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The Vietnam experiences of M.Sgt. William D. Abbott, USMC (Ret.), the Third Marines Scout-Sniper Platoon Commander (25 December 1966–14 October 1967), provide valuable insight into one Marine regiment’s efforts to employ Scout-Snipers to its best advantage.

The problems encountered and the measures necessary to pull the Third Marines sniping program together are indicative of the difficulties Marines like Bill Abbott faced in Vietnam. As the Corps was quick to learn, training snipers was one thing; employing them effectively was another problem altogether and the key to successful sniper operations.

The discipline required of a successful match shooter was one of the major reasons for the use of competitive marksmen as the organizational foundation of the Marine Corps sniping program in Vietnam. In this case, however, rather than being an accomplished rifle and/or pistol shooter, as most of the Marines involved with the sniper program were, Sergeant Abbott had earned the title of “Distinguished International Shooter” for his trapshooting skills before he was posted to Southeast Asia.

The principal arteries in the I Corps Tactical Zone, the Marine Corps area of responsibility in RVN, were Routes 1, 4, and 9. Camp Carroll, the Headquarters for Third Marines, was located on Route 9 approximately 12 miles west of Dong Ha in Quang Tri Province. The camp was situated about 6 miles south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ).
Though barely a dirt trail for much of its length, Route 9 passed through, or in close proximity to, such places as Cam Lo, The Rockpile, Ca Lu, Khe Sanh, and Lang Vei on its way to the Laotian border. For the Marines who were there, these were names and places not likely to be forgotten.

Bill Abbott describes in his own words the activities of Third Marines Scout-Sniper Platoon during 1967 as follows:

When I arrived at Camp Carroll in the Republic of South Vietnam on Christmas Day 1966, I was assigned to Headquarters 3rd Marines. On reporting I was assigned the duty of Platoon Commander of the 3rd Marine Scout-Snipers. I was instructed to report to Regimental Commander Colonel John P. Lanigan.

The colonel informed me that their “snipers were scattered from hell to breakfast” and “were not being used for what they were trained to do.” He said he would give me “just 30 days” to round them all up; retrain and refit them for duty as Scout-Snipers. The colonel wanted a unit he could call on to plug the holes as needed.

As I went to the various companies in the regiment I found the snipers being used on mess duty, guard duty, burning and every other dirty task that needed to be done.

One of the company commanders who had a two-man team assigned to him told me “I don’t give a damn who you are, you don’t get these men until they are off mess duty.” I asked to use his field phone and he said “go right ahead, call anybody you want to, but you aren’t getting them.” I told the phone operator to call “Starboard 6” (Col. Lanigan), and when the “6” came on the line I stated my problem. He said to put the company commander on the phone. I handed the company commander the phone and told him “Starboard 6” wanted to talk to him. He turned white as he took the phone and didn’t have much to say except “Yes Sir, Yes Sir, I understand Sir, I’m sorry Sir.” When he got off the phone he told his lst Sergeant to get those men to regimental headquarters on the double. He then turned to me and said “I owe you one.”

While assembly of the snipers was going on, I had my Platoon Sergeant and squad leaders putting together a training program that included a refresher course in all aspects of Scout-Sniper duties. We set up a long distance range and conducted dawn till dusk shooting practice for a minimum of 6 hours per day. The training included hand-to-hand combat, physical exercise, the use of radios for artillery and air-strikes, map reading, etc.

With training set, I took a squad leader, rations for 15 days, maps of our entire A.O., and we went on a scout mission from Camp Carroll east to the ocean. We moved at night, slept a little, and studied the terrain during the day. When we reached the ocean north of Dong Ha we crossed the Ben Hai River and proceeded west in the DMZ to Laos. We crossed the river to the south side of the DMZ and made our way back to Camp Carroll.

There were several reasons for this trip:

1. To learn the A.O. we would be working in.

2. I took plastic playing cards with me to prove to my troops that I had been there. The cards were hidden in fairly easy locations so that the patrol leaders could find them. I would sign a card, date it, hide it, and mark the location on my map. The patrol was told the location of the card, but not which card it was. When they found it they knew damn well I had been there. The former platoon commander would not go on patrol, nor did he check on the men assigned to the infantry companies.
3. To locate the routes the NVA were using to head south.

4. To determine the best locations to set up interdiction teams.

After the training was completed and the sniper weapons were brought up to as good a condition as they could be, we were assigned the task of clearing snipers (“the bad guys”) from Route 9 from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh. Our convoys were taking sniper fire on a regular basis.

