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## MANHUNTERS IN VIETNAM

*ABSTRACT: The article addresses the organisation, equipment and typical engagements of the US Army and the USMC snipers in the Vietnam War, and examines the reasons for this conflict having become a milestone in the American military sniping trade.*

*KEYWORDS: Vietnam War, bodycount, marksmanship, sniper team, long range shooting*

### THE GENERAL BACKGROUND OF THE TYPICAL NORTH AMERICAN RIFLEMAN

The sniper is a shooter equipped with a special weapon – a rifle which is more accurate than the average servicemember's weapon. He engages targets from far – the distance could be many times longer than the effective range of the ordinary rifleman. The story of the sniper and the development of their weapons are closely related. The combat skills of the operator and the outstanding accuracy of the weapon system have always made the difference to other warriors.

The long barrelled, muzzle loading rifle was the most effective weapon for the Americans' tactics in the Revolutionary War. In certain combat situations the rebel riflemen – in many cases they were former hunters – were able to kill British officers and NCO's from 250 meters. That was impossible with a regular British smoothbore musket, and the English commanders received a horrifying lesson. Recognizing the potentials of the riflemen, on 14 June, 1775, the Congress authorized the state of Pennsylvania to create at first six and later nine rifle companies.<sup>1</sup> One of the first American expert military marksmen, Timothy Murphy was a member of the 1st Company. Using his custom-made double barreled hunting rifle he became the hero of the Revolutionary War.<sup>2</sup> The 1st Pennsylvania Continental Regiment was built on these rifle companies, under the command of Colonel William Thompson. George Washington's main engagements were supported by these riflemen – they slowed down the

<sup>1</sup> James L. Nelson: June 14, 1775: Raising Today's Army, 2011. <http://www.thehistoryreader.com/modern-history/june-14-1775-raising-todays-army/> (Accessed: 02. 08. 2015.)

<sup>2</sup> In 1777 Murphy was a major contributor to the victory: „As the battles around Saratoga raged, the British, having been pushed back, were being rallied by Brigadier General Simon Fraser. General Benedict Arnold (still a good guy at the time of Saratoga) rode up to General Morgan, pointing at Fraser and shouted „ ...that man on the gray horse is a host in himself and must be disposed of”. Morgan gave the order for his best marksmen to try and take him out. Timothy Murphy climbed a nearby tree, finding a comfortable notch to rest his double barreled rifle, took careful aim at the extreme distance of 300 yards, and squeezed off a shot. General Fraser tumbled from his horse, shot through the midsection. He was taken from the field and died the next day. Another British Senior officer, Sir Frances Clarke, General Burgoyne's chief Aide-de-Camp, galloped onto the field with an important message. Murphys second shot dropped him. He was dead before he hit the ground. These two unerring shots did more than anything else to shatter the morale of the British and to turn the tide of the most important battle of the Revolution.” <http://www.americanrevolution.org/murphy.php> (Accessed: 02. 10. 2015.)

advancing British soldiers and covered the retreating rebel army in case of breaking contact. It is a historical fact that a well aimed long range shot is able to decide a battle. In this era a saying was born: "*Fear the man who owns only one gun.*"<sup>3</sup> Usually these warriors were hunters or woodsmen who depended on their own weapon – before, during and after the war. This "bloodline" of shooters has continued through the Civil War and the World Wars until today. Every technical invention, every successful engagement made this inheritance more and more effective in combat. Besides the wars, hunting and national shooting competitions have also served as the cradles of this military trade.

