Long Range Marines:
The United States Marine Corps
Scout/Snipers in Vietnam

Honors 499

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Introduction

My Senior Honors Thesis is the culmination of my years at Ball State University. It shows both the knowledge I have gained and the lessons learned throughout this journey of education. This Thesis owes a great deal of thanks to several people. First and fore-most is Dr. Thomas Phelps of the History Department. As my advisor, he helped to create a work which I am pleased to have produced. Other persons who were helpful in this endeavor are Dr. Tony Edmonds and Dr. Phylis Zimmerman, both of the History Department. Once again, special thanks to those people, as well as all those at Ball State who made my experience there so extremely pleasant.
There were a small group of highly trained soldiers who struck fear deep into the hearts of the North Vietnamese forces in the Vietnam War. These men stalked to their position, from which a single, well placed shot would ring out, and another enemy fell. These men were the Scout/Snipers of the United States Marine Corps.

To understand the importance of these men, as well as the evolution of the military sniper, there are several things to be considered. In sniping, as in all history, it is necessary to examine the foundations which led to the American deployment of snipers in Vietnam. Sniping in general has always had a love/hate relationship in the military, a feeling which the Marines helped change.

To comprehend the entirety of the Marine Corps' snipers in Vietnam, there were several categories which had to be investigated. The weapons of the sniper were highly precise instruments, and an analysis of these weapons assisted in understanding their complete purpose and usage. The Marines had no true combat snipers, and were forced to develop a comprehensive training program in Vietnam to add this much needed tool to the battlefield. Once the sniper program was up and running, some of the most amazing events of the war centered around these men. Through the experiences of these men, many specific tactics and strategies were developed, these tactics and strategies still remain with the United States Marine Corps today.
To completely understand the impact which these men had upon the conflict, one must first define the term sniper. Most people envision a sniper as a lone gunman who climbs a tree, aims his standard army issue rifle, and fires a few shots at a distant enemy. This is a great generalization found in many movies both before and after Vietnam.

The true sniper, however, is something very different. A sniper is a man who is highly trained rifleman and very skilled in the aspects of basic fieldcraft. While extremely proficient at using a specially built scoped rifle, a sniper is much more than a random killer. The Marine designation is Scout/Sniper. A sniper is an important observer, and a powerful reconnaissance tool which can be used to great affect. A sniper is expected not to indiscriminently fire at enemy soldiers but to seek out the targets with the most importance then destroy them.

Traditional definitions of snipers have always centered around the use of the firearm as the principle weapon employed. The reason for the use of firearms is the range and accuracy involved, as well as a "ballistic advantage," a term which will be examined later in this work in greater detail.

The military sniper is concerned with only military targets. Critics say that the sniper is a murderer, because he engages his targets with little or no warning. This same description applies to many military practices such as ambushes and tactical air strikes which have come to be
accepted as the norm. The key difference is that the sniper has the skills to differentiate between targets which are valid and those which are not valid.

**Early History:**

The roots of sniping can be traced almost as far back into history as gunpowder itself. In fact, traditional definitions of snipers have always centered around the use of the firearm as the principle weapon employed. The reason for the use of firearms as the central definitive term is the range and accuracy involved, as well as a "ballistic advantage." In order for a marksman to be proficient, he must have an accurate firearm. In order for that firearm to be accurate, it must have rifling. Rifling is a series of grooves cut on the inside of a barrel in a twisting, spiral pattern. This twist causes the bullet to spin in flight, creating a ballistically stable flight pattern. The projectile is much more stable and its flight path much more predictable. Rifling was known to gunsmiths probably as far back as the 1500s.

Rifling, however, resulted in a major drawback: the rate of fire was very slow. Because of this, most armies around the world frowned upon its use in warfare. It was not until the American Revolution that rifled military arms saw any widespread use. When people envision the American Revolution, and the battles involved, they often see the Americans hiding
behind trees, firing with their long and accurate rifles from a distance at the helpless British. This, for the most part, was not the case. The bulk of the small arms on both sides was the smooth-bore (no rifling) musket. However, the Americans did use their rifled weapons to great affect.

The standard British musket was accurate out to eighty or one hundred yards. At the time, soldiers determined accuracy according to their ability to strike a standing man. This coincided with the traditional use of ranks and files for infantry man in front of officers and artillery personnel beyond the range of muskets. The American rifles, in the hands of a skilled marksmen, could accurately fire to 300 yards. This gave the British fits, because their cannon crews and high ranked officers were fell by shots which they could not return. In the Revolution, most Riflemen, as they were often designated, worked in large groups of about company size. Because of their slow rate of fire and lack of bayonets Riflemen usually depended upon other, more traditionally armed troops for actual battles, while they served in a skirmish and supportive role.

The British, however, did have a man, Major Patrick Ferguson, who was very much interested in military rifles. He designed the Ferguson rifle which was very accurate. He designed it as a breach loader, so it had a rate of fire even higher than traditional smooth-bore weapons. The breach of a weapon, located just forward of the lock (the firing
mechanism, which houses the trigger and hammer) is the portion in which the actual detonation of the propellant occurs. At one point, Ferguson, who was a champion marksman himself, had the ability to change the course of the war and perhaps the entirety of American History as well. Ferguson, while on a scouting mission, noticed a group of rebel officers in the distance. He took aim with his rifle, but as he did so the officers turned to ride away. He could not bring himself to shoot in the back the officer at which he was aiming. That officer was none other than General George Washington. Shortly after this incident Ferguson was killed, and his rifle was dropped from use by the British Army for more traditional weapons.

The War of 1812 brought the American marksman further fame. Throughout the war riflemen were used to good effect, with the most famous use being in the Battle of New Orleans. There, Andrew Jackson's Kentucky riflemen were instrumental in the defeat of the British forces. It was because of this that the long rifles used by the men were dubbed the "Kentucky Rifle." However, the British, having learned their lesson in the Revolution, fielded some riflemen of their own.

It is important to note that the rifles used in both these wars were not military weapons. They were civilian weapons which were used for military purposes. This was a fact throughout the history of the Marine Snipers, and was remedied only due to the lessons learned in the earlier stages
of the Vietnam War.

