

Snipers, Pro and Con

Notes from the Bunker

by Rich Redman

"I do it real good, you know. When I was nineteen, I did a guy in Laos from a thousand yards with a rifle shot in high wind. Maybe eight or even ten guys in the world could have made that shot. It's the only thing I was ever good at."

-- Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) in Lethal Weapon (Warner Brothers, 1987)

Welcome to my bunker. As one of the designers of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, and a veteran of real-world modern combat (having served as a tank platoon leader in Operation: Desert Storm), I'm in a unique position to offer insights into the game.

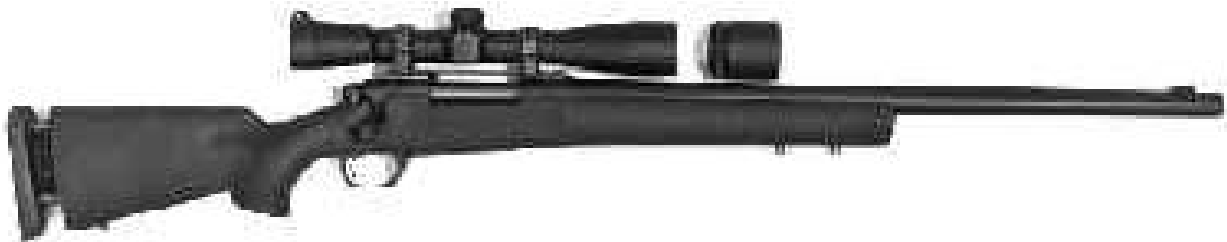


This month's topic is snipers. While in the military, I learned a great deal about how snipers work and what they need to succeed. Such knowledge breeds a healthy respect for the skills of these highly effective killers, as well as extreme caution when traveling through areas where they might be active. In fact, for some time after Desert Storm, I drove a different way to work every day just to confuse "the snipers."

Definitions

Not everyone who can hit a target from a distance is a sniper. That term applies specifically to a military person or a police officer who has had special training in stealth, infiltration, concealment, and long-range target shooting. A sharpshooter working for a government could be either a sniper or an assassin. Someone with a rifle and a scope who goes out and kills others for personal reasons is just a serial killer, plain and simple.

The military sniper's primary role is to cause trouble. Typical missions for a sniper of this sort might include eliminating leaders or striking deep inside enemy territory to remove any illusion of safety the locals might have. A police sniper is often assigned to provide pinpoint covering fire for teammates or to protect hostages by eliminating those who would threaten them.



Snipers in Games

Historically, snipers have operated quietly, carrying out their missions efficiently and usually anonymously. The profession was not limited to soldiers or even to men; in fact, many Soviet snipers in World War II were women. But because sniper characters have been featured in many popular movies, such as *Navy SEALs* (1990) and *Sniper* (1993), players may have a heightened interest in emulating their tactics in *d20 Modern* games. The idea of outwitting an opponent in the modern equivalent of single combat is certainly at least as romantic as the swashbuckling swordsman saving the day in a medieval fantasy tale. GMs, for their part, may find that snipers make excellent guards for their villains.

Thus, it's important that anyone wishing to use sniper tactics, whether player or GM, understand the pros and cons. Heroes using these techniques properly could save not only their own lives, but also those of their allies. Furthermore, a hero who understands snipers' tactics may be able to spot opposing snipers before they can do any damage.

Requirements

"One shot, one kill."

-- Motto, United States Marine Corps Snipers

Besides a weapon built for the job, what does a sniper need to operate effectively? First, she needs foreknowledge of the engagement so that she can be in the right place at the right time with the right equipment. Second, she needs distance, so that she can fire and move away before any surviving opponents can reach her. Third, she needs time to survey the location, choose a position, and set up her equipment. Finally, she needs a teammate to watch her back while she concentrates on the view within her sights.

Foreknowledge

In military operations, foreknowledge is often the most difficult commodity to acquire. A soldier has no control over his opponent's actions, so he has to be ready for anything. But there are plenty of ways to gain the necessary information through a little espionage. For example, a sniper working as a guard has access to all the information he needs. He knows all the routes in and out of his position, he has plenty of time to arrange for concealment, and he has a pretty good idea of the range at which he'll have to fire.

But perhaps the best way for a sniper hero to fulfill the foreknowledge requirement is for his teammates to lure an opponent into an area that they know and control. To accomplish this goal, of course, the heroes must know what the opponent wants and convince him that they have it. While the first part of that requirement usually isn't a problem for heroes who know their enemy, the second part isn't as easy as it sounds, especially when you consider that all three of the campaign models presented in the *d20 Modern* game feature opponents that can read minds!

Once the heroes have arranged to lure the opponent to the chosen site, they must maintain full control of it. Smart opponents always send scouts ahead to clear an unfamiliar area before stepping out into the open, so heroes must be prepared to locate and neutralize such agents silently. I say "neutralize" not because I like euphemisms, but because it's not always necessary to kill the scouts. Knocking them out or fooling them into reporting the "all clear" is just as effective, and this tactic often results in fewer legal entanglements later.