## RESTARTING THE SNIPING TRADE IN EVERY WAR

If we talk about snipers, marksmen or sharpshooters an interesting phenomenon can be observed from conflict to conflict. In a certain phase of a war a demand surfaces for "long range killers", but after the end of the fights the need for precision rifle shooting, stalking and deliberate killing fades away. Take the Korean War as an example. After the invasion of South Korea by the Northern Communists, the United Nations allies and the United States became involved in the conflict. Initially the advancing and retreating maneuvers were very similar to World War II combat. The next two years were more like the stalemate of World War I. The commanders in the trenches needed an instrument to engage targets from a distance – the specially trained and equipped shooter and his rifle. The two services, the Army and the Marine Corps, started to revise and print brief field manuals about sniper training and guidelines about how to deploy military marksmen. The available telescopic sights and weapons were from the era of the two World Wars – M1903 Springfields and Garand M1C models. At that time sniper schools or courses did not exist. North Korea used snipers from the start of the conflict, equipped them with soviet Mosin-Nagant rifles or their Chinese clones. These few enemy marksmen were able to inflict many casualties, and the usual answer from the U.S. forces was massed fire. Being aware that snipers are the best countersnipers, many commanders developed their own sniper courses and techniques in the battlefield, as they did in World War II. The best shot of the company was designated as a sniper and equipped with the best available rifle.

After the Korean War the few snipers of the Army and the Marine Corps became again regular members of the services and the special weapons of their trade were put in storage. There was no room for their role in peacetime. The personal way of killing and other techniques were compared to murder and "bushwhacking". In the military leaders' vision of future war, the large-caliber guns and tons of bombs decided the battles, taking away lives anonymously.

After the Korean ceasefire the cut in sniper slots and training did not mean that this trade entirely disappeared from the ranks of the services. Many former snipers became instructors in marksmanship schools or members of competition shooting teams, maintaining the basic skills which were essential to snipers.

In the era of the Cold War the nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union made total mutual destruction possible. In the military leaders' vision the next European war would be fought between huge forces on flat terrain, supported by tactical nuclear strikes. In this picture the place of the rifleman was in armored personnel carriers. In the '60s many NATO members adopted the .223 Remington hunting cartridge, designated as the 5,56x45mm

<sup>3</sup> John L. Pluster: *The History of Sniping and Sharpshooting*. Paladin Press, 2008, 143.

NATO round. The full-automatic assault rifles designed to the new cartridge were lighter and shorter than the older semi-automatic weapons firing the 7,62×51mm NATO round. In the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps, with the newly issued M16's, every marine and soldier could carry almost two times more ammunition and engage targets with automatic, but less accurate fire. The capability of firing 100-150 rounds per minute drew attention away from painstaking individual marksmanship training.

There were still a few voices in the wilderness, who believed that there was a place for accurate, long range rifle shooting in the military. Among them was Brigadier-General George O. Van Orden, who recommended the Winchester Model 70 rifle for individual sniper weapon in 1942. After the Korean War he suggested the adoption of the very powerful .300 Winchester Magnum sport and hunting cartridge for military sniping. Due to supply difficulties the Marine Equipment Board at Quantico rejected the idea.<sup>4</sup>

In an official report, another high ranking officer, Colonel Henry E. Kelly stated: *"Apparently the sniper is no longer considered essential in our infantry. The squad sniper, actually only a designated and specially armed infantryman, has been dropped from the rifle squad of the future. Likewise no provision is included for a sniper detachment in the battle group organization."*<sup>5</sup>

Further combat experience was needed to change the view about the role and the importance of the military sniper: the Vietnam War.

At the beginning of this conflict the sniper capability had already existed in the structures of the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps – in theory. There were differences between the two services in unit organisation and weaponry, but the principles of how to deploy snipers were very similar. A Marine company usually deployed a two-man sniper team which operated together, from a "fire base". Occasionally the pair worked independently, but in the area of the company. In the cases of Army companies the riflemen equipped with sniper weapons normally functioned as unit snipers, like in the Korean War. But in Vietnam their methods of operations and tactics did not remain the same during the conflict. To successfully engage the enemy, they changed, learnt or invented whatever was needed.

