

# The Shooter/Spotter Relationship

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The following is written from a military sniper's prospective. I understand that many police shooters operate independently due to circumstances and personnel availability.

The professional sniper world is dominated by the perception of not one lone gunman but rather a highly skilled team of two men who act as one. With the exception of a few rare instances snipers operate in teams of two personnel. This team functions as one element each with specific duties and responsibilities on which the other relies.

## Team Concept

The idea of a 2-man sniper team seems simple in concept. However, in reality it is an extremely complex and at times very hard to establish relationship. Each shooter relies on the other for support, knowledge and experience. Ideally the two should compliment each other. Each sniper should make up for the other's weakness and add to the other's strengths. All of this is easy to write and talk about, however it is much harder to achieve. Contrary to popular belief few sniper teams are as close as most would believe. This is especially true in today's military due primarily to the fact that the US has not been engaged in sustained combat for some time. Combat sniper teams like all small elite combat units develop bonds forged in battle that are extremely tight.

## Sniper Student Selection

The actual selection of sniper students is usually one more of chance than any other factor. In reality sniper students are usually selected due to time in the unit and prior job performance rather than some specific displayed trait. Few services (if any) select two personnel from the beginning to become a sniper team. While in school sniper students will be paired off into teams usually with soldiers from other units. In some cases two students will come from the same unit and may operate together at a later time in the unit, but this is the exception rather than the rule. In training the students have little say in who will be their partner, however once in the unit the snipers will usually pair off with someone whom they are comfortable. I suppose I should add at this point that as with all relationships, sniper teams do not always get along. In fact I have personally seen sniper partners go to blows over a missed shot.

## Initial Sniper Training

Once the teams are selected they begin to check each other out which is lovingly referred to "butt sniffing". This attempt to discover their partner's strengths and weakness is a continual process, which lasts usually right tot the end of the course. During the first phase of training the students are usually overwhelmed to the point that they are concentrating on their own problems and not at all to concerned about their partner. But, as training progresses and more team events are introduced the students begin to focus and each other's attributes. Events like snaps and movers and unknown distance shooting which require that both students do their job bring the team together. Good instructors will watch their students closely and help the team build on the strengths and overcome the weaknesses. In some cases it is necessary to separate an extremely strong team and reassign them to two weaker shooters. A large amount of what a sniper learns in school he does so from his partner and from collective mistakes. Two weak shooters quickly fall behind and usually never catch up. By the end of the course the teams will have grown together and become a functional unit. Sniper school graduates usually have fond memories of the training and their partners. I would say that few snipers couldn't recall at least the first name of their partner as well as being able to recall their partner's strengths and weaknesses.

## Once In the Unit

Depending on the unit, the newly trained sniper will once again have to prove himself. During his first few outings with the unit he will usually be assigned to a partner who is senior to him in experience (and rank depending on the unit). This partner will train the new member in unit specific Standing Operating Procedures (SOPs) and school him in real world procedures. During this training period the senior sniper will assess the "Cherry's" skills and attributes in addition to his value to the unit. Throughout this time the new sniper is constantly being evaluated. Should at any time the unit make the decision that he does not meet the standards or expectations of the organization he will be moved back to the line platoons. This is more prevalent in elite units such as the Ranger Battalions and the 82nd Airborne Division.

In conventional units contrary to popular belief many military snipers are not snipers first. In fact many times an individual will be slotted as a sniper but never even see, train with or carry his rifle. This is mainly dependent on the local command's understanding and interest in using sniper. Believe it or not many US military commanders do not understand how to use snipers and the value of sniping. Many see snipers as a waste of a good infantryman.

## **Team Positions**

So now that we have already stated that snipers (at least military shooters) employ and operate as a two-man team, lets delve into how they operate. There are two predominate schools of thought concerning the concept of seniority among snipers. The USMC teaches that the senior member of team be the shooter, whereas the Army teaches that the senior shooter be the spotter. Being an Army shooter myself I of course am predisposed towards the Army system but I can understand the USMC's point.