We set up a system consisting of two Scout-Sniper teams in two jeeps with a squad leader and radio operator that would work together as a team. We formed a total of 10 teams and stationed them as follows: 2 at Khe Sanh, 1 at The Rockpile, 4 at Camp Carroll, 1 at Cam Lo, and 2 at Dong Ha. When a shot was fired at a convoy we responded from the east and west of the convoy and sent an additional 2 teams from Camp Carroll. The way this was set up we could have a team respond in not more than 30 minutes anywhere along Route 9. This worked very well and we secured the road from enemy sniper fire.

During this time I also visited our battalion and company commanders and gave each one a run-down on the best way to employ Scout-Sniper teams. This turned out to be a nearly full-time job due to combat injuries and rotation of officers. It proved to be worthwhile, however. When teams were assigned to go with a battalion or company on a combat sweep, in most cases, the snipers were used correctly and effectively.

The major problems we had to overcome were:

1. Being treated like a bastard at a family reunion. No one wanted to be responsible for our equipment or rations.

2. There was no schooling at company or higher level on proper employment of Scout-Snipers.

3. All of this was taking place when the Corps was really just starting to gear up in RVN.

For all of the difficulties we experienced, however, with the help of Colonel Lanigan and the S-3, things did improve a great deal before I left in October 1967. We received the Remington M700s with the 3-9 scopes, the AR15, and Starlight Scopes as well.

The rotation of snipers with two-thirds in the field and one-third being held in reserve for rest and refit worked very well. We relieved one-third every 30 days which meant 60 days in the field and 30 days R&R. When the troops came in for R&R they cleaned their equipment first and the rest came after that. While they were in base camp they were subject to being called out for Route 9 patrol or any other problem that came up.

I had 20 months combat in Korea as a squad leader and platoon sergeant and I had some very good men. I do believe the special training the Scout-Snipers had gone through gave them a better edge, that is, the men were trained for known missions and were equipped to carry out the missions both mentally and physically. These were the most highly motivated Marines I had ever commanded in combat. I am indeed a very lucky man to have had that honor. They were the best!

The official position regarding the Sniper Platoon was set forth in “Division Order 3590.3A,” 5 July.
1967. The order “promulgated instructions and information concerning the activities of Sniper Platoons within the 3d Marine Division.”

As it was then stated:

**Policy**

a. The unique capabilities of the Scout-Sniper Platoon are at the disposal of the Regimental and/or battalion commanders. The platoon may be employed as a unit, or it can be broken down into squads or teams which may be attached to any size tactical unit of the regiment/battalion.

b. Snipers should wherever possible, be employed in pairs to minimize eye fatigue from incessant surveillance. The two members relieve each other in performing the duties of sniper and observer.

c. A squad (10–14 Marines) built around a Sniper team is generally considered as the smallest unit which should be employed on missions beyond sight or direct communications from parent units. However, where the situation, terrain, and reaction capability permits the commander to reduce this force to exploit stealth and surprise, the calculated employment of smaller groups (4–8 Marines) is authorized out to 2,000 meters from friendly positions. These forces may be made up primarily or even exclusively of scout/sniper personnel provided appropriate arms and equipment augmentation is provided. Again with appropriate situation, terrain and reaction capability commanders are also authorized to employ single scout-sniper teams out to 500 meters from friendly positions.

d. Under all conditions of employment scout-sniper teams/units will be provided with appropriate communications, artillery and mortar fire support on an “on-call” basis.

e. RTE armorer, MOS 2112, will be the only armorer authorized to perform second echelon maintenance. Weapons and telescopes requiring third echelon maintenance will be evacuated to FLSG.

**Mission.** The mission of the Scout-Sniper Platoon is to support the Infantry/Reconnaissance Battalions by providing a specially trained and equipped unit capable of rendering sniper support in combat operations, by providing personnel trained to kill individual enemy soldiers with single rifle shots from positions of concealment.

**Organization.** Reference (b) [Allocation Change Number 753-65] promulgated detailed instructions concerning the organization of the Scout-Sniper Platoon within the Infantry Division.

a. Infantry Regiment organization consists of 3 squads of 5 two-man teams and a squad leader each, an NCOIC, an RTE armorer and an Officer-In-Charge with a total strength of 1 officer and 35 enlisted.
b. The Reconnaissance Battalion organization consists of 4 squads of 3 two man teams and a squad leader each, an NCOIC, an RTE armorer and an Officer-In-Charge with a total strength of 1 officer and 30 enlisted.

