

by JOSEPH
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IF THE Taliban fighters had bothered to look up, they would have seen small white nicks on the face of the boulder behind them. Nicholas Ranstad had been using it for target practice.

But they didn't notice. Ranstad could take his time.

It was January of 2008. For months, Ranstad, a 28-year-old Army specialist from Florida, had lived in a small hut 1.28 miles away from the rock with a group of snipers. Part of their mission was to keep an eye on a road crew working in this corner of Kunar province, in northeastern Afghanistan. The Taliban was executing the laborers to discourage any Afghan from cooperating with American-supported construction.

Ranstad had been shooting at the boulder and other natural targets in the ravine. For each shot, he'd jot down each variable — the wind, temperature, time of day and accuracy — in a spiral notepad snipers called the “dope book.”

Through the scope, Ranstad could see the four Taliban, all armed and wearing masks. One man remained in the open, while the other three took momentary cover behind other nearby boulders.

Lying prone on the top of the small hut, Ranstad aimed at the man in the open. The distance was immense. While snipers in Afghanistan were routinely shooting at targets 800 to 1,000 yards away, this shot was well over twice that. At 6,775 feet away — about the distance from the Empire State Building to the bottom edge of Central Park — the man was beyond the adjustable range of Ranstad's scope. He hovered in the bottom sliver of Ranstad's view, a tiny figure, about two fingernails tall.

Using Ranstad's dope book, Ranstad's spotter Alex Simpson told him the distance to the target. Simpson peered through his single-eye spotter scope, examining the heat signatures off the ground.

“Winds, 3, left to right,” Simpson said. Ranstad didn't say a word as he listened. He focused on keeping his Barrett .50 caliber rifle perfectly still.

“The biggest thing before shooting is to slow your heart rate down,” Ranstad told *The Post* last week. “You want to be comfortable. I'm taking slow, deep breaths.”

Beat.
“It's almost like a meditation. I'm not thinking of anything. I'm just ready to take that guy out.”

A US Marine sniper trains for battle at a Korean base.



HOW TO SHOOT SOMEONE FROM A MILE AWAY

Snipers have become one of America's most effective weapons in the desolation of Afghanistan

Beat.
“Send it,” Simpson said.

Beat.
Ranstad pulled the trigger before Simpson finished the order.

Then he waited.
Even traveling at nearly 3,000-feet per second out of the barrel, the bullet would take a couple of seconds to hit its target. He saw a trail of dirt about five or six feet below the target. A near miss.

“Damn it!” Ranstad thought. “What's wrong with you?”

“I go into every shot expecting to kill,” he recalled. “I was aggravated

with myself for about a tenth of a second. But you can't shoot angry or with anxiety.”

Through the scope, Ranstad could see that the Taliban had no idea where the bullet had come from. They scrambled aimlessly. The man the shot had missed now slipped behind the large boulder. But one of the other four suddenly came forward. Confused about the origins of the bullet, the enemy fighter had left his protected position.

Simpson called out the correction as Ranstad aimed at the new target. He fired.

The seconds seemed like days, but his patience was rewarded.

“I had the chance to see him roll down the hill.”

RANSTAD later heard through the sniper grapevine that the shot was the longest by an American sniper in Afghanistan — and wasn't too far from the 7,972 foot kill in 2002 by Canadian Army Cpl. Rob Furlong. Since Ranstad's kill, a British soldier, Craig Harrison set a new distance record when he shot two Taliban from 8,120 feet last year.

Ranstad, who first shared his story with *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, said he had heard that another American has since shot an enemy at a longer distance, but he didn't know the specifics. He hopes it's true. Though he takes pride in his shot, the record is one he's happy to see broken — it means a better chance of winning the war.

Along with automated drones, snipers have become a key allied force in the war — a not-so-secret weapon to routing the Taliban. “In Afghanistan, most of the attacks on Americans by fire — with mortars and machine guns — have been at longer range, because they don't want to get close enough for American infantry to engage them,” explained John Plaster, a retired Army major who was the former commandant of the National Guard sniper school.

For snipers, much of the shooting takes place at 800 yards or farther away.

“I love taking the rifle to the limit, which is what you have to do, because most of the firefights, you're talking a click or two clicks out,” Ranstad said.

Plaster estimates that there are between 200-300 Army school-trained snipers in Afghanistan, not to mention the designated marksmen in each infantry squad who are armed with scoped rifles. The Marines and Navy SEALs also have their own snipers.

In the popular imagination, snipers roam through enemy terrain in two-man sniper teams stalking high-ranking enemy officers or wait-

ing for targets of opportunity. But snipers who have fought in Afghanistan and Iraq say they rarely operate entirely independent of other troops. Their primary mission is often scouting and calling in the position of enemy fighters. “Our main goal is intel, it's not to shoot,” Ranstad said.

They often support other units, such as laying in wait while special operation forces raid a position where a high-value target is believed to be hiding. Or they stake out trails that Taliban fighters are known to use on their way to attack American bases.

In Afghanistan they often serve in three or four man “small kill teams,” carrying a range of rifles, including a .50 caliber, which shoots a cigar-sized cartridge and is the go-to weapon for the longest range shots.

The transition away from the