It was during the American Civil War that sharpshooters, as they were called, began to take on the appearance of what would later become the modern day sniper. Due to the large numbers involved on both sides, a great deal was learned about how to effectively use such firepower on the battlefield. During the Civil War, the majority of troops on both sides were armed with rifles which could kill in excess of 300 yards. The sharpshooter, therefore, needed the capability for accuracy beyond the standard 300 yards.

It was also during the course of the Civil War that a new technology was employed that would forever change the history of snipers. The first use of a telescopic-sighted military rifle gave the sharpshooter the capability to hit targets which were barely visible to the naked eye. This technology greatly extended the accurate range of the sharpshooter far beyond the capability of the ordinary soldier. This technology also led to the role of an observer being given to the sharpshooter. With his scope, he could see farther and in greater detail the enemy troops and fortifications, thus providing a great deal of valuable information that was beyond the ability of the naked eye.

Tactics had changed by this point as well. While the sharpshooters were still organized into companies they operated in much smaller groups. Often times the sharpshooter worked alone or with a handful of other sharpshooters. They
were given a relatively free hand in choosing the place on the battlefield where they could have the most effect. As in earlier wars, their targets of choice were cannon crews and officers.

The cannon of the Civil War had changed little over the decades and had a very limited range. A sharpshooter could place himself at 600 yards, for example, and fire at the crews with little danger to himself for the most part, as he was beyond the range of most of the cannons of the day. At such a range, however, the sharpshooter was still capable of killing the crews which operated the cannon. However, there was a new target which gained a great deal of the sharpshooter's attention, that being the one which now presented the most personal danger to the sharpshooter, the enemy sharpshooter. 7

As of yet, the rifle used by the sharpshooter was not a military arm. It was a civilian arm which was used by the military. No effort had been made to produce a military arm specifically for sharpshooters. In many cases, rifles such as the Union's Sharps rifle, and the Confederate Whitworth rifles were weapons which had proven to be very accurate in civilian marksmanship competitions. 8 They were pressed into service by a desperate military with little or no modification. The same situation was seen with the scope, first designed to assist the competitive shooter, and then adopted by the military.

Amazing as it may seem, given the great impact that these
sharpshooters had in the war, the United States gave no thought to further advances in this field after the Civil War. There was no program developed to produce accurate weapons or quality scopes for sharpshooters. The sharpshooter rapidly fell from a position of great importance to one of non-existence following the Civil War.

The First World War, however, elevated the sharpshooter to the status of the modern sniper. The Germans were well prepared for the use of snipers. The Germans made sure that their men had accurized versions of the standard Mauser, plus, and perhaps even more important, of vast quantities of quality optics for field use. The German sniper had a good scope with which to fire as well as binoculars and spotting scopes with which to observe the enemy. The United States, and all the Allied nations for that matter, were quite unprepared to meet this threat. They had no trained snipers, no sniper rifles, and few scopes. It was only after seeing the devastating effect of the German snipers that the Allies moved forward with sniper programs of their own.

Additionally, tactics and applications of snipers evolved as well. Snipers either worked entirely alone, or with a spotter, a new addition to the arena of sniping. The spotter had several jobs. One was to provide support and protection for the sniper. The sniper, while looking through the scope, had a limited view of the battlefield, and was armed with a precision instrument which offered little protection from
close threats. The spotter, therefore, served to look over the entire battlefield to recognize threats and potential targets for the sniper. Additionally, the scope’s magnification often made targeting of targets within one hundred yards difficult to find. The spotter was armed with an open sighted rifle which dealt with these threats easier. Also, when the sniper was firing, the observer watched through an optical device so as to advise the sniper of a hit or to see where the bullet went in the event of a miss and then informed the sniper so that he could adjust accordingly.

A sniper’s targets also changed with the nature of World War One trench warfare. Artillery was now far out of range, but crew serviced weapons, (weapons which require more than one person to use, such as machine gun) were not. The crews of these weapons were a favorite target but not as much as the weapon itself. A shot placed into the breach of a machine gun ruined that weapon for further use and was more effective than killing the crew. Officers, at least high ranking ones, were farther from the front, and targets seen for a second or two in a gap in the trench are hard to identify, but the killing of ordinary soldiers served a much different purpose which went for beyond the loss of a regular soldier. A sniper’s shot rang out, apparently from nowhere, and killed a man who felt safe in the trench. This had a devastating affect on the morale of the troops left alive.

In World War Two, there were very few changes present
from World War One. Sniping tactics and technologies remained unchanged in the years between the wars. There was one major change, however, the nature of the warfare present. World War Two was much more fluid and fast paced when compared to World War One. This presented more freedom to the sniper.\textsuperscript{9}

Other than the one deviation, World War Two left little to examine in general terms. The trends which had been established in previous conflicts held true. The snipers were once again products of need for the Allies, after German and Japanese snipers proved the value of snipers. The weapons and equipment were once again civilian products pressed into service.

Korea presented great problems for the sniper. The ranges involved were often greater than one thousand yards, far beyond the range of the standard sniper’s rifle. This war was the first to develope extreme range sniping, as well as introduce the use of the Browning .50 caliber M2 heavy machine gun as a sniper’s weapon. While the weapons, ammunition and optics were not up to the challenge of the demands of accuracy at such ranges, hits were occasionally made. However, to the enemy, even a near miss fired from a weapon they often did not see or hear was very demoralizing.\textsuperscript{10} This was significant when the use of these weapons dramatically increased in Vietnam and the Gulf War. Conventional sniping was used in Korea, but it followed the path of the two world wars in tactics, weapons, and other major aspects.
Vietnam:

All of the major wars in which the United States has been involved have seen the use of snipers. Vietnam was no exception. What was interesting was the way that snipers were introduced into the Vietnam War. In the wars previously examined, snipers were created in the middle of a conflict by desperate militaries who needed snipers' services on the battlefield. The snipers would do what was requested of them, but once the need was over, so were snipers. According to Sasser, author of *One Shot-One Kill*, "the standard reaction was to cork the snipers back into their bottle, as though they never really existed." As with the other wars, the need developed first.