In past times trained snipers were hard to come by and it was difficult enough to get one trained sniper let alone two. The principle was (and is) that you could take a trained sniper and give him a mature, capable, and trainable Marine as a spotter, which the sniper could mold him into a operational partner. During the Vietnam conflict the attrition rate and rotation system was not conducive to a lasting sniper spotter relationship which further assisted this concept. The resulting situation was that a Marine who either volunteered or was selected to become a spotter was assigned a sniper to work with. This spotter usually carried an M14 or M16 and the night vision device. The spotter was responsible for the team's security and to assist in multiple target acquisitions. This system has carried over to modern times, however in the USMC today an effort is made to have two trained snipers operating as a team. Additionally it is left to the platoons as who fills what role. There are benefits to having the senior member operating as the sniper. In fluid situations such as Beirut and Somalia, where a hard call is warranted the maturity and experience behind the gun could pay huge returns. As I will discuss later, during movement into the final firing position (FFP) it can be beneficial to have the senior member as the sniper.

For a variety of reasons the US Army has chosen to do just the opposite and stress that the senior sniper operate as the spotter. One of our sayings is "The sniper is the monkey and the spotter is the driver". This means that a knowledgeable spotter can through verbal instruction talk a shooter onto a target and obtain a hit. In additional to this is the fact that it is very difficult (if not impossible) to make a wind call and follow trace through the riflescope. With the senior member as the spotter he can have the sniper train on the primary target while he surveys the surrounding terrain and make tactical decisions. Once the shot is fired he can follow the trace to the target and make any adjustments for a follow up shot. Later I will discuss more in depth the actual duties and responsibilities of each position.

In some "other" government agencies the duties of the team are completely separated. Neither member is trained nor operates as the other. The concept here is that by narrowing the focus the individual can become very good at that one event rather than split his time and resources trying to become good at both. I am also aware that many law enforcement agencies usually employ only one shooter usually due to the availability of trained snipers. Law enforcement can get away with this technique mainly due to the range and tactical environment they are usually faced with. Should a situation occur requiring two members (due to time or environment), a team can be formed or the one-trained sniper can obtain a partner for assistance. Unlike the military combat sniper both law enforcement agencies and non-military government agencies do not usually have to worry about security and the situation to their rear.

## **Duties and Responsibilities**

There are three phases of sniper operations, Planning Phase, Movement Phase, and Targeting Phase. Time and situation will dictate when and how each phase is accomplished. Let's take a closer look at these phases

At the beginning of the planning phase the team receives the mission. Both team members need to be present at any and all briefings and be privy to all available intelligence. This facilitates equal understanding of the mission and the environment. As the saying goes "two heads are better than one". The team needs to use some format for planning to ensure that nothing is missed. A popular format used by the military is the Operations Order (OPORD) or Patrol Order. Some organizations have developed their own formats, which facilitate their specific missions. Regardless of the format used, it must cover all aspects of the mission and provide both the team and higher headquarters with an understanding of how the team sees the mission unfolding. A key here is a solid communication plan and good contingency planning. It is very easy to "what if" a plan to death. Do not fall into this trap, look at as many possibilities as possible but at some point you must disregard the extremes. I will cover mission planing in depth in another article at a later time. Mission planning is the foundation, which will help to dictate the mission outcome. It is during the planning phase that the team needs to conduct their pre-mission checks. Of course both team members are responsible for their individual equipment and weapon readiness. The sniper is responsible for the rifle, optics and supporting sniper equipment he will have to use in conjunction with operating the rifle. The spotter is responsible for all mission supporting equipment such as the radio/s, binoculars, spotting scope, etc. Should there be any mission specific equipment such as thermal sights, video/photography equipment, etc. the team together will handle this. Once all of the equipment is packed and ready the team will make any last minute checks and prepare to move out.

The movement phase is broken down into two (2) stages, movement to the Objective Rally Point (ORP) and from the ORP to the Final Firing Position (FFP). The ORP is a location where the team can make final coordinations for movement into the FFP. This is usually the place where the team will ghille up and if needed cache any unneeded equipment. Of course this technique is primarily used in rural environments although it could be used during urban operations if the team has to move over land by foot to the objective area. Movement from a release point (where the team exits a friendly controlled area) to the ORP is led by the spotter. In keeping with the senior sniper acting as the spotter he can best chose the route and navigate. Also the spotter normally has an assault or suppressed weapon, which he can use to break contact if necessary. In some cases both members will be carrying assault weapons with sniper weapons system being carried in or on a rucksack or some other carrying apparatus. Even if this is the case the spotter normally will lead. Of course the situation will dictate the teams actions. Once at the ORP the team will make final preparations for movement into the FFP. The ORP is also the place the team makes contact with higher to inform them of the teams status and location.