## TRAINED SOUTHERN ASIAN SHOOTERS

The fact, that the first North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units in the southern areas did not have enough marksmen, convinced Hanoi to launch a sniper school system in 1965. These efforts resulted in twelve companies, which consisted of freshly trained snipers. Five companies comprised the 700th NVA Battalion and seven other independent sniper companies infiltrated through Laos into South Vietnam. Later these sniper companies were divided into 18 platoons, and two platoons were assigned to each NVA division. Thus, three or four sniper teams were parceled out to the battalions. After meeting the initial requirement, the NVA slowed down its sniper training. Their sniper training course took three months, the curriculum consisted of long range shooting up to 1,000 meters, camouflage techniques, stalking, setting mines and booby traps. The most common sniper weapon of the NVA was the M1891/30 Mosin-Nagant bolt action rifle with PU telescopic sight. Some of these rifles

<sup>4</sup> Martin Pegler: *Out of Nowhere*. Osprey Publishing, 2004. 282.

<sup>5</sup> Col. Michael Lee Lanning: *Inside the Crosshairs: Snipers in Vietnam*. Random House Publishing Group, 1998, 50.

were issued with this words written on the buttstock: *"this long-range weapon is for use only by experts. Use to shoot unit commanders and American advisors."*<sup>6</sup>

In the jungle the typical NVA sniper engagements consisted of several shots because the snipers could escape on the well concealed routes, and the thick vegetation slowed down the reaction forces. To engage distant targets, the North Vietnamese snipers occasionally used tracer bullets to observe the misses and the effect of the wind. In attacks, these marksmen did not play a significant role, but in defense they successfully delayed or pinned down American servicemembers. The five-man NVA sniper squads were able to cover withdrawals, as well as cover each others' flank. Moving backward from position to position, they allowed an NVA unit to escape in order to mass again for the next attack.

A platoon leader of the 25th Division was killed with a single shot on 2 April 1970, when the NVA 271st Regiment successfully used snipers near the Cambodian border. The parent unit, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry, found enemy snipers stalking and shooting from many directions. As a report detailed:

*"2Lt Ronald Kolb, with 3/C/2-27 Inf was killed during this maneuver, and SSG Melvin Kalili, Platoon Sergeant of the 1st Platoon, was killed when he went to aid the wounded point man. The intense enemy fire was very accurate and well-directed. The men of Company C were effectively pinned down and had difficulty locating the source of the enemy fire. They remained pinned down by the sniper fire following the firefight for over six hours and had extreme difficulty extracting their casualties. The dead point was left overnight because it was impossible to reach his body."*<sup>7</sup>

## THE NEED FOR TRAINED MANHUNTERS. THE BODYCOUNT METHOD

In this type of war, the Army and the Marine Corps constantly had to change their fighting concepts and to devise innovative methods and techniques to face an enemy whose operations ranged from NVA division-level offensives to Vietcong hit-and-run raids. One of the most effective and economical change during the Vietnam War was the deployment of properly equipped and trained snipers and sniper teams. The exploitation of the shooting skills of an individual was not new in wartime, but the way the U.S. military set up new standards and developed the expertise in Vietnam definitely was. The snipers of the Army and the Marine Corps eliminated enemy personnel at distances often in excess of 800 meters with one bullet fired from a specially designed rifle. The two-man sniper teams could operate in the open spaces of the Mekong Delta and in the mountain highlands as well, killing enemy soldiers before they heard the muzzle-blast of their rifles. On the side of economics, virtually every second sniper round produced a body count, which is drastically better bullet-to-body ratio than the statistics of other wars or the regular riflemen in Vietnam. According to the studies about World War II combat, the U.S. troops used 25,000 small arms rounds for every enemy soldier killed. This number increased 50,000 in the Korean War.<sup>8</sup> When the United States entered the Vietnam War, the technologically advanced individual weapons made fully automatic fire possible for every American infantryman, and increased the expenditure of ammunition to 200,000 rounds for every dead enemy soldier. The snipers of the Army and

<sup>6</sup> John L. Pluster: *The History of Sniping and Sharpshooting*, 548.

<sup>7</sup> Army 18th Military History Detachment, 25th Infantry Division, Small Unit Combat After Action Interview Report, 1970. <http://www.history.army.mil/documents/vietnam/renegr/rtxt.htm> (Accessed: 02. 08. 2015.)