In Vietnam, the need was filled largely by frustration. This frustration manifested itself in the mind of Major General Herman Nickerson Jr, the commander of the First Marine Division in Vietnam. There were several reasons for General Nickerson's frustration. One was the fact that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong (VC) had used their own snipers to great affect. Nickerson wanted to inflict similar problems on the enemy along with the added benefit of having the capacity to eliminate the enemy snipers. The other reason was due to field observations which the General had made. While inspecting a firebase, he noticed some armed men in black pajama's, the Viet Cong uniform, walking at about one thousand yards range. He then was informed that the
individuals were too far away to engage them. He further learned that even if they had been close enough for an M-16 to reach, it was highly improbable that there was a marksman capable of hitting them.

In Vietnam, a trend which had been increasing throughout this century took a tremendous leap skyward. This trend was in the number of rounds needed to produce a single enemy casualty. During the First World War, roughly seven thousand rounds were fired to produce a casualty. In World War Two, this number jumped to twenty-five thousand rounds. For Vietnam, estimates vary from fifty-thousand rounds to in excess of two hundred thousand rounds.\textsuperscript{12}

There were several reasons for this poor marksmanship. One was the nature of the troops present in Vietnam. A large number of draftees who had little or no shooting experience prior to their induction led to some of the trouble. Another problem which caused such an expenditure of ammunition was the jungle in which the fighting occurred. The jungle could easily hide the enemy, causing the soldiers to fire blindly into the jungle in the direction they thought the enemy was hiding. The weapons used were also a problem; there was a proliferation of automatic weapons, arms which could eat up bullets at an unbelievable rate.

Perhaps the most important contributing factor to poor marksmanship was found in the training policies of the armed forces. There were two key concepts to firearms training at
that time: the concepts of Trainfire and Quick-kill. Trainfire resulted from a study done by the Army, mostly in Korea. It concluded that in combat most targets would be visible only briefly and at relatively close range, two-hundred to three-hundred yards. With this study as a basis, the military trained its troops to fire at "pop-up targets" at various unknown ranges. This was good in theory. However, the basics of shooting, the learning of how to hit a stationary, fully visible target at a known range was ignored. Without these basic foundations it became very hard to hit anything at all.

Quick-kill came into being from experiences in Vietnam. The key to this concept was volume of fire, often erroriously referred to as firepower. The volume of fire was the number of rounds outgoing to a target. Firepower, however, was quite different. Firepower was the number of rounds actually striking the target. Quick-kill policy stated that since the enemy was often seen for a brief moment, if at all, the soldiers should fire as many rounds as possible towards the target as fast as possible. The laws of probability were figured to ensure a hit. Records revealed, however, that this was not the actual result. Theodore Roosevelt once said "in battle, the only bullets that count are the ones that hit." It was obvious from the above statistics that when a soldier fired his weapon, it rarely, if ever counted.

Therefore, in 1966, Nickerson ordered Captain Jim Land to
start up a training program to enable the First Division to field snipers as soon as possible. Captain Land was a good choice to start a sniper school in Vietnam. He had founded the first peace time sniper school at his post in Hawaii in 1960. He had spent years studying the written works of snipers from previous wars, and was very excited about the prospect of trying out his knowledge in combat. While he was an instructor, Land actually had never seen combat as a sniper.

RIFLES

When Land started his Scout/Sniper school in September 1966, he faced several problems, the biggest of which was a lack of quality rifles. This was a problem that was not easy to correct. The only rifle readily available was the Winchester Model 70, a bolt action target rifle with which the Marines were familiar. The Marine Corps shooting team had been using these rifles for quite some time, and their accuracy was well known. The rifles sent to Vietnam were Model 70s with heavy "bull" barrels chambered for the 30-06 round and were fitted with either a sporter or target stock.¹⁶ A heavy barrel, sometimes referred to as a "bull barrel", was a barrel which is of greater outside diameter than a normal rifle barrel of the same caliber. These weapons fired the M72 National Match round with a 173 grain boat-tailed bullet. (See appendix) On these rifles were mounted World War Two era
Unertl scopes with 8X magnification.

There were several reasons why a bull barrel was important to insure the long range accuracy needed by a sniper. One reason was that the increased amount of metal made the barrel stiffer which helped to keep the rifle shooting straight as the bullet traveled down the barrel. A second reason was that the metal absorbed heat, helping to keep the barrel closer to a consistent temperature while several shots were fired. If a rifle was fired several times in a short amount of time, the temperature of the barrel rose significantly. This severely affected the accuracy of the rifle until the barrel cooled.

A target stock was a stock which was designed to give the shooter the maximum advantage while on the target range. This was of great benefit to accuracy, but it did have drawbacks. One drawback was the weight of such a stock which was considerably greater than that of a sporter stock, a stock designed to be carried in the field. Another drawback of the target stock was that what was good on a target range may not work so well in the field due to the wide variety of conditions found in combat. While not as easy to shoot accurately, the sporter stock was lighter and thus easier to carry. Also, it was designed for easier use in the many different situations faced in combat, not just to perform well at the range.

The Unertl scope was a common scope used for many
competition events and had seen action in World War Two and Korea. The 8X fixed magnification was a relatively high one, which was useful at longer ranges. The magnification of a scope was very important, as it enabled the shooter to see his target much more clearly. The 8X designation meant that the scope increased the size of the object by eight times. This made a target seen through the scope at eight hundred yards look the same as a target seen with the naked eye at one hundred yards. A fixed scope was one that remained at a constant magnification while a variable scope was one whose magnification can be adjusted. There were good and bad points to each type of scope. The problem with fixed scopes was the field of view. An 8X scope was highly effective at long range, but inside of three hundred yards, the scope was a hinderance. At such close range, it was easier to make the shot using the observers M-14 with open, or conventional sights. A variable power scope (with the ability to reduce the magnification for use at shorter ranges) solved this problem. However, the problem with these scopes was that they were more complex, and thus less robust than the fixed power scopes. Scope magnification also varied, 10X Unertl scopes, as well as Redfield 3X-9X variable power scopes were also used.