From the ORP to the FFP the sniper is in the lead. This allows the sniper to select the best firing position and establish the position. Once the sniper is in position the spotter should position himself as close as possible on the sniper's firing side with his head about even with the sniper's shoulder. This position will allow the spotter to look down the line of bore and facilitates better communication. In this position the spotter is in an ideal position to look into the chamber of weapon in the case of malfunction, to observe all of the snipers actions and to see what is on the optics. Once again the situation, environment and terrain will dictate the team's actions but an effort should be made to establish this sniper position if at all possible.

Once the team is in position the targeting phase begins. During the initial setup the sniper and spotter both have specific duties in order to make the team operational. The duties are;

**Sniper:** As soon as he gets into position he should ensure that the gun is operational.

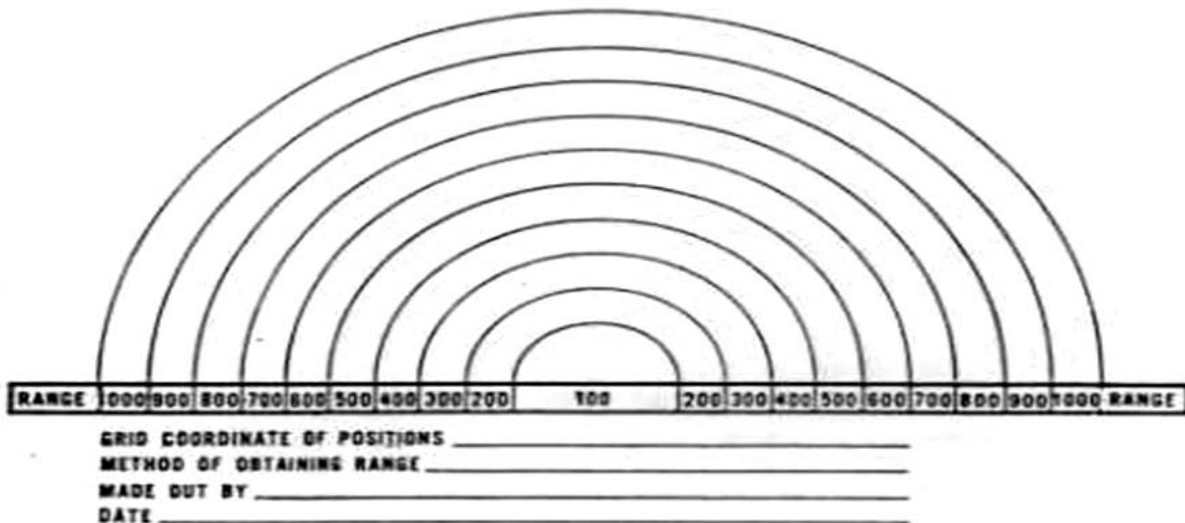
- A. Magazine is full and a round is loaded into the chamber
- B. The optics are securely mounted
- C. There aren't any obstructions in the bore or barrel channel
- D. Remove the turret caps and open the scope caps.

**Spotter:** As soon as the spotter gets into position he will survey the operational area.

- A. Set limits and boundaries for that position. This will define where the team can engage without moving or shifting.
- B. Identify target sectors within the area of operation.
- C. Identify the primary target location or likely avenue of approach.
- D. Identify key terrain.
- E. Begin to make a terrain sketch and/or a range card.
- F. Open the log.

