making was around 400 meters, but the new sniper school had not solved the army sniper problem. Casualties had to be replaced. Three of the first graduating class of 12 men were killed in action. Four snipers of the second class were hospitalized with wounds. Most of the snipers were two-year conscripts who had, at most, a year’s service remaining by the time they were selected and trained.

The first Chechen War ended badly for the Russians in 1996, and they returned in 1999 for another effort. The Russians took a page from the Chechens’ notebook and began forming their own two- or three-man hunter-killer detachments. Various combinations of a machinegunner, RPG-7 gun-

ner, SVD marksman, and assault rifleman formed hunter-killer detachments that would move together with other detachments to combat Chechens. The movement of these detachments had to be controlled and coordinated to provide mutual support and synchronized action.

Aside from the TO&E military snipers who were employed as marksmen, the war in Chechnya saw the return of the elite sniper who was part of the government special reserves and hunted Chechens. These snipers avoid carrying their weapons in public since they do not want the locals to identify them as part of the sniper elite force. The sniper works as part of a team—two snipers plus a five-man security element armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles. The snipers go into position at night and leave at night. They usually are led into the area by scouts who know the area. The snipers select their positions at night but prepare them during the day. Preparation includes digging in, camouflaging the position, clearing lanes of fire, and improving the position. Unlike World War II, the pair of snipers do not occupy the same position but are some distance apart where they can see each other and the ambush area. They set up some 200 to 300 meters from the ambush area, while the support group sets up some 200 meters to the rear of the snipers and some 500 meters to the side. The sniper team will remain in position for one or two nights.

The sniper carries his sniper rifle as well as an assault rifle or machine pistol for close-in fighting. He also carries a night-observation device, dry rations, hard candy, a flare pistol with a red flare, a grenade, two shelter halves, and a shovel. Sometimes he also carries a radio. In the mountains, he carries a ski pole to help him climb. He wears a mask to hide his skin tone. Snipers do not intend to be captured. If the support group fails to cover the sniper's withdrawal, the red flare will bring artillery fire down on his position, and the grenade will deal with the sniper and his attackers simultaneously.

Elite snipers are not MVD or FSB conscripts but extended-service contract personnel and company-grade officers.

Boris K. is a senior sergeant who served as a sniper for two years while with the airborne in Afghanistan. He graduated from airborne sniper school and was awarded the "Order of the Red Star" and the "Medal for Merit in Combat" for service in Afghanistan. Although he worked alone in Afghanistan, he always works with another professional sniper in Chechnya. He has also selected the personnel of his support group and, depending on the mission, the size of the support group may sometimes expand to 16. Professional snipers are rotated out of combat frequently to keep them fresh.

Elite (professional) MVD and FSB snipers are trained at the Water Transport Special Police Detachment facilities near Moscow. Famed special units such as the FSB's Alfa Detachment and

In the 1999 War, the Russians took a page from the Chechens' 1996 notebook and began forming their own two- or three-man hunter-killer detachments.

the MVD's Vypel detachment also regularly train here. The school and its graduates get the latest sniper gear to field test, but most stick with the SVD with a silencer. The professional snipers in Chechnya work on the principle of killing the most dangerous enemy first. This is usually an enemy sniper or RPO-A flame-thrower gunner. RPG-7 gunners and machinegunners are usually next, followed by riflemen. A professional sniper is usually equipped with a camouflage (ghillie) suit, a scoped sniper rifle, a machine pistol, binoculars, a radio, a multifunctional knife, an entrenching tool, a load-carrying combat vest, and a backpack. A laser range finder and a periscope are also recommended.

There is a lot of activity in developing and fielding new Russian sniper rifles. The impetus for this development was the Soviet-Afghan War, and the development has continued to the present day. The Russians consider the 7.62x54mmR sniper round effective and

lethal to 600 meters while the 12.7mm (.50 caliber) is effective and lethal out to two kilometers. Recently, the 9mm (9x39mm cartridge with the 16.2 gram subsonic bullet) has become popular. There is even work on .22 Long Rifle silenced weapons for close work. Instead of trying to produce an optimum sniper weapon that will work equally well on all terrain and various ranges, the Russians are developing a family of sniper weapons for different terrain and situations. Most of the sniper weapons have silencers.

Western Sniper Issues

Recent Russian experience shows that the role of the sniper is increasing on the modern battlefield. With the increased demand are questions on proper training equipment, tactics, force structure, and employment. These are also concerns in the Western military services.

The right place for snipers on the contemporary battlefield remains a topic of debate. In many Western armies, there are sniper weapons in the arms room but no TO&E snipers. If a company or battalion commander wants some snipers at his disposal, he has to come up with the training funds and send his sniper candidates off to a lengthy course. Once the snipers return, they have to continue training at home station. Home station training requires additional resources, a separate training schedule, and a 1,000-meter range. Older military posts might have 1,000-meter ranges, but newer posts have much shorter ranges, and what older ranges there are, are often poorly maintained. Once the sniper rotates, a new sniper must be trained in his stead. Since *sniper* is not a recognized specialty in many armies, there are no promotion advantages for a distinguished sniper, and promotion usually ends his career. The United States Marine Corps has addressed this problem by making snipers part of the reconnaissance platoon and creating a scout/sniper military occupational specialty (MOS).

The Soviet/Russian approach was to have a TO&E sniper in each platoon, but he was normally trained locally

within the regiment. Sniper shortcomings in Afghanistan promoted the need for centralized sniper schools, but quality sniper training did not appear until 1999. Most Soviet and Russian ground-gaining units did not need snipers as much as they needed marksmen. The prime question is where should snipers be assigned—in battalions or in a central reserve, or both?

Sniper tactics are an issue. Many Western armies deploy a sniper and an observer together. The observer carries an assault rifle to protect the sniper. The Soviets and Russians tried this approach with their snipers who were organic to motorized rifle platoons. This did not work effectively for them in either Afghanistan or Chechnya. The platoon sniper eventually ended up as part of a two- or three-man hunter killer team that employed the sniper as a marksman. Elite (professional) snipers worked in pairs with a security team backing them up. Many Western armies use the single sniper with a single security assistant approach.

The ideal sniper rifle is another issue. Deer hunters who hunt with a scoped rifle often miss close-in shots because they cannot acquire the animal quickly in the scope, and there are no open sights under the scope. The Soviets and

Russians have consistently designed sniper weapons with open sights readily usable under the scope. Many Western sniper weapons lack this elementary characteristic. Even with open sights, Russian snipers carry an automatic weapon (assault rifle or machine pistol) as emergency backup. The Russian penchant for semi-automatic (and automatic) weapons extends to sniper weapons. Only recently have they explored the inherent accuracy of bolt-action sniper weapons, but the army has yet to buy any. The ideal caliber and characteristics of a sniper rifle continue as a matter of debate in the Russian Army and others.

Western and Russian snipers have access to the same types of equipment (laser range finders, binoculars, radios, and so on). The field periscope, which was very valuable for Soviet snipers during World War II, disappeared but quickly reappeared after the initial fighting in Grozny, since snipers often need to scout the battlefield without exposing their heads and hands.

Sniping is once again a hot topic in the U.S. Army. During Operation Anaconda in the mountainous Sharikot valley of Afghanistan, Canadian Snipers from the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry

Regiment, destroyed enemy targets at ranges well beyond the capability of the U.S. assault rifles. The Canadian .50 caliber rifles proved quite effective and created a demand for .50 caliber rifles in the hands of U.S. troops in that region. As the U.S. Army reexamines the mission and role of snipers in its infantry units, the Russian experience, and the recent Canadian experience, should certainly shape the debate.

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