<sup>8</sup> Kiss Á. Péter: *A gépkarabély és használata*. Zrínyi Kiadó, Budapest, 72.

the Marine Corps in Vietnam expended 1.3 to 1.7 rounds per one killed enemy soldier. In Vietnam the success of the operations was represented by the numbers of the killed enemies and not by areas taken from the NVA. Lieutenant General John H. Hay Jr., the commander of the Army's 1st Infantry Division in 1967, pointed out a key feature of the use of snipers in Vietnam in a study written in 1974:

“The use of snipers was not new in Vietnam, but the systematic training and employment of an aggressive, offensive sniper team - a carefully designed weapon system - was. A sniper was no longer just the man in the rifle squad who carried the sniper rifle; he was the product of an established school.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet, when the Vietnam War started, the United States had no properly trained and equipped sniper teams. In peacetime the sniper units of the earlier U.S. conflicts had been disbanded and the marksmen discharged or went back to the rank of the infantry. The “fair-minded” Americans had a tendency to forget the existence of a warrior, who kills deliberately with a single bullet, without warning. But in wartime the services recognized the need for renewed sniper training again. In Vietnam the Marine Corps fielded their first sniper team in October 1965. The Army started its in-country sniper training in the spring of 1968, but in the meantime some sniper weapons used by marksmanship competition teams were already adapted to the unique war zone, unofficially.<sup>10</sup> Later the policy was eased and snipers got formal support and became one of the most effective weapon systems of the war. But the result came from the individuals behind the rifles, who met the standards for acceptance into training and the expectations of their superiors.

## THE MARINES' RESPONSE

On 11 July 1965, several U.S. marines were wounded and two were killed by a Vietcong sniper, near Da Nang airbase.<sup>11</sup> More and more sniping incidents followed and the NVA marksmen were proving to be a real threat. Being confident that they could cause significant losses, and carry out counter-sniper activity, in 1966 Marine units did their best to get proper sniper rifles and telescopic sights from marksmanship competition teams. Thus, initially the USMC marksmen used Winchester Model 70 sporting rifles in .30-06 caliber, equipped with nine-power Unertl optics. In 1953 the national championship at Camp Perry was won by Staff Sergeant Don Smith, who used one such rifle.<sup>12</sup> There were no problems at all with the accuracy of the Winchesters, but in 1964 the Model 70 was redesigned and the parts of the new rifle were incompatible with those of the old one.<sup>13</sup> Many professional marksmen also noticed that Winchester Model 70s made after 1964 just did not measure up. The Corps needed a new sniper rifle, it was decided. The search for the new sniper weapon was headed by Colonel Walter Walsh, who founded the Marine Scout-Sniper School in 1943 at

<sup>9</sup> Lieutenant General John H. Hay, Jr.: *Vietnam Studies, Tactical And Materiel Innovations*. Department Of The Army, Washington, D. C., 1989. <http://www.history.army.mil/books/Vietnam/tactical/chapter6.htm> (Accessed: 02. 08. 2015.)

<sup>10</sup> Col. Michael Lee Lanning: *Inside the Crosshairs: Snipers in Vietnam*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *A Chronology of The United States Marine Corps 1965–1969*. Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps, Washington, D. C., 1971. [https://archive.org/stream/ACHronologyOfTheUnitedStatesMarineCorps1965-1969/ACHronologyOfTheUnitedStatesMarineCorps1965-1969\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/ACHronologyOfTheUnitedStatesMarineCorps1965-1969/ACHronologyOfTheUnitedStatesMarineCorps1965-1969_djvu.txt) (Accessed: 02. 09. 2015.)

<sup>12</sup> Frank G. Mcguire: *Snipers-Specialists in Warfare*. *The American Rifleman*, July 1967, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Chuck Hawks: *Winchester's Model 70: The Rifleman's Rifle*. [http://www.chuckhawks.com/win\\_70.htm](http://www.chuckhawks.com/win_70.htm) (Accessed: 02. 09. 2015.)