After the team is set up they begin to determine ranges to specific points (Target Reference Points or TRPs) within each sector within the AOR. This is annotated on the terrain sketch/range card. The team will label the sectors either numerical-

### SNIPERS RANGE CARD



RANGE 1000 900 800 700 600 500 400 300 200 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 RANGE

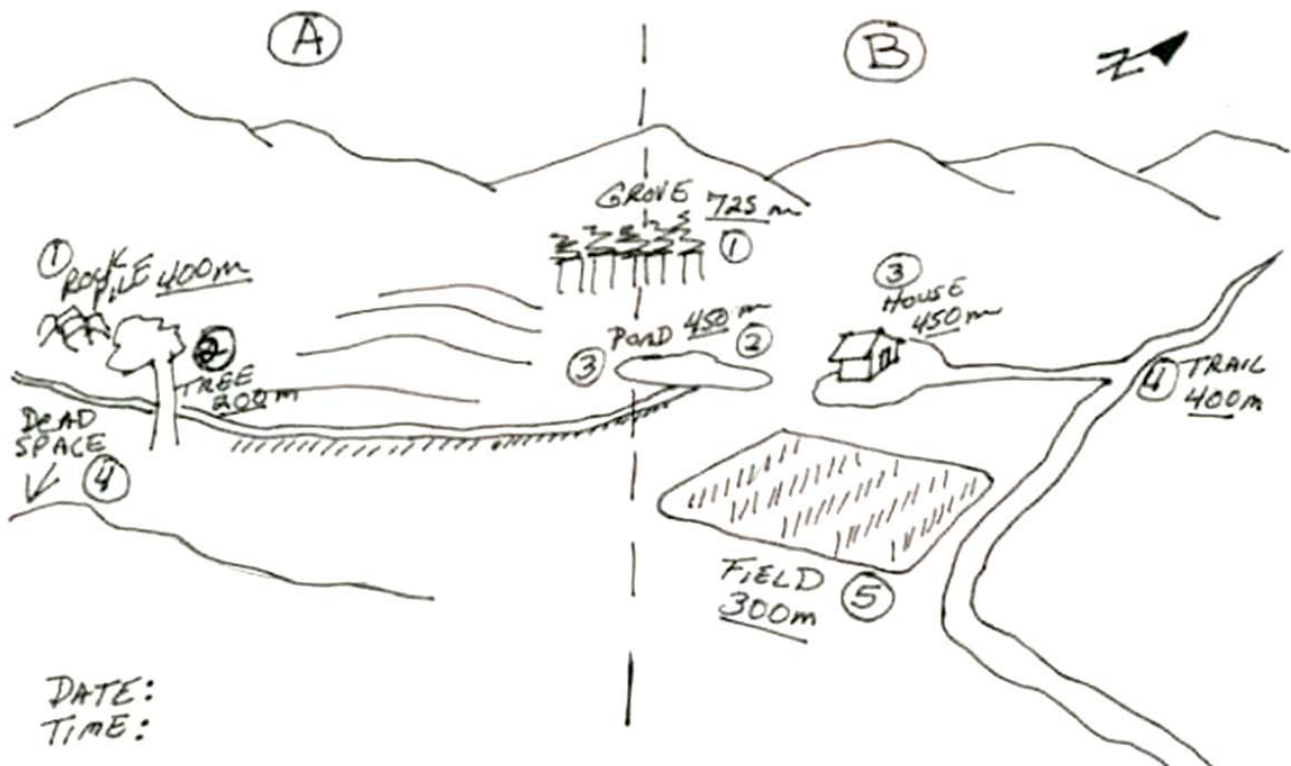
GRID COORDINATE OF POSITIONS \_\_\_\_\_

METHOD OF OBTAINING RANGE \_\_\_\_\_

MADE OUT BY \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

ly or alphabetically and then label the TRPs within each sector. This allows the team to shift quickly from one point to another. This is as good a time as any to briefly discuss range cards and terrain sketches. Most people who have been in this business for a little while or for that matter just reading this publication have seen a US Army Sniper Range Card. This card is supposed to allow the sniper team to quickly transition to targets annotated on the card. By using the ranging rings the team can quickly determine the range, make the necessary adjustments and engage the target. The problem with this card is that it is too small for an accurate depiction of the target area. After the mission the card may be used for intelligence purposes or in the case of law enforcement the card may be used to provide superiors (or jurors) the opportunity to see what the sniper team saw. A terrain sketch works much better than the standard range card. The first thing that I am sure many people are saying is that "I can't draw". Well this card is not that difficult and with a little practice you should be able to draw one quickly. The most important aspect of the terrain sketch is not to get too complicated or clutter up the card with every little detail. Only the major terrain features or specific points of interest need to be drawn. After the team has established their position and drawn the terrain sketch they begin to conduct a detailed search of the objective area. This is done slowly and deliberately using the riflescope, binoculars and the spotting scope. During the detailed search the team will identify dead space and areas that require special attention.