The major problem with the M-70s was two-fold. First, they were old and in need of replacement, perhaps more M-70s, or a new rifle. Second, while the M-70 was an accurate rifle,
it was a target rifle, not a sniper rifle. The difference between the two was very slight. Both must have been very accurate, but the type of accuracy was the key to the difference. According to the Marines, "a target rifle is expected to put all its shots into a very small group after some adjustments to the sights. The sniper's rifle must put the first shot of any day into the same spot as the last shot of any other day." 17

These rifles were pressed into service, much like target rifles in previous wars. These rifles were never officially adopted for combat use for the Marines, but did see a great deal of combat in Vietnam. They were not the rifles which were to become the official sniper rifle of the USMC; that honor went to the Remington Model 700, which became the Marine's M-40.

The M-40, adopted April 7, 1966, started with a standard Remington 700 bolt action (the breech area where the firing of the bullet actually occurred.) To this base was added a tapered, free-floating medium heavy target barrel (the stock never actually touched the barrel accept where the barrel was attached to the action, this was another aid to long range accuracy.) This barrel was chambered for the NATO standard 7.62mm bullet, which was also known as a .308. The entire rifle was given a non-reflective finish to aid in concealment. This rifle was to be topped with the Redfield 3X-9X variable scope. The entire package weighed nine and one-half pounds,
and had an overall length of 43.5 inches. The preferred ammunition was the M118 National Match which was made at the Lake City Arsenal, the same used by the Marine Rifle Teams. This cartridge propelled a 173 grain boat tailed bullet at 2,550 feet per second, and which could strike a target one thousand yards away with great accuracy.

This choice of a rifle was in contrast to the Army's choice for a sniper rifle. The army chose an accurized M-14, which was designated the M-21, as the weapon for their snipers. This rifle was an automatic rifle, and it did not have the medium heavy barrel like that of the M-40. The M-21 did have the advantage of being able to mount the Starlight Scope system, a system which allowed short range shots to be fired at night. The M-21 was capable of faster second shots due to its action, but this went against the Marines' ideals. The M-21 was not as accurate at extreme ranges due to the same action. The action used gases from the bullet's propellant to move the bolt, thus robbing the bullet of important velocity at long range. As a result, the M-21 could only fire out to about nine hundred yards, and even less with any degree of accuracy.

Captain Land, however, had to make due with his M-70's for a while. It took some time for the new rifles to be produced and even longer before they were shipped to Vietnam in any quantity. For that moment at least, Land had rifles which were capable of sniping, and it remained for him to
produce the men which would put the rifles to use.

**The American Sniper:**

As for the men who became the students in his sniper school, Land looked for a special type of soldier. It was important to Land that his students were combat veterans; they had been under fire before and would know what it was like and how to react. Second he looked for men who were able to demonstrate above average ability in fieldcraft. His snipers would be out with only their observer as help and would be forced to rely on their own skills to survive. Another important criteria for his students was that they had qualified as expert riflemen. Many of Land’s snipers had been competition shooters at one time or another.

There were other qualities for which Land looked in his students, qualities which are important today at the Marine Scout/Sniper School in Quantico Virginia. Right handed people are preferred; most bolt action rifles and most people are right handed. This made pairings of sniper/spotter easier. Glasses were out, as they could be lost, damage, or fog easily. Snipers must not smoke. Smoke can be detected at long distances, as can the glow. Also, smokers get very shaky when they go without a tobacco, thus hindering their accuracy.

According to Land, one of the most important things learned during the training period for his instructors was the
psychological make up of a good sniper. Land said "when you look through a scope, the first thing you see is the eyes. There is a lot of difference between shooting at a shadow, shooting at an outline, shooting at a mass, and shooting at a pair of eyes." Major Dick Culver, who served with Land, said "he (the sniper) has to have no compunction against killing, but he must also have compassion...one who kills wantonly is worthless. You don’t want a man who will kill for the sake of killing."

There were two qualities perhaps more important than anything else, however: patience and concentration. It may take days of waiting in order to fire the one perfect shot. Concentration was also a key, not only for hitting a long range target but for survival as well. This concentration is what helped make Carlos Hathcock so successful. Hathcock was the Marine’s leading sniper in Vietnam. Land said "the thing that set Hathcock apart was his concentration and total awareness of his surroundings."

The school Land started was designed to last two weeks. The first week was devoted to marksmanship training with the scoped M-40. The second week of the course focused on teaching the tactics which would enable the students to complete their missions and survive. For a student’s graduation test, the student was required to go out with an instructor to obtain his first kill. The sniper and instructor would accompany a Marine patrol to an area in which
patrols had noticed enemy activity. Once in the area, the snipers would stay behind and watch for signs of enemy activity.\textsuperscript{21}

Once Land had these men assembled, he taught them everything he had ever read or heard about sniping throughout history. They read first hand accounts and how-to-manuals from many different armies. When they had exhausted all the literature, they set about becoming proficient with their weapons. The sniper was to be armed with the M-40 while his observer was to carry an M-14. This was because they could both make use of the same ammunition, a great advantage in the field far from any resupply base.

Once this had all been accomplished, Land had his snipers. But one more thing remained. These men were to become the cadre of schools for even more snipers, and as yet had never actually shot anyone as a sniper. Land decided that they must test their training in the field before they could attempt to teach it to others. So, with that in mind, Land told his men "let's go hunting."

And hunting they did go, for a three month period, to gain valuable field experience in sniping. Land's students quickly showed that General Nickerson had been right in starting the school. Land sent seventeen men out to learn the art in the field. During their training period, these men killed more Viet Cong than any single battalion in I Corps.\textsuperscript{22} This was done without a single sniper being killed or wounded.
These kills were confirmed kills as well. For a sniper to get a confirmed kill he must have a witness and be able to search the body and physically confirm the target’s death, thus insuring an accurate "body count," something which could not be said for standard line units.

One of those cadre members helped change the face of Marine Sniping for decades to come. That man was none other than Carlos Hathcock, who was to become the most successful Marine Sniper in Vietnam. Hathcock racked up ninety three confirmed kills before the end of his service, and after Vietnam he assisted in the development of the Scout/Sniper Schools in the United States, as well as the Scout/Sniper Military Occupational Specialty(MOS).