Camp Lejeune as a captain.<sup>14</sup> His team selected the modified Remington Model 700 rifle in 7.62x51mm NATO caliber. The bolt action rifle was made with a dulled wooden stock, epoxy fiberglass bedding of the receiver and a heavy barrel. At the Marine Corps the Remington, mounted with the Redfield 3-9x40 Accu-Range optical sight, was designated as the M40 sniper weapon system. Its reticle was connected to the variable magnification to calculate distances. To use it, the shooter simply zoomed in and out until the gap between two thin horizontal lines (representing about half a meter, normally the distance from a man's chin to his belt) aligned on the target. As the shooter zoomed, a synchronized distance scale inside the scope moved back and forth to show the distance in yards. The sniper then applied proper holdover, and fired. Using the Redfield scope was fast and accurate, but it measured distances up to 600 yards, which was not enough for military use. Firing M118 Special Ball sniper cartridges, the M40 proved very accurate: it broke „the one-minute barrier” – it was the first U.S. military sniper rifle that shot smaller groups than 1 inch at 100 yards.<sup>15</sup>

In Vietnam the Marine Corps' sniper training was carried out in division-level schools. The 3rd Marine Division established the first one, under the leadership of two former competitive shooters, Captain Robert Russell and Gunnery Sergeant Marvin Lange. The course lasted only a few days, and the candidates were sent to the field for on-the-job training. Later the school of the 3rd Division extended to four weeks. The 1st Marine Division also organized a sniper school, based on the initiative of the commander, Major General Herman Nickerson Jr. He personally travelled to Okinawa to recruit an experienced competitive shooter, Lieutenant Edward James Land to be the head of the training. The expectations of the general were clear: *“I want mine to be the best school in the Marine Corps. I want them killing VC and I don't care how they do it - even if you have to go out and do it yourself.”*<sup>16</sup>

Nickerson found the perfect man for the job. Land was one of the greatest advocates of an effective and well organized sniper capability. Six years before, when the Marine Corps had had no sniper training, the frustrated Lieutenant Land established a two-week sniper course on his own, in Hawaii, which became the first Stateside course since World War II.<sup>17</sup> For the sniper school of the 1st Division in Vietnam, he brought in Sergeant Carlos Hathcock, a former Hawaii course graduate, who already operated unofficially in sniper role and scored 14 kills. Another serious competitive rifleman, Gunnery Sergeant James Wilson headed the school's instructor team. Since they had no proper shooting range, Land and his instructors were carrying out real sniper missions to gain experience, before the first candidates arrived. According to Land's mindset, a sniper instructor cannot teach the trade to young marines if he had not actually done it himself. When the shooting range was built at the Marine base southwest of Da Nang on Hill 55, with their fresh experience, their years of long-range shooting expertise, and Land's historical knowledge, they launched their first formal course in November 1966.<sup>18</sup> From the initial three days of training the team expanded the length of the course to two weeks and the results were more than satisfactory. In the following three months, the first 17 graduates of the course killed more enemy in action than any Marine

<sup>14</sup> Bill Vanderpool: *The Amazing Life of Walter R. Walsh. The American Rifleman*, 2010. <http://www.americanrifleman.org/articles/2010/10/21/the-amazing-life-of-walter-r-walsh/> (Accessed: 02. 09. 2015.)

<sup>15</sup> John L. Pluster: *The History of Sniping and Sharpshooting*, 555.

<sup>16</sup> John L. Pluster: *The History of Sniping and Sharpshooting*, 559.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Humphries: *The Father of USMC Sniping*. 2008. <http://www.tactical-life.com/firearms/the-father-of-usmc-sniping/> (Accessed: 02. 10. 2015.)

<sup>18</sup> Jay Taylor: *Point of Aim, Point of Impact*. AuthorHouse, 2011, 30.

battalion in South Vietnam. In the meantime the Marine Corps was following the sniping developments in Vietnam, and in the next year opened a four-week sniper school at Camp Pendleton, led by returned sniper veterans who prepared the new instructors in Vietnam before coming home.

In 1968 the Headquarters of the U.S. Marine Corps made official what had already been happening, and authorized a sniper platoon in each marine regiment, plus one sniper platoon for the divisions' Force Recon battalions.

