

Snipers And Their Rifles - 1775-1975

First of Two Parts

By R.J. Thomas

Snipers and sniper rifles are a product of the great hunting civilizations of the world, of which the United States is the greatest.

Americans, Canadians, Australians, South African European pioneers and, to a lesser degree, northern Scandinavians and Siberian Russians, were all subsistence and market hunters. They were common men and the primary source of snipers for their armies from the 1700s through the Korean War.

The effectiveness of the American Revolutionary Long Rifles and the muzzle-loader snipers of the Civil War such as Berdan's Sharp Shooters is worthy of a stand-alone study. The hunters of Great Briton and the middle European countries were primarily from the aristocracy, with a few poachers sneaking shots at game (sometimes at risk of their lives). British aristocrats seldom ended up as snipers, but a few of the poachers did. A secondary pool of snipers were the great long-range target shooters of the mid-1800s.

The development of the long-range center-fire cartridge rifles for western mountain and plains game hunting, led to great competitions between Americans and particularly the British for the title of "greatest long range shooters of the world."

Rivalry between the Americans and the Commonwealth Nations during the 1800s led to the Palma Matches conducted at ranges of 800, 900 and 1,000 yards. The Americans fired center-fire cartridge single-shot Sharps, Ballards, Winchesters and Remingtons against British muzzle-loader Whitworths, Rigbys and Henrys. It became apparent fairly early on that the cartridge rifles had an advantage, and the race was on to develop the best long-range rifle and cartridge combinations.

Competitions were held all over the world to develop top long-range shooters and champions from many countries had huge followings who turned out to watch how their country's top marksmen fared. The long-range Palma competitions continue to this day, with micrometer non-optical sights and bolt guns (however, their loads are restricted to 7.62 NATO with 144- to 155-grain bullets).

Long-range rifles were also used by American plains and western mountain hunters to hunt buffalo, elk, moose and grizzlies. The amazing thing about the feats of marksmanship these early sniper forbearers accomplished was that they primarily used micrometer aperture rear and wind gage front sights. While crude optical (scopes) sights were available, they were fragile and inclined to lose zero once off the bench on the target range.

Both the early long-range target shooters and hunters had to learn how to "read the wind" and judge range within a few yards to accomplish the long-range hits as popularized by the 1990 movie, "Quigley Down Under." The American center-fire black powder rifles - with paper-patched lead .38 to .50 caliber projectiles propelled by up to 150 grains of black powder - reigned supreme up until the advent of the modern smokeless powder center-fire sniper rifles. Americans proudly considered themselves the best shooters in the world and our heroes of the time, like Teddy Roosevelt and Alvin York, were held in high esteem for their prowess with the long gun.

At the dawn of the 20th century, smokeless powder rifles and cartridges began to surpass the big black powder cartridges for long-range performance. By the early 1900s, the Americans had developed the 30-06 Springfield, the British developed the .303 Enfield, the Germans the 8x57 Mauser and the Russians developed the 7.65 Nagant. All of these cartridges, in combination with robust optical sights and strong bolt-action rifles, allowed snipers to make hits out to a thousand yards.

The ammunition of the day was certainly not up to the standards of today's precision loads and projectiles, however, the 150- to 180-grain spitzer-shaped bullets propelled to 2,500-to-2,800 feet per second, provided the snipers of those days with two to three minutes of angle (MOA) accuracy out to a thousand yards.

Americans continued to lead the world in long-range marksmanship through World War I and World War II, due in no small part to the youth marksmanship programs and hunting traditions enjoyed throughout the country. The National Rifle Association, in conjunction with the Army Department's Director of Civilian Marksmanship (DCM), were the primary forces behind teaching the youth of our nation the techniques required to become excellent shooters (and potential snipers).

These organizations focused on teaching young people the use of the current service rifle. Every DCM state organization would send teams of young shooters to the National Championships at Camp Perry, Ohio, to compete annually.

(Unfortunately, these wonderful programs, along with shooting programs sponsored by the Boy Scouts of America, Four-H and similar organizations, have been stifled by leftist political activists who oppose teaching our youth to shoot. Although the Democrats have been successful in removing government support from the DCM, they have been unable to stifle the gun owner and hunting traditions of the western states. As a result, the tradition of training marksmen has continued, although at a diminished level in comparison to the training that occurred from the 1920s through the 1970s. As a result, the U.S. military today has to train its snipers from a much lower level of experience than in previous eras. Many recruits have never touched a rifle prior to joining the military.