The Enemy Sniper:

The NVA and VC had snipers as well, and these snipers were the Marines’ primary concern. Viet Cong snipers were not truly snipers in the context of the definition used in this work. Most Viet Cong snipers were not well trained, and often employed a standard AK-47, or SKS rifle, neither of which have sufficient range or accuracy for the job. They simply fired these weapons from a distance, mostly in a harassing nature with hopes of hitting something.

The North Vietnamese Army snipers, however, were much different. They were all volunteers subjected to a three month course on marksmanship and fieldcraft. These snipers
were armed with the 7.62mm M1891/30 Mosin-Nagant sniper rifle. This rifle was mated with either a 3.5X or 4X scope. These combinations had been the Soviet Union’s sniper rifles during World War II and had been used to great affect.

Phil Caputo, a Vietnam veteran and best selling author, describes his contact with a VC sniper in 1965 at Hill 268: "we had little trouble with the enemy, except for 'sixteen-hundred Charlie', a punctual guerilla who cranked off a few rounds at four o’clock almost every afternoon. We grew rather fond of him, mainly because he never hit anything." A similar experience was related by Hathcock. Early one morning he spotted a sniper and easily killed him. Later investigation of a village in the area proved to be interesting. The sniper was an old man, almost seventy. He was armed with an old bolt-action rifle that was taped and wired together, and whose barrel had been worn smooth on the inside. Every morning the VC would leave him five rounds, and every morning he would fire those rounds towards the Marines. He was not expected to hit anything, the VC simply wanted the Marines to know on whose turf they were standing.

Unfortunately, NVA snipers could be very good. One of these top snipers was sent to hunt Hathcock down. Hathcock had become legendary for his shooting prowess, even among the VC and NVA, who called him "L’Trang", or White Feather, because of a feather he always wore in his hat. The North
Vietnamese offered a bounty for all snipers, but Hathcock's was the largest. Bringing in his famous feather would earn a sniper a bonus which was equal to three years' pay.

The North Vietnamese Army sniper went to Hill 55 in search of Hathcock, but he rarely got a glimpse of the elusive man. To pass the time, he fired at other targets as they presented themselves. The sniper was an excellent shot, and killed many Marines before Hathcock was able to track him down. Hathcock waited early one morning for the sound of a shot. When he heard it, he used the sound to finally locate the North Vietnamese Army sniper's hide. A hide was a specially built bunker from which the sniper can safely observe and fire. Once the hide was located, Hathcock and his spotter tracked the sniper.

The sniper was aware of their presence, and the hunted became the hunter as well. In the end, it came down to one single shot. Hathcock notice a reflection on a distant ridge. Frustrated at his inability to track down the sniper, he decided to chance a shot at the reflection. When he fired, the sniper fell into the open. Hathcock and his spotter then hiked over to the body, where Hathcock received the shock of his life. When Hathcock picked up the sniper's rifle, he noticed that his bullet had passed through the sniper's scope, striking him in the right eye. The only way this could have happened was if the sniper had been aiming right at him when Hathcock fired. This realization was an extremely humbling
experience for Hathcock.

Snipers were not always as welcomed as Hathcock had been in that situation. They were sometimes looked down upon by their own men. The snipers were often referred to as "Murder Incorporated." This reference to murder was because the sniper fired from long range, seemingly from nowhere to deliberately kill the enemy. To many this seemed like an immoral act, but in the context of war, many things were accepted. The sniper’s actions were little different than ambushing an enemy in the night. The "incorporated" refers to the rifle cases the snipers used to transport their delicate instruments of death from location to location. These cases looked like elongated briefcases, making them look much like a busy business man of corporate America.

Corporal Gary Edwards, a sniper in 1965, had a more direct and personal exposure to some people’s dislike of snipers. In some areas of Vietnam, there was an unwritten understanding between the United States troops and the Viet Cong. As long as one left the other alone, everything was fine. Edwards learned that a VC patrol often entered a village at three o’clock every afternoon, and decided to lay in wait for them. The local commander of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN, the South Vietnamese Army) told Edwards "this is VC country. We don’t bother them, they don’t bother us... until now." The local troops were very upset to learn of Edwards’ plans, but he went ahead, and was able to
kill at least four members of that patrol. This effectively ended the "understanding" of which the local commander had spoken.

Snipers did not always fight one on one with the enemy. Joseph Ward, who was a sniper in Vietnam, related the following action:

"Lightfoot (Ward's spotter) began firing, and at the same moment I shot a machine-gunner between the eyes. Lightfoot hit three men before they could get under cover. My second shot took out another machine-gunner. My third hit a mortar man in the neck. Shot four hit another mortar man, which caused the mortar he was firing to drop the shell among his own people...Lightfoot then dropped two more."\(^{28}\)

The sniper and his spotter then held the NVA down with fire as they called in an air strike from F-4 Phantoms. The jets were able to drop a load of napalm on the formation, killing many. Due to these actions, this two man team was responsible for mauling an entire NVA battalion.

One of the problems snipers faced in Vietnam was the lack of knowledge on how they should be employed. The local unit commanders to whom the snipers were assigned received no training on how to make use of these specialized killers. Often they were assigned to go on patrol with regular units, a task for which there bolt action rifles were ill suited. This was because of their slow rate of fire and difficulty in engaging short range targets.\(^{29}\) Other popular assignments for snipers were mess duty and burning heads (the navy and marine term for latrine.) These were 55 gallon drums cut in half. Periodically the contents were burned off by pouring kerosene
in and lighting it. It was a dirty, messy, foul smelling job which no one wanted, including the snipers.\textsuperscript{30}

Guard duty was another job to which snipers were assigned that they were ill qualified to handle. Lance Corporal Jim Miller, a sniper in 1968, decided to make the most of it. While serving in a tower at a firebase, he noticed some Vietnamese moving about at nine hundred yards. Observing them through his scope, he noticed that one was attempting to hide an M-79 grenade launcher under his shirt. Deciding that these armed civilians were VC, Miller engaged the party. He was able to kill the one with the "M-79 ensemble" before the others disappeared from view.\textsuperscript{31}