The 1st and the 3rd Marine Divisions produced more than 10,000 sniper kills by the end of the war.<sup>19</sup>

## THE ARMY WAY

Similarly to the Marine Corps, the Army's marksmen initially were equipped with several types of older weapons from the era of World War II and the Korean War – Springfield Model 1903A4s, Garand M1Ds and even a few British Lee Enfield rifles.

Some units filled the gap with ordinary M16s mounted with 3x Colt telescopic sights or other commercial optics.<sup>20</sup> The Army, dealing with the issue, sent various types of sniper weapons and optics for testing to Vietnam, in order to select the most appropriate ones. The efforts resulted in a new sniper weapon system, the XM-21, which was based on the National Match version of the M-14 semi automatic rifle.<sup>21</sup> Since 1957 the Army Rifle Team had been using this version in competitions. Unlike the ordinary service M-14, the National Match M14 had glass-bedding: the receiver area of the stock contained an epoxy-fiberglass layer, so the surfaces conformed tightly to each other, fixing the action to the stock perfectly. Despite the ordinary appearance, it had been heated over 300 degrees to eliminate the internal dampness and with resins it had been placed in a vacuum which sucked together the materials into the wooden fibers. As a result of this manufacturing procedure the stock became resistant to warping and dampness. The barrels were selected for accuracy, the mating metal surfaces were honed and the trigger mechanism was adjusted for crisp release. The Army's Marksmanship Training Unit (AMTU) in Fort Benning mounted the National Match M14 with a new telescope/mount system under the development of the Army's Limited War Laboratory. It has to be called „system” because this optical sight - the ART, or Adjustable Ranging Telescope - had a unique mounting mechanism which was as interesting as the riflescope itself. The mount was a special cradle synchronized to the riflescope's zooming ring. Looking through the scope, the shooter zoomed the magnification in and out, until the distance between two stadia lines represented 0.75 meter on the target, or approximately from the top of a figure's head to his waist. The shape of the zoom ring was elliptical: as the shooter rotated it, the whole riflescope raised or lowered in its mount, compensating for the estimated distance automatically. It was quite reliable because the cam of the zoom ring was carefully adjusted to the sniper bullet's trajectory. With the M118 Special Ball sniper ammunition, the XM-21's

<sup>19</sup> Col. Michael Lee Lanning: *Inside the Crosshairs: Snipers in Vietnam*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> H. Shawn: *USMC Scout Sniper Weapons of the Vietnam War*, 2012. <http://looserounds.com/2012/08/02/usmc-scout-sniper-weapons-of-the-viet-nam-war/> (Accessed: 02. 13. 2015.)

<sup>21</sup> Mel Ewing: *U.S. Army M21 and XM21*, 2014. <http://www.snipercentral.com/us-army-m21-xm21/> (Accessed: 02. 14. 2015.)

accuracy was two minutes of angle (about 2 inches at 100 yards) or better. From 1968 to the end of the conflict more than 1,400 XM-21s were shipped to Vietnam.<sup>22</sup>

At approximately the same time as the Marine Corps launched its sniper training in Vietnam in 1966, some Army units acted similarly.