Considerations for Employment
a. Conventional Offensive

(1) The capability of snipers to support infantry offensive action by precision destructive/neutralizing fire is invaluable. Snipers with telescopes have the distinct advantage of being able to see as much as nine times better (with a 9x scope) than the infantry personnel being supported. Neutralization of enemy automatic weapons and defensive positions is facilitated by the utilization of optics. As advancing infantry elements continue in the advance, snipers must displace to forward echelon to effectively support the offense by fire. Depending upon the size of the objective, snipers may be massed to render proportionately more support. Upon seizure of the objective, pursuit by fire phase is enhanced by the presence of snipers.

b. Conventional Defensive

(1) The effective range and optical advantage of sniper rifles used in defensive situations causes premature deployment of enemy elements and unquestionably creates a tremendous psychological, demoralizing impact upon the enemy. Officers, NCO’s and crew-served weapons are likely targets. Variable telescopes with magnification at low power possess the capability of acquiring targets at ranges up to 600 meters when a full moon is evident, over rice paddies. While the ability to penetrate heavy foliage and tree lines is limited, distinct objects such as monuments, pagodas, etc. may be identified. Conventional iron sights do not have this capability. With telescopic sights, an additional hour of effective shooting time with accuracy, is possible. This capability denies the enemy movement during first light and at dusk.

c. Attachment to Patrols

(1) Experience has shown that the Viet Cong invariably take patrols under small arms fire from concealment. Firing is sporadic, of short duration, and because of the dense foliage it is extremely difficult to detect the source. Snipers, attached to patrols, with telescopic sights have the capability of acquiring targets more readily than other patrol members without benefit of optics. Additionally, their long range accuracy denies the enemy the ability to close and therefore minimizes the accuracy of the weapons. In built up areas, targets frequently cannot be taken under fire by area type weapons because of the proximity of innocent civilians. The capability of the sniper in delivering precision, long range fire is a tremendous asset to the patrol.
d. Daylight Ambush - Extended

(1) This type employment is used in selected areas where there is a likelihood of encountering Viet Cong. The concept of employment provides for the sniper team, with infantry protection moving to a pre-selected ambush site under cover of darkness and being in position by first light.

Surveillance is maintained throughout the day. Withdrawal is made after darkness. Snipers, with the dual capability of adjusting artillery fire, take identifiable targets under fire with artillery or sniper rifle depending upon the size of the target. Survivors of observed artillery missions are taken under fire by the sniper.

e. Daylight Ambush - Close

(1) Close ambushes are those sniper team ambushes within approximately 300 meters of friendly positions. To avoid possible capture or destruction the sniper team is covered by friendly fires. The 300 meters, coupled with the 1000 meter range of the weapon theoretically denies the enemy movement within 1300 meters of friendly positions and accordingly minimizes the effect of enemy sniper fire and surveillance. This type of employment also involves assumption of the pre-selected ambush site prior to daybreak and withdrawal after darkness has followed.

f. Counter-Sniper

(1) In situations wherein friendly positions receive small arms fire on successive days from the same general location, snipers are employed to decrease the enemy’s effectiveness by delivering accurate counter-sniper fire. The distinct advantage lies in the sniper weapons precision fire capability when firing into built-up areas which normally precludes the utilization of automatic weapons or supporting arms.

g. Blocking Positions

(1) Sniper teams attached to infantry elements in blocking positions have been used extensively and effectively in conjunction with search and destroy operations. The enemy is taken under fire when driven into the blocking positions or while attempting to evade capture. The sniper rifle’s accuracy, range and telescopic sights permit long range fires at targets which normally are too far distant to allow positive identification. This capability, in effect, precludes indiscriminate firing at innocent indigenous who have inadvertently wandered into the area of operations.

Employment of Attached Snipers

a. Employment of snipers in both an offensive and defensive role is generally limited only by the imagination. Types of employment for which snipers are suitably equipped and trained are as follows:
SNIPER PLATOON

(1) Execution of long range (500–1000 meters) daylight ambushes.

(a) To kill and harass the enemy by precision fire.

(b) Striking fear in the enemy by the psychological aspects derived from long range accurate small arms fire.

(2) Daylight patrols - Provided the terrain is suitable for long range accurate fire in support of patrol activities.