One of the fond memories of many snipers who served in the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) was "the lighter." At least once during their tour of duty, a sniper and his spotter were required to requalify with the M-40. This qualification was done as a contest among all the requalifying snipers. The course was worth two hundred points, with the highest scoring team receiving a Zippo lighter which was engraved with their accomplishment.\textsuperscript{32} Ward said that one of his fondest memories and greatest possessions in Vietnam was the lighter he and his observer won at that contest. One of the saddest days was the day that someone stole that treasured lighter from him.\textsuperscript{33}

One of the most notable shots of the war, as well as the longest confirmed kill in United States Marine Corps history, was also fired by Carlos Hathcock. While on duty at Hill 55,
Hathcock attached his sniper scope to a standard M2 Browning .50 caliber machine gun, and zeroed (set up the scope to fire at) twenty-five hundred yards, more than one and one half miles. While behind the gun, he observed a Viet Cong "mule" or equipment carrier pushing a bicycle loaded down with AK-47s. It was the mule's misfortune to cross right in the area where Hathcock had targeted to zero his scope. Hathcock fired one round into the front of the bicycle. In response, the mule returned fire with an AK-47, although he had no chance of hitting Hathcock. Hathcock then centered the scope on his chest and fired. The round struck squarely in the center of mass, resulting in one kill.

This shot, quite simply, was amazing. The range was greater than double the range at which snipers were trained to fire. In fact, that range was well outside of the accuracy potential of the M2 which Hathcock fired. However, it did demonstrate what good equipment, proper training, tremendous skill, and a lot of luck could produce. It was a shot such as this which eventually led the Marines to adopt a special built .50 caliber sniper rifle, which saw action in the Gulf War.

The great impact which the snipers where having in Vietnam was quickly appreciated by the higher Marine Corps officials, and sniper schools were developed in the United States to train men prior to their deployment into Vietnam. The first of these schools was set up at Camp Pendleton,
California. It was at this school that Ward received his training in Marine sniping.

The training was of extreme importance in order for the snipers to be effective and to simply survive their demanding missions. These men would one day find themselves out in the jungle, a sniper and his spotter, miles from any support. In this situation, all they had to depend on was their training to ensure their survival. These schools reflected the training programs which had been developed in Vietnam with the added benefit of the experiences of snipers returning from combat tours. The most significant difference between schools in the states and the ones in Vietnam was experience. Snipers in Vietnam schools were selected from combat veterans, while the students in the states often had not experienced the "baptism by fire."

The first order of business in any sniping school was to familiarize the students with the bolt-actioned sniper rifles. They were trained how to care-for and maintain the weapons which differed greatly from the M-16s they had trained on in basic. It was also important for the students to understand how to properly fire a scoped rifle without injury. As Ward attested from his training, a scoped rifle could be very dangerous to the untrained user. The untrained user had a tendency to place their eye close to the scope while firing. This could cause the scope to strike the firer's eye during the recoil. While this often resulted in a bright red ring
around the persons' eye to remind them in the future to set back, it also could cause serious injury.

The recoil of the rifles was something else which took training to handle. The recoil of the sniper rifles 7.62mm round was a sharp increase over the 5.56mm round in the M-16. This increase resulted in sore shoulders until enough rounds had been fired to accustom the shooter to it. The higher recoil could also cause the shooter to flinch when a shot was fired thus resulting in a missed shot.

Accuracy was drilled into the students' heads from the first day. Their lives, as well as those of others, might one day depend upon one shot, and it was important that they had the skills to hit that shot, the first time, every time. The students learned to fire in progressively greater distances out to one thousand yards, after being told the distance. Then they were trained to fire at targets at various ranges which they had to determine in order to hit the target. Students were trained in several ways to accurately and quickly judge the distances. The ability to judge distance was a must in order to complete their missions, and, if they proved unable to do so, they were dropped from the program.

The student fired hundreds of rounds a day, every day, in all conditions. The exact accuracy requirements were vague, because the students fired in all kinds of weather, in the rain, and on extremely windy days. Usually it was left to the opinion of the instructors as to whether a students
performance was acceptable. While they did fire in the early morning hours and late in the evening, little attention was paid to firing at night. The M-40 was unable to mount the Starlight night vision scope, and so learning to shoot at night was not important to their training.

After the stationary targets were engaged successfully, the students were trained to deal with moving targets. This was the most challenging of all targets. Students learned to judge the direction and speed of the movement in order to be able to score a hit. There were two ways of dealing with a moving target, the trap and the lead methods. With the trap method, the shooter aimed ahead of the target along the line of travel and held the rifle on that position. At the proper time, the sniper fired. If done correctly, the bullet and the target arrive at the point of aim at the same time. The lead method was somewhat different. The sniper judged how far the target moved in the time needed for the round to travel the distance. He then aimed that distance ahead of the target. Swinging the rifle to maintain that distance, the sniper fired while in motion. To the properly trained sniper, a running man at six to eight hundred yards was an inviting target.37

Another variation with which snipers were trained to deal was elevation. There were two types of elevations. One was the actual distance above sea level of the area in which the sniper was operating. The difference in the density of the air could adversely affect the ballistics of the shot at long
distances. The difference in elevation between the sniper and his target also affected the shot. Optically, the target appeared different when up or down hill from the sniper, and he had to adjust accordingly. The school’s targets were designed to resemble the size and shape of a standing man. Standard round targets were of little use to soldiers who were being trained to kill a man. The scores were totalled according to how close to the center of the torso the student hit. Unlike in many popular movies, Marine snipers were not trained to shoot the enemy in the head. The torso is a much larger target, and thus easier to hit, especially at great range. Also, the head is a highly animated part of the body, often moving around a lot in relation to the body. A hit to the torso, even a wounding shot, is much more useful in combat than a missed shot to the head. However, in combat, the head is sometimes the only target available, and in those situations an attempt would be made. Snipers were trained to fire from the prone position whenever possible, as this is the most stable position from which to fire. This position also had the added advantage of presenting the smallest target to the enemy. However, in the field this was not always possible, and snipers were trained in several positions which had varies degrees of stability. Another problem with the prone position was that it took a relatively long time to get into it, and a shot could be missed. The sniper learned to judge rapidness and stability of each position quickly to
maximize the chances of a kill. It was also important for the sniper to learn how to quickly and silently load and unload the rifle. The sound of the action could be detected by close range targets. The shiny brass construction of the rounds also presented a problem. When a spent round was removed, it might produce a glare, thus giving away a sniper's position. (Likewise, leaving a spent round behind could alert an enemy patrol that a sniper was in the area.)\(^{38}\) The sniper also had to take care that his scope lens did not create a reflection.