### Shooter Spotter Dialog

Shooter spotter dialog is a process that allows the team to communicate in a quick efficient manner. This one skill more than any other gives sniper students the most trouble. I would even offer a guess that poor dialog has even resulted in missed targets during some live missions. The most important aspect of the dialog is that both team members completely understand one another. Here is the dialog that I teach to my students.

1. Warning Order. This is the call to action and can be given by either member.
2. Target Location. This can be in the form of the actual location or directions onto the target from a known point.
3. Target Description. This is a general description but specific enough that the shooter can positively identify the target.
4. Range estimation/determination. Normally once the shooter has identified the target he automatically begins to mil the target. Once he has a mil reading he gives it to the spotter who calculates the range and announces it to the shooter and tells the shooter either to hold the range or dial it on.
5. Wind Call. The spotter checks the wind and announces it, followed immediately by directions to the shooter to hold or dial it on.
6. Fire Command. This is not a verbal command. After the wind call the shooter has 3-9 seconds to take the shot. If the shooter has not fired, the spotter should give hold or a new wind call.

7. Shot Call. The sniper announces where the round broke so that the spotter can adjust the second round if needed.
8. Target Status or continued fire commands. The spotter announces where the round went and if a second shot is required. If a second shot is required it should be announced in the form of an adjustment from the last call or repeat the last call.

### Example of Sniper Fire Mission

Spotter: Target!  
Spotter: Sector A, from TRP 1 right 50, add 50.  
Sniper: Roger, sector A, from TRP 1 right 50 add 50.  
Spotter: Lone soldier black fatigues carrying AK in right hand.  
Sniper: Roger, Lone soldier black fatigues carrying AK in right hand.  
Sniper: Target Identified!  
Sniper: I have 2 mils crotch to head  
Spotter: Roger, 2 mils crotch to head  
Spotter: Dial 500 on the gun  
Sniper: Roger, 500 on the gun, Indexed!  
Spotter: Wind from right to left 6 mph, hold ? mil right.  
Sniper: Roger, Wind from right to left 6 mph, hold ? mil right.

BANG!!! (Followed immediately by follow through and chambering another round)

Sniper: Broke ? mil right  
Spotter: Center hit, stand by.  
Sniper: Roger, center-hit stand by.

A couple of notes here first is that the team must agree on what units of measurement they are using. For the target location the team should use whatever is most familiar to both such as meters, yards or feet. Next is that the team needs to use some word or command that lets the other know that they have accomplished the task at hand. Looking above to where the sniper dialed the range onto his optics he said "indexed" which lets the spotter know that it was dialed on. Another command I have used is "gun up" which has the same effect. Last thing is that the shooter MUST listen to the spotter and do exactly as he is told. Some of the biggest problems occur when the shooter thinks he knows better than the spotter. This condition usually occurs in training during target location since all of the targets look the same. The other time this is a problem is during the wind call. The shooter thinks the call is bad so he shoots what he thinks is best. The problem is if he misses the spotter will adjust using his last call, which if it was bad will result in a missed second round.

The above may seem like a lot of talking but especially with students it allows complete and understandable communication. By both partners repeating what was said, the other partner knows that he was understood. A good team with practice can go through this entire dialog in a matter of seconds. Teams can alter this format as needed so long as effective communication is maintained. Believe me I have seen and heard many different dialog formats and most if not practice do not work. This is especially true when the students are under pressure. As I said in the beginning I have seen students go to blows over a missed shot which was directly attributable to poor dialog. A standardized dialog is especially important in units or organizations where snipers and spotters are not assigned as a team all of the time. This saves invaluable time once on target alleviating the need to adlib a communication format that both snipers understand.

A solid shooter spotter relationship is the paramount to effective sniper team operations. Although at times difficult to establish and maintain this relationship can be one of the best experiences of a sniper's career. At a minimum I hope that this article has been entertaining. Hopefully some sniper team out there who reads this will find something helpful with what I have written.

*"Every man shivers at the thought of being taken by an invisible distant foe who reaps this grim harvest coolly, selectively and unerringly"*