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British Snipers (i)

An Account of the Training and Organisation of Snipers in the British Armies in France

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In the early days of the war, when reports of German "sniping" began to be published, it was commonly considered a "dirty" method of fighting and as not "playing the game."

Sniping in some form or other has usually developed in every great war since the invention of firearms. Austrian sharpshooters were used against the soldiers of Frederick the Great, and were so effective that at times the ex-Kaiser's ancestor found it difficult to bring his Hussars, armed only with short sabres, out of their camps. This led to the formation in the Prussian Army of Jager battalions, recruited from *hunting districts*, because professional hunters had not only the necessary skill in marksmanship but also the courage, good eyesight, powers of observation, knowledge of stalking, and the use of cover which the successful sniper must possess.

That is why at the beginning of the war the enemy was well equipped with expert snipers.

The British Armies had no units with such special training or organisation until steps were taken in France to train and organise our snipers.

In 1914 the circumstantial reports of the deadly work done by the Boche snipers gave the world the impression that German soldiers were better shots than we were. The German *never was* a better shot, or even as good a shot. as the Britisher.

It was the better shooting and the superior manipulation of their rifles by the "Old Contemptibles" that enabled the British Army to "walk backwards" from Mons in perfect order and discipline until the enemy was effectively checked. But the shooting done by Lord French's old Army was not sniping, it was *controlled* fire. It was done by sections and platoons at the word of command. Targets

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and ranges were *indicated* and fire-orders given. And the result was such a torrent of well aimed and well directed bullets against masses of the enemy that captured German officers stated their belief that every British Tommy was armed with a light machine gun.

But we had no *snipers*, men specially selected and trained to find small and indistinct targets, to shoot at them on their own individual initiative and be sure to kill at the first shot.

When both sides settled down to trench warfare, the Boche sniper showed the value of his special training. Often behind his trench line as well as in it, and from cunningly constructed and concealed posts, he kept a vigilant watch on our lines. He picked off sentries and observers, who carelessly or sometimes unavoidably exposed themselves