The 30-06, in conjunction with the Springfield 1903/1903A3/A4 with a Lyman or Weaver scope, continued to function well as a sniper rifle up through World War II. The American concept for employment of snipers was basically to assign them to a battalion to function as anti-sniper teams and provide perimeter security against enemy snipers. General officers often had personal snipers assigned to them as bodyguards against opposing snipers.

Snipers were chosen from the ranks of the enlisted by their capabilities demonstrated on the known-distance (KD) ranges and as members of marksmanship teams, as opposed to graduates of formal sniper training schools.

Toward the end of World War II, efforts at scoping the M-1 Garand rifle led to the M-1C/D. But the attempt to convert the M-1 to a self-loading sniper rifle was only marginally successful, for a couple of reasons. The Garand design incorporated an eight-round "en bloc" clip, which loaded and ejected directly out of the top of the receiver. This top-loading/ejection feature dictated location of the scope to the left of centerline of the rifle, making precision eye alignment with the scope difficult for a right-handed shooter and impossible for a left-handed shooter. Additionally, the side-mounting scope designs for the M-1 were too susceptible to loss of zero from rough handling and recoil.

During the Korean War, the M-1D was used with some success. However, a new mission was beginning to evolve. In addition to perimeter security and the anti-sniper role, the U.S. military sniper was using his unique equipment and hunter techniques to be the forward eyes for his company or battalion. What was developing was the Scout/Sniper mission. The concept of a sniper gathering intelligence on enemy concentrations, movements and material, while hunting high value personnel, was beginning to gather support.

By the time the Vietnam War was underway, the U.S. Marine Corps had initiated formal Scout/Sniper training schools in conjunction with their marksmanship units. The programs were a combination of reconnaissance/scout training with advanced marksmanship.

The U.S. Navy lagged behind in sniper training for its primary recon and intelligence gathering units, the Navy SEALs. The west coast SEALs tagged on to some of the sniper training going on with the Marines at Camp Pendleton, Cal., but the policy was informal: Whoever shot the best scores with the issued Remington 700 was assigned as the platoon sniper. I know, I was one of those who went to Vietnam as a SEAL sniper with no formal training whatever, except what I provided for myself in pre-deployment workups.

The Army sniper rifle of the Vietnam era was the M-14 with ART scope and AN/PVS scope for night work, designated the M-21. The load for the M-21 was the match 7.62 NATO 173-grain FMJ boattail projectile which developed about

2,600 fps out of the M-14. The Marines and the Navy (SEALs) also used the M-21, as well as the militarized 700 Remingtons (a few old Model 70 heavy barreled 30-06 rifles made it over to Vietnam too), with Redfield 3-9 range finder stadia scopes.

With selected lots of National Match or Match 7.62 NATO ammunition, my issue Remington was capable of half-minute performance out to 600 yards. I was told that my rifle was built by the Remington custom shop and the small inverted heart stamped on the underside of the barrel indicated that it was barreled with a Hart Match Grade barrel. The 25-inch barrels on the 700s developed about 2,700 fps with the 173-grain bullet, which stayed supersonic past a thousand yards.

The stability and thereby the accuracy of a boattail spitzer is directly related to maintaining supersonic velocity. The bolt gun extended the effective range of the 7.62 match load 200 to 300 yards over the M-14.

The employment of snipers in Vietnam primarily involved individuals. Although occasionally two- or three-man teams were assigned missions, often it was a single sniper sent out to hit a high-priority target. The sniper was recognized as a tremendous force multiplier in Vietnam (one sniper sometimes tying up hundreds of enemy troops). But this practice exposed the vulnerabilities of one man trying to do the job.

The snipers themselves soon recognized their disadvantage in encounters with superior numbers of enemy troops during insertion or extraction. The two-man sniper/sniper security team was the solution.

The second man in the team would also be a sniper, assigned a battle rifle to protect the bolt gunner in the event of contact during insertion or extraction or discovery in their hide.

As Vietnam wound down, the U.S. military finally began to recognize the extraordinary contributions snipers could provide. The money and support to develop the highly-capable sniper teams that emerged in the armed services in the late 1970s and 1980s was a result of the lessons learned in Vietnam.

Next: Snipers from post-Vietnam to Afghanistan

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