While shooting took up a large portion of the student's time, it was not all that was required to make a soldier a sniper. A great deal of time was also devoted to the use of a radio. The sniper's radio was perhaps a more powerful weapon than his rifle. The radio enabled him to report in to his base camp. This link was important to quickly make use of any observations which he might have made in the field. Also, the radio was his one link to additional support should it be needed. A sniper was trained how to call in artillery and air strikes. The sniper then had to be able to accurately adjust those strikes to complete the mission. This was sometimes a challenge to students. They were accustomed to judging distances in yards for their rifles. However, artillery and air strikes used the metric system. The sniper had to be able to quickly and accurately convert between the two under great stress.

The range card and the sniper's log were two important
tools in assuring hits (see appendix for examples). The range card was drawn up if a sniper was using a blind, or a secure and camouflaged position which was to be occupied for an extended period. On the card, the sniper sketched the major landmarks. Over this he drew arcs representing the ranges of these landmarks from his position. He then noted likely positions where targets may appear, and wrote down their exact range. This reduced the time needed for range estimation when a target appeared, and enabled easier and more exact communication between the sniper and the spotter. The sniper’s log was always with him. In this, he noted every shot fired, the location, range, target or targets, time, date, important surroundings, and the results of the shot. This log was written as soon after the shot as possible. He might also sketch a crude version of his range card. This log helped to tell the sniper information which he might use in future shots. It also provided a written record of what he saw in the field, which could be useful to intelligence personnel when he returned from his mission.

Sniper students were also trained to enhance their observation powers. Strong observation skills not only helped the sniper to survive, but provided valuable intelligence as well. On a mission, the sniper might never have seen the enemy and yet still be able to provide valuable information. One example would be an abandoned enemy camp. By examining the campsite, many things were learned: the size of the
force, its tactical make-up (there might be evidence of heavy or crew serviced weapons), morale, confidence factor, (i.e. how confident was the enemy of their safety in that location), origins, destination, and even their mission.

When a sniper did see the enemy, he noted every detail. How were they armed? What were they doing? Was it a work detail, a patrol, a convoy? Were they regular soldiers, engineers, local militia? How many officers were present, and their ranks. Even if it was too dangerous for the sniper to engage the enemy, this information could have been used by others.

In training, snipers were taken to mock-up camps and told to learn such details. Once shown the items for which to look, all of the information could be accurately learned in a few minutes. The snipers memory was also important. An often used training tool was to lay a series of items on the ground, under a blanket at hundreds of yards. The blanket was removed for a short time, perhaps thirty seconds. The sniper and the observer used the rifle scope and binoculars to view the items. Then they sketched all the items in place and named them. A sniper was to move silently and rapidly. Unfortunately, to do one meant that the other suffered. The faster one moved, the more noise one made, and the sniper was to judge the best balance between the two. This might vary from a relatively normal walk to a slow low crawl. A low
crawl was totally silent if done properly, but the sniper had to measure his progress in feet per hour. While moving, the sniper had to make use of local terrain to mask his approach as well as augmenting his apparel to better camouflage his person. This camouflage ranged from a normal uniform to a ghille suit. A ghille suite was a coverall worn over a sniper’s clothing. It was made of burlap, which was then painted to match the local vegetation. Then, some of that vegetation was attached as well. A sniper with a ghille suit who was in position could be almost impossible to detect even at extremely close range. While useful in many situations, this suit was rarely used in Vietnam due to the extreme heat and humidity there.

One often used training tool honed the students skills in movement and concealment. The instructors would stand on a platform away from the students, perhaps a thousand yards, armed with binoculars. The students would be hidden from sight. They then moved towards the instructors. Any student who was seen failed the course. They were expected to get very close to the instructors, perhaps within one hundred yards.40

The sniper students were also trained to build various types of hides. These different hides varied in time needed to build and effectiveness. The ones most often used in Vietnam were ones that required no more that five to ten minutes to build. Some hides took days to build. They were
very useful in several respects. They could help to make the sniper invisible. A fully camouflaged hide, if the sniper had days, was impossible to detect, even if one was standing on the hide itself. The hide also helped conceal any movement and prevented glare from the brass rounds and the optics. It protected the sniper from the elements thus making him more comfortable and more effective. They did have drawbacks, however. They took time to build, something which was not always available. The building of an elaborate hide was difficult to conceal during the construction phase and often required assistance. Perhaps the biggest drawback was of a tactical nature. It was dangerous to fire repeatedly from the same location. This gave the enemy the chance to locate the sniper, and kill him. Also, if the sniper was detected, hides took longer to evacuate, and this delay could kill the sniper. 41

One of the most significant problems the snipers faced early in the war was that their commanders had little or no idea how a sniper could be used most effectively. To rectify this problem, the Corps turned to the snipers themselves. In addition to the training that the early sniper courses offered, the snipers were trained how they could best help in a given tactical or strategic situation. While this was only a temporary fix until the Marines could formulate an official manual for the commanders, it was very helpful in solving the problem.
The Marine Corps snipers in Vietnam had a long lasting impact on the war and the Marine Corps. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were very fearful of their abilities, just as fearful as they were of the Navy's highly touted SEALs. This effectiveness was not something which stemmed from a government study but from actual combat results.

So effective were they that the Marines made them a permanent part of the Corps. Money was set aside to further develop weapons and equipment for the snipers. Officers were trained to make use of their special talents. Eventually, a sniper training school was set up in Quantico, Virginia, the Marines main training camp.