(3) Blocking forces - Cover likely avenues of escape.

(4) Offense

(a) Provide accurate covering fire for advancing maneuver elements.

(b) Attack prime targets such as: crewserved weapons, bunker apertures and personnel in trench lines or fighting holes.

(c) Pursue enemy by long range fire

(5) Defense

(a) Take enemy under fire at distances up to 1000 meters with accuracy.

(b) Deny the enemy freedom of movement in approach to friendly positions.

(c) Counter-sniper fire - decrease enemy effectiveness through accurate counterfire.

b. Supported Unit Requirements. Units employing sniper teams must insure that the following principles are adhered to in employing snipers:

(1) Always employ in teams (pair) to increase their capability.

(2) Always cover by a security element (one fire team and a radio operator).

(3) Do not employ as a security element to front, rear, or flanks in column movements.

(4) Do not employ in ambushes, patrols or listening posts during the hours of darkness.

(5) Always insure snipers are informed of any friendly forces within their operating area.
c. Control of Teams

(1) Units desiring sniper team augmentation submit request to this Headquarters. Request to include number of teams desired and estimated duration of utilization.

(2) Sniper Platoon personnel when deployed will be under the OPCON of the supported unit and under ADCON of Headquarters Company Regiment. The supported unit will provide logistical support to sniper personnel under their OPCON.

Reports

a. Units participating in normal operations include the following information in 1800 SITREP to cover the period 0001-2400H that day.

b. Units submitting 24 hour SITREPS include the following information for consolidation into Division Daily SITREP.

c. Format & Example

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<th>CMD GRU/OP</th>
<th>No. of Teams</th>
<th>No. Deployed</th>
<th>Method of Employment</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A/1/4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Outpost Security</td>
<td>IVC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| No                          | |
|----------------------------| |
| A/1/4                      | 3 |
| 2                          |   |
| Outpost Security           | IVC|

d. Additionally, a copy of enclosure (1) [Sniper Report Form] will be forwarded to this Headquarters on a weekly basis for evaluation of Scout-Sniper teams.

Action

a. Commanding Officers will implement the instructions contained within this order upon receipt.

b. The Assistant Chief of Staff (G-3 Training) will provide staff cognizance of the Scout-Sniper Platoon performance and questions/problems will be directed to this Headquarters as they occur.

c. A copy of this order will be placed in the Commanders Continuity file.

In addition to his duties as platoon commander, while serving with Third Marines, Sergeant Abbott initiated a highly successful civic action program for the Vietnamese and Montagnard children in the Third Marines’ Tactical Area of Responsibility. The program, named Operation Red Wagon, was described as follows in the January 1968 issue of Trap & Field magazine:

Operation Red Wagon is a program begun in May 1967 by the Amateur
Trapshooting Association to encourage the Vietnamese people to be self-sufficient, healthy individuals and to help our boys in Vietnam. The program was conceived by MSgt Bill Abbott (our ATA man in Vietnam at the time) and then-ATA President Ralph Taylor.

The goal of 1000 red wagons—awarded to Vietnamese children on the basis of achievement in schools and also offered as incentives for families in crowded refugee areas to maintain high standards of personal cleanliness and hygiene—was reached in November 1967. When it became apparent that the enthusiasm and efforts on the part of trapshooters would carry the fund over the $4000 goal, the ATA checked with Bill Abbott and asked, “What else can we offer the kids that will do you and them a lot of good?” The answer was obvious to Bill: “Blue bib overalls—coveralls. The kind every kid in the United States has. Many of these little ones don’t have anything to wear. And it’s hard to go to school under these circumstances.”

Though it is rarely noted by the media, there was considerably more to American involvement in Southeast Asia than death and destruction. The efforts of Bill Abbott are just one example.

“There were 77,729 Marines in South Vietnam at the end of 1967.”
—United States Marine Corps

Brigadier General Metzger (left) and Master Sergeant Abbott, Camp Carroll, 1967. The Commanding General, Ninth Marine Amphibious Brigade, Metzger became assistant division commander, 3d MarDiv, in May 1967. Sergeant Abbott served as Third Marines Scout-Sniper Platoon Commander (25 December 1966–14 October 1967). Said Abbott, “Even generals got their faces dirty in Vietnam.” The photograph was taken immediately after a Viet Cong mortar attack. Both Marines were as close to the ground as they could get. (William D. Abbott.)
Third Marine Regiment (3d MarDiv) Scout-Sniper personnel shown “sighting-in” their equipment near Camp Carroll. The rifles are Model 70 Winchesters with 8-power Unertl telescopes. (William D. Abbott.)

The Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. Wallace M. Greene Jr. (left) and Third Marine Regiment Commander Col. John P. Lanigan are shown during an inspection tour of Camp Carroll (1967). Note the 175mm powder canisters lining the path. According to Marine Corps information, at one point “there were 14 U.S. Army 175mm long-range guns [support artillery] operating from Camp Carroll.” The area was also referenced as “Artillery Plateau” in Army and Marine Corps documents. (William D. Abbott.)
While not disproportionate to those earned by American combat forces at large, awards and decorations were earned in significant numbers by Army and Marine Corps snipers during the war in Vietnam. As a matter of interest, Camp Carroll was named in honor of a Marine officer (Capt. Joseph J. Carroll) killed in action while leading an assault on Hill 484. (William D. Abbott.)
Third Marines snipers, Camp Carroll 1967. The Marine (foreground) is using a 20-power M49 observation telescope for spotting targets. The others are sighting Unertl-equipped Model 70 Winchesters. (William D. Abbott.)

A Third Marine Regiment Scout-Sniper Platoon sergeant during operations near Cam Lo (March 1967). The sniper rifle is an M1D mounting a M84 telescope. (William D. Abbott.)

Veteran USMC rifle team member 1st Lt. Don L. Smith, the CO for HQ Company, Third Marines, at the battalion command post at The Rockpile, August 1967. A Distinguished Marksman, Smith competed with a Van Orden Model 70 Winchester, winning the Wright Memorial Trophy at the 1953 National Matches (Camp Perry, Ohio). The same rifle was among the Model 70s shipped to RVN as supplemental sniping equipment early in the war. (Don L. Smith.)
The “Rockpile,” a 700-foot-high hill described officially as “a cork to the valleys leading down from North Vietnam from the north and west” (major North Vietnamese Army infiltration routes). “Mutter’s Ridge” is at the right, the “Razor Back” on the left. As Don L. Smith related, “An OP could look across the DMZ directly into North Vietnam from The Rockpile.” The photograph was taken “looking north” from the battalion command post (1967). (Don L. Smith.)

Marine Sgt. Bjorn A.G. Dahlin, from Sweden, a squad leader with Third Marines Scout-Sniper Platoon at The Rockpile, 1967. The “Swede,” as Dahlin was known, had served with an elite Swedish commando unit in Africa and Cyprus with United Nations Emergency Forces before enlisting in the Marine Corps. (Don L. Smith.)
The 3d MarDiv Sniper Report Form cited in Division Order 3590.3A, 5 July 1967. (U.S. Marine Corps.)
M.Sgt. William D. Abbott is pictured with one of the early-issue Remington sniper rifles and wagons destined for Vietnamese children as part of Operation Red Wagon (May 1967). According to Abbott, the first M700 rifles reached his unit (Third Marines Scout-Sniper Platoon) in April. The Redfield telescope is fitted with the soft (pliable) plastic lens covers; the rifle has a web sling. (William D. Abbott.)

The logo for Operation Red Wagon was used to generate interest in the project conceived by Bill Abbott. The program was sponsored by the Amateur Trapshooting Association and Trap & Field magazine in the United States. (Abbott Collection.)
This illustration was part of an article describing Operation Red Wagon in the 30 June 1967 issue of SEA TIGER, a publication of the III MAF, Vietnam. Its caption read as follows: “WAGON SWAP—Marine M.Sgt. William D. Abbott (left) holds a Vietnamese boy’s homemade wagon after trading it for a new red wagon. Abbott is working with the Amateur Trapshooting Association, in the United States, to supply Vietnamese youngsters with wagons donated by members of the Association.” (U.S. Marine Corps.)

One of the countless souvenirs brought back from Vietnam, The Charlie Ration Cookbook, a “tongue-in-cheek” approach to “C-Rats” with Tabasco sauce (a product of the McIlhenny Co., Avery Island, Louisiana) as one of the main ingredients. The 10-page booklet featured such recipes as “Fox Hole Dinner for Two,” “Patrol Chicken Soup,” “Breast of Chicken under Bullets,” and similar culinary delights all made with basic C Rations. Fred Rhoads, the illustrator for the booklet, was the author of the “Gizmo” and “Eight Ball” series in Leatherneck magazine. (McIlhenny Co./Fred Rhoads.)