At the 25th Infantry Division, Lieutenant Colonel Truman Boudinot was responsible for the division's sniper selection and training. Equipped with "accurized" M14 semi automatic rifles mounted with available telescopic sights, these sniper teams were "*particularly useful in harassing Vietcong movements, eliminating their Vietcong counterparts, and adding extra protection around the base camp perimeter*", according to the division's newspaper.<sup>23</sup> By the middle of 1967, their efforts had resulted in a week-long sniper course, with growing emphasis on the scouting role of the sniper teams. The 1st Air Cavalry Division also organized a divisional level sniper school near Bong Song. The trainees used the regular M16 mounted with a Colt 3x telescopic sight, which was not a real long range combination and their function was similar to today's Designated Marksmen. In the Mekong Delta, where NVA and Vietcong personnel frequently were observed across vast wetlands and paddy fields, company and battalion commanders begged for sniper equipment. The M16s just did not have the effective range. The immediate solution was to use M14s with bipods, but what they really needed was rifles with optical sights. Responding to frustrations and lost chances to engage the enemy, in 1968 the greatest change started in modern U.S. Army sniper training, initiated by Major General Julian J. Ewell, the commander of the 9th Division. General Ewell understood the role of the snipers and involved expert trainers from the Army's Marksmanship Training Unit (AMTU). The Fort Benning based unit was created in 1956 when the Army's competitive shooting program was restored.<sup>24</sup> Under General Ewell's supervision, an AMTU instructor team was dispatched to Vietnam in order to lead the newly established 9th Infantry Division Sniper School. The Army Marksmanship Unit team, led by Major Willis L. Powell and consisting of seven non-commissioned officers, arrived in June 1968. Upon arrival they helped with the construction of a 500 yard range at Dong Tam and occasionally accompanied ambush patrols to gain experience. Brigadier General James S. Timothy was in charge of accelerating progress. The curriculum of the school included the basic sniping subjects: range estimation, camouflage, stalking, with students firing up to 900 yards with XM-21 rifle, which is the effective range of the ART scope.<sup>25</sup> By the end of December 1968, 72 trained snipers had completed the course, which meant six snipers per battalion. Despite the numbers, General Ewell did not see the expected results: he discovered that the new snipers were being used as ordinary infantrymen and most company commanders were careless in the issue.<sup>26</sup> General Ewell made the battalion commanders responsible for their proper employment.<sup>27</sup> When the snipers started to get personal attention and proper assignments, the results were extraordinary. According to the combat reports from October 1968 to June

<sup>22</sup> John L. Pluster: *The History of Sniping and Sharpshooting*, 567.

<sup>23</sup> Vol 1 No. 15 Tropic Lightning News June 10, 1966. <http://www.25thida.org/TLN/tln1-15.htm> (Accessed: 02. 15. 2015.)

<sup>24</sup> Col. Michael Lee Lanning: *Blood Warriors: American Military Elites*. Random House Publishing Group, 2007, 256.

<sup>25</sup> Col. Michael Lee Lanning: *Inside the Crosshairs: Snipers in Vietnam*, 178.

<sup>26</sup> Lieutenant General Julian J. Ewell: *Sharpening The Combat Edge*. Department Of The Army Washington, D.C., 1995, 120. <http://www.history.army.mil/books/Vietnam/Sharpen/ch06.htm#b4> (Accessed: 03. 01. 2015.)

<sup>27</sup> US Army Sniper Program. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/vietnam2-sniper.htm> (Accessed: 02. 15. 2015.)



1969 these 72 snipers killed 1,158 enemy soldiers. The Sniper School of the 9th Division and its instructors became the core for any Army sniper training in South Vietnam. They instructed future cadre and students for six U.S. divisions, who went on to establish further schools. In 1969, when the 9th Division started the withdrawal from Vietnam, the school's instructor team was sent to the 25th Infantry Division, where they established a new school near Cu Chi. In the same period the 23rd Division organized three-week-long sniper courses under the supervision of a former Olympic level competitive shooter, Major Lones Wigger. The 101 Airborne Division's sniper school was run by former competitors, too. All these courses equipped their new graduates with XM-21 rifles before sending them back to their units. Arriving at Fort Benning from his tour in Vietnam, Major Willis L. Powell founded a course for sniper instructors and wrote the first sniper manual in the history of the U.S. military: Training Circular 23-14, Sniper Training and Employment. In a very short period the sniping trade in the U.S. Army advanced so far as never before.

## THE LEGACY OF THE VIETNAM WAR: SNIPING BECAME A REAL MILITARY TRADE

As soon as American ground combat ended in Vietnam, the Army and Marine Corps closed their sniping establishments. The schools, the sniper slots, the effort to develop tactics were gone. It might have remained that way but there was a human driving force: Jim Land, the same officer who had founded the 1st Marine Division Sniper School in Vietnam. By 1976, Land was a major and the USMC's chief of marksmanship. This could have been just another staff job, but to Major Land, who knew the price paid to develop marksmanship and sniper knowledge, this position became a challenge. At Marine Corps Headquarters he would explain the value of precision fire to anyone who would listen - not just as the minimum use of force but an essential capability, as critical a component of modern warfare as a machine gun or mortar.