Ever since the Vietnam War, snipers have been involved in every conflict in which the Marines were present. They were in Panama and Grenada. They protected United States interests in Beirut and across the globe. They have helped to protect the President of the United States, augmenting his Secret Service security detail. Perhaps the best example of the impact of the snipers in Vietnam was in their involvement in the Gulf War.

In the Gulf War, Marine snipers provided security for the air bases. They were deployed in the front lines with the tanks as well. Some snipers were even sent on patrols deep inside Iraq, providing reconnaissance on Iraqi forces. It was even speculated that Marine snipers should have been used in an attempt to assassinate Hussain.42
Perhaps the most telling example of the impact of the Vietnam snipers on the Gulf War was the Marines deployment of the Barret M82A1 .50 caliber sniper rifle to the gulf. This rifle was a result of the effectiveness of the M2 machine gun in Vietnam as a sniper weapon. It was a special built and accurized semi-automatic rifle which could fire in excess of one thousand yards accurately. It fired a variety of ammunition, including high explosive, armor piercing, incendiary, and tracer rounds.

One example of this rifles capabilities occurred in February, 1991, when SGT Kenneth Terry, 3rd Bn, 1st Marine Division engaged a formation of three Iraqi BMPs (Russian made armored personnel carriers) at a range of 1100 meters. He fired two armor piercing incendiary rounds into the first, which knocked it out of action. The two remaining BMPs immediately surrendered. This was a highly effective use of Marine Corps sniping at its finest.

Conclusion:

Sniping, in general, has been a portion of the military which has long received little or no attention. This was unfortunate, as the history of such personnel was as rich and full as any other. These men were highly skilled and trained professionals who did an extremely difficult job. For a long time, the experiences of the veterans of the Vietnam War received little attention. Today there is a wide range of
works examining a variety of those experiences, but relatively few examine the significant impact of the Marine Corps snipers.

Snipers went out alone, or in groups of two, into areas that the strongest units of the armed forces did not dare to tread. Once there, in the enemy’s back yard, they engaged them in a type of warfare which sent fear and respect throughout the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. With motto’s such as "one shot-one kill" and "long distance is the next best thing to being there" they plied their deadly trade with skill and devotion. Their accomplishments rank in kind with those of the famous special forces such as the Rangers, the Green Berets, and the Navy SEALs. Feared and hated by the enemy, rejected and despised by men in their own units, they continued the mission.
ENDNOTES

1. Ballistic advantage is a term derived out of modern sniper weapons. It means that a sniper is armed with a weapon that has a greater accuracy range than that of the standard soldier. This is due to the rifle itself, the caliber of the rifle, and the ammunition. Thus, a sniper can fire at 800 yards with a great chance of scoring a hit, while a standard soldier has little chance of returning fire. For example, a Vietnam era U. S. Marine Corps M40 sniper rifle had a range of one thousand yards. The AK-47, the common rifle of the Viet Cong, had an effective range of 330 yards. Therefore, a sniper would be sure to fire far outside of this range.


3. A breach loading rifle is much faster to load than a muzzle loading rifle, as the bullet does not have to be rammed down the barrel. The problem with breach loaders was a basic lack of a functionally practical design. The breach had to be air-tight during the firing of the weapon, and yet be rapidly and easily opened for reloading.


5. Ibid., 9.

6. Ibid., 15.


9. Ibid., 76.


12. Chandler, Death from Afar, p 152.

13. Sasser, One-Shot, 166.
15. Ibid., 20.
17. Ibid., 219.
19. Ibid., 172.
25. Ibid., 183-187.
27. Ibid., 118.
36. Ward, *Dear Mom*, 44.

38. Ibid., 184.


40. Ibid., 59.

41. Division Order 3590.3B: Scout-Sniper Platoons, HQ 3rd Marine Division, June 9 1968 (Department of the Navy), 35.


Bibliography

**Primary Sources:**


Division Order 3590.3B: Scout-Sniper Platoons, HQ 3rd Marine Division, June 9, 1968 (Department of the Navy).


**Secondary Sources:**


Tommy is probably the Corp's most popular poem. If anyone is not familiar with it, they will at least empathize with the theme. Tommy has remained popular in the British Forces since Kipling's time.

**TOMMY**

I went into a public-ouse to get a pint o'beer,
The publican 'e up an' sez, "We serve no red-coats here.
The girls be'ind the bar they laughed an' giggled fit to die,
I outs into the street again an' to myself sez I:
   O it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, go away";
   But it's "thank you, Mister Atkins," when the band begins
to play--
The band begins to play, my boys, the band begins to play,
O it's "Thank you, Mister Atkins," when the band begins to play.

I went into a theatre as sober as could be,
They gave a drunk civilian room, but 'adn't none for me;
They sent me to the gallery or round the music-'alls,
But when it comes to fightin', Lord! they'll shove me in the stalls!
   For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, wait outside";
   But it's "Special train for Atkins" when the trooper's on the tide--
The troopship's on the tide, my boys, the troopship's on the tide,
O it's "Special train for Atkins" when the trooper's on the tide.

Yes, makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep
Is cheaper than them uniforms, an' they're starvation cheap;
An' hustlin' drunken soldiers when they're goin' large a bit
Is five times better business than paradin' in full kit.
   Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?"
   But it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll--
The drums begin to roll, my boys, the drums begin to roll,
O it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll.

Rudyard Kipling
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A Sniper's Log

Below are select pages from Corporal Thomas D. Ferran's Sniper Log, Vietnam 1967. The pages have been reduced to use less space. We invite other snipers to submit their work for our next volume. How it is done in the field is often the best information of all.
25th July 1967

Set up in YTC outside line. Spotted 3 V.S. on same dye. Fired 3 rounds.
1 Confirmed Kill

24th July 1967

Set up in same position as yesterday. Spotted 2 V.S. along Petty Dye.
1 Confirmed Kill

June 25th

19th April, 67

Attached with 2 to V.S. A
A V.S. at 2:30 for about 2 minutes, no rounds fired.
1 Blanking Fire.

June 27th

Map of Area:

User:

 handler n.a. and Chandlerey, DEATH FROM AGE: MARINE Corps Sniping Volume II

(Iron Brigade Press, 1993)