Distance

The right amount of distance for the shot is usually the toughest variable for the sniper to determine. The sniper wants to fire and then put a lot of obstacles between herself and any pursuit. The faster she can move, the closer she can be to her target. If she can fire from within her vehicle, or from close by it, she needs even less distance.

Another factor in determining how close the sniper must be is how good a shot she is -- a variable represented by her Dexterity modifier, base attack bonus, and relevant feats such as Far Shot. "One shot, one kill" is the goal of every sniper, so a less-skilled operative must try to shoot from closer range.

The sniper must also consider the capabilities of her opponents. In some campaign models, the opponents may be able to fly, and in others, they may have ready access to helicopter support. Either of these factors greatly enhances the potential speed of pursuers and thereby increases the necessary distance. On the other hand, if the sniper's opponents are undisciplined gang members, they probably have less skill and worse equipment than corporate mercenaries do, so the sniper can afford to shoot from a closer position. Even if such street toughs have hand guns, the sniper is much safer than she would be if they had one or more snipers of their own.

Finally, equipment is also an important factor. A weapon with an 80- or 90-foot range increment is more effective at a distance of 200 or 300 feet than a weapon with a 20- or 30-foot range increment would be. That's why the United States Marines use the M40A1, a modified Remington model 700, for missions in which range is important. Of course, heroes may find their equipment limited by their finances, so they often have to use whatever they have on hand. This restriction actually helps by eliminating one factor from the distance equation. Once the capabilities of the available equipment are known, all the heroes have to do is evaluate the opponents' capabilities and decide how fast the sniper can put obstacles between herself and her opponents.

Time

When the heroes have to hunt down their opponents, time becomes the most important factor in their planning. Taking the battle to the enemy allows *him* to control the location of the fight. Thus, it's likely that the opponent has fortifications, guards, and a thorough knowledge of the area. The only way to take the advantage away from the enemy is to scout the location carefully, and that takes time. How much time depends on the size of the site -- a single building takes less time to check out than a factory complex or port. The longer the heroes can operate undetected in the opponent's backyard, the more likely they are to be successful when the shooting starts, so it's often a good idea for players interested in sniper activity to give their characters plenty of ranks in stealth skills, such as Hide and Move Silently.

The ideal location for a sniper to set up offers cover, concealment, and good lines of sight. The highest point on the map is not necessarily the best place, since it limits the sniper's options for evading pursuit and often does not provide lines of sight into buildings. When the target is likely to be inside a building, the sniper may want a lower position. Only the GM can describe the situation well enough for the sniper's player to make the right choices, so effective communications at the gaming table are vital.

Teammates

A sniper needs at least one teammate for backup because his own concentration must remain tightly focused on the target. When using a telescopic scope (see below), his perception of the area around him is extremely limited. He can see only what's in the tiny circle of the viewfinder - not what may be creeping up on him from the sides.

Teammates can maintain watch and provide protection for the sniper. They can also help by observing the target through binoculars (which offer a wider field of view) and providing advice on conditions that the sniper can't perceive.

Telescopic Scopes

The *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* doesn't provide guidelines for telescopic scopes, but a set of rules governing the use of such devices can lend considerable realism to the game. I suggest the following.

- When using a telescopic scope, a hero cannot use automatic fire, or the Burst Fire, Double Tap, or Strafe feats.
- A hero gains the benefits of the Dead Aim and Far Shot feats when using a telescopic scope, even if she does not have those feats or qualify for them.
- A hero using a telescopic scope takes a -10 penalty on Spot checks made to detect opponents within 30 feet.
- Making an attack when using a telescopic scope requires a full-round action.
- A telescopic scope provides no benefit at ranges less than 50 feet.
- Depending on their quality, telescopic scopes provide varying equipment bonuses on attack rolls, according to the following table.



<i>Scope</i>	<i>Equipment Bonus</i>	<i>Purchase DC</i>
x3	+2	14
x8	+4	16
x12	+6	17
Zoom, x3-x12	+6	18

Summary

Snipers can be excellent additions to a group of heroes or serve as effective guards for villains, as long as they have the right tools and favorable conditions. The key aspects of sniper tactics and requirements are summarized below.

- Snipers use planning and specialized equipment to engage their opponents at long range. They require foreknowledge, distance, time, and teammates to operate most effectively.
- The best way for heroes to control an engagement is to lure their opponent to a place they control at a time of their choosing.
- Heroes must carefully consider their opponents' capabilities when planning a sniper operation.
- Groups of heroes that emphasize sniping should ensure that all members spend ranks on stealth skills, particularly Hide and Move Silently.
- The highest position is not necessarily the best one for a sniper.
- Telescopic scopes are handy pieces of equipment that can improve a sniper's effectiveness at the cost of overall perception. A sniper using such a device needs a teammate more than one who doesn't.

On a personal note, I stopped worrying about snipers years ago. I still pay careful attention to cars driving down my street, but I don't take cover "just in case" anymore.

About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to Wizards of the Coast RPG R&D department, he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast's Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer, having worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, the *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game*, and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich does freelance game design, cooks, and performs yoga.