

by JOSEPH  
GOLDSTEIN

**I**F 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.

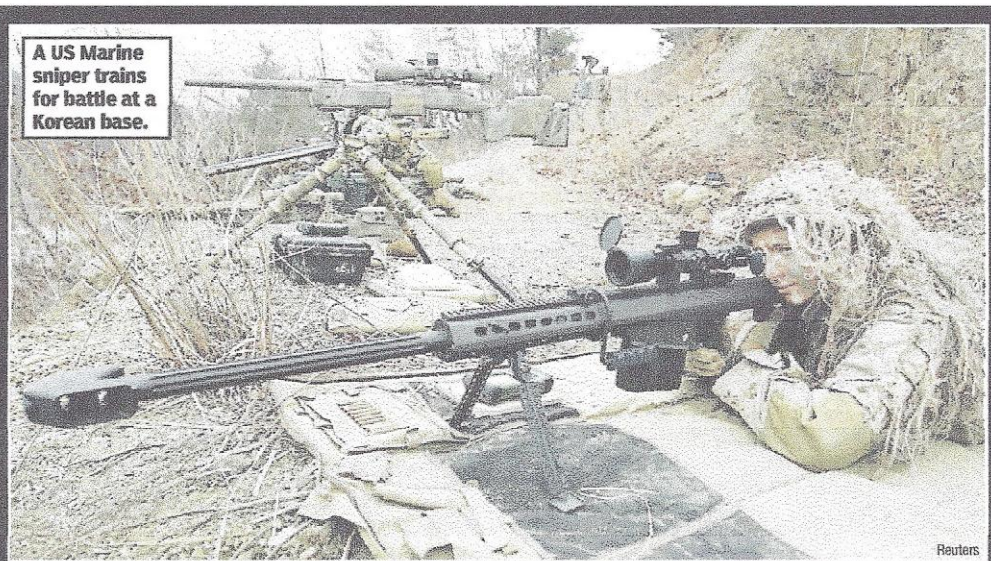
"Winds, 3, left to right," Simpson said. Ranstad didn't say a word as he listened. He focused on keeping his Barrett .50 caliber rifle perfectly still.

"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.



Reuters

# 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."

**R**ANSTAD 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 kick or two kicks 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 waiting

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



traditional two-man sniper-spotter team began in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 after a number of those teams were overrun by large masses of insurgents, Plaster said. "Because of this, the Army and Marines started reinforcing their teams."

In Iraq, snipers were mostly shooting at much closer range than in Afghanistan and frequently fought in urban environments, or city outskirts. In addition to killing enemy gunmen, American snipers in Iraq were crucial in the effort to disable IEDs.

Warrant Officer James Miller said that he and his small kill team spent months monitoring the road intersections where insurgents placed bombs. "A guy jumps out of the car, drops something off, and drives away really fast. What you end up shooting is the item. We would shoot the wires off of the thing."

He estimates that his team disabled about 15 IEDs during one three-month period. Miller, who is now retired in Kentucky after 21 years of Army service, said that he would often stay in place, hidden amid foliage and debris, for 72 hours at a stretch. During that time, he and his team would be in contact communication with headquarters. "You've got e-mail, text, camera systems — it's just like the commander is right there with you," he said.

A constant challenge for snipers is keeping alert and engaged while remaining invisible to the enemy for days on end.

Joe LeBleu, a sniper in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 who wrote a book about his experience entitled "Long Rifle," described how he and his spotter would divide the landscape into a grid and memorize each piece. They also gave nicknames to the goat herders who wandered across their field of vision.

Other snipers sketch the landscape in notebooks, to ensure that every detail registers in their mind.

They are constantly on the lookout for anything out of place. "A sniper learns to look at corners, the edges of trees, the edge of boulders and hillocks, because a bad guy is going to be down snug and trying to aim around the edges," said Plaster, who has written a manual for snipers.

**F**OR GENERATIONS, American snipers relied on Kentucky windage and Tennessee elevation — that is, instinct.

Snipers are experts at gauging distances. When Miller arrived in Iraq in 2006, he tape-measured the average size of truck tires in Iraq, which are smaller than those in America. He kept those and other measurements on a card with him at all times, so that



he would be able to calculate distances based on how small these common objects appeared at different ranges.

At long ranges, there is no room for error. Enemy fighters can appear little more than stick figures even when viewed through a scope. At about 800 yards the naked eye "can make out the silhouette and the weapon, but you're not getting anything about their face," said Milo Afong, a sniper who served in Iraq and wrote a book called "Hunters." "Through scope, you can see if they're wearing the terrorist face mask, but you still can't really make out too much."

In the desert, veteran snipers say the tendency is to underestimate distances, meaning that bullets will often fall short. And the heat will change the arc of a bullet. "As the temperature rises, your bullet would rise as well," Miller explained.

In Afghanistan, wind presents its own set of challenges. A sniper shooting across a valley to an enemy fighter on the opposing ridge might have to contend with multiple gusts of wind blowing at various speeds and in various directions. There is no exact science.

"The most important thing is to look at the wind closest to your target," LeBleu said. "You look at the wind by your target's feet and what the wind is doing to the bushes near his hands."

But the military is now churning out equipment intended to minimize human error in longer distance shooting. Some snipers carry laser range finders — basically binoculars that size up the distance of an object and are available in sporting good stores for deer hunters and golfers.

Researchers at the Pentagon are currently at work on a computer system that will measure all the

### Future of snipers

The Pentagon's inventors at DARPA want sniper and spotter scopes that will help a shooter to rarely miss a shot. With the "One Shot" research program, the military is seeking a sniper scope that uses laser optics to determine the crosswinds between the sniper and the target. A computer in the scope would assist the sniper in compensating for the various winds. At present, snipers and spotters look at vegetation and heat emissions off the ground to determine which way the wind is blowing.

The military is hoping that the system will produce a 60% chance of hitting in a single shot a target under a mile away in moderate winds. Lockheed Martin has been awarded a contract for the project. The military hopes to have the scopes by 2011.

**Nicholas Ranstad, who holds the record for the longest US sniper kill at 6,775 feet and the "dope" book he uses to perfect his shots.**

crosswinds between a sniper and target and suggest how far the shooter should adjust his aim horizontally. The program is called the "Advanced Sighting System," but is colloquially known as the "One Shot" program.

The equipment that is changing most in Afghanistan is the choice of rifles and ammunition. Snipers are increasingly carrying top-grade cartridges guaranteed for consistency — the bullets, primers and brass all come from the same lot, so as to minimize microscopic differences from one round and the next.

Yet snipers in Afghanistan and Iraq say the equipment they are most comfortable relying on is their eyes and their dope books.

With good data on wind and distance, Ranstad said of his record shot, "You could do it every day."

### Over there

#### Where are troops are this Memorial Day

<b>Deployed in combat zones</b>	225,000
<b>Iraq</b>	90,900
<b>Afghanistan</b>	92,100
<b>Other areas</b>	42,000
<b>Non-combat countries with largest US troop presence:</b>	
Germany	56,222
South Korea	28,500
Japan	47,000
Italy	9,700
UK	9,700

#### US military at a glance

	Total	Enlisted	Officer	Female
<b>Army</b>	549,015	473,396	75,619	73,568
<b>Marines</b>	201,219	179,751	21,468	13,225
<b>Navy</b>	330,218	273,799	51,973	56,606
<b>Air Force</b>	331,508	266,405	65,103	64,046
<b>National Guard forces</b>				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>in combat</b>		
<b>Army National Guard</b>	365,000	44,461		
<b>Air National Guard</b>	105,000	11,998		

Source: Department of Defense