He followed high ranking officers to sporting events, accosted them in the corridors of the Pentagon corridors, and cornered them over lunches. Land urged that the Corps needed four things: a sniper military occupational specialty, proper weapons, a formal sniper school, and real scout-sniper billets in the units' table of organisation. After a year of this lobbying, his campaign achieved its first victory. At Quantico's Precision Weapons Facility, technicians rebuilt the aging Remington M40, replacing its wooden stock with a synthetic McMillan fiberglass one, and adding a match-grade H&S or Hart barrel. This new version, the M40A1, fired impressively: on average, 1-inch groups at 100 yards with M118 Special Ball ammunition.<sup>28</sup> Continuing his campaign, the next year Major Land scored double victories: the Marine Corps reinstated the scout-sniper specialty and it created scout-snipers billets in each Marine infantry battalion. In 1977, Gen. Louis H. Wilson approved the concept and established a program in which every Marine infantry battalion would have a team of eight snipers within a special platoon of scouts and snipers called the Surveillance and Target Acquisition (STA) platoon to reflect the additional roles of reconnaissance and adjusting air strikes and artillery.<sup>29</sup> Land's greatest achievement soon followed, on 1 June 1977, with a new Scout-Sniper Instructor School at Quantico which is still in full operation today. The school's

<sup>28</sup> Mel Ewing: USMC M40A1, 2014. <http://www.snipercentral.com/usmc-m40a1/> (Accessed: 02. 16. 2015.)

<sup>29</sup> Charles Henderson: Marine Sniper: 93 Confirmed Kills. Berkley Trade, 2001, 285.

first commandant, Captain Jack Cuddy, and its NCO in charge, Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock devised the curriculum, drawing on Hathcock's extensive combat and shooting experience. Graduates of the Quantico school soon began instructing division-level Basic Sniper Training Courses at Camp Pendleton, California, and Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

Although the U.S. Army snipers performed well in Vietnam, after the war the service emphasised the mechanized, and possibly nuclear, warfare on the flat terrain of the Central German Plain. After the war, the Army continued to exclude authorization for snipers, and the infantry school did not see the marksmen as having any role on the future battlefield. Yet both instructors and veteran snipers were still on active duty, and many of them were serving in the Army Marksmanship Training Unit (AMTU). Major Willis Powell and his staff, who had established Army sniper training in Vietnam, continued to take part in regular marksmanship training. For the next decade the Army left the organisation and training of sniper teams to local commanders. A few individuals actively supported the inclusion of marksmen in their units, but most continued to ignore long-range shooting. The Army reestablished a sniper program only in the middle of the 80's under the name of Special Operations Target Interdiction Course (SOTIC) with sniper training as its core subject. In 1988 the army's marksmen were to be armed with the M24 modified bolt-action Remington Model 700s with a 10x power Leupold M3 Ultra telescopic sight. Delivery of the weapons to the sniper school and to units began in April 1988. One year later an updated sniper doctrine was released: a revised version of TC 23-14, Sniper Training and Employment.<sup>30</sup>

## SUMMARY

Some years after the Vietnam War the Army and the Marine Corps were able to consolidate their sniper training and the slots for long range marksmen were integrated into their organisations. The leaders of the services recognised the need for precise match grade rifles, optical sights and ammunition and the best available equipment was issued to the snipers. The key figures of the succesful sniper training were former competitive shooters with personal interest in the subject and in many cases they had combat experience. Even today the recruiting, selection and training are carried out according to strict standards. The era of the Vietnam War was the first instance when the opinion and experience of shooters did count in the process of selecting a sniper weapon. Due to the persistence of dedicated specialists (often in the face of organizational inertia), both the US Army and the Marine Corps had excellent sniper capabilities from the very beginning of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan in the new century.

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<sup>30</sup> Col. Michael Lee Lanning: *Inside the Crosshairs: Snipers in Vietnam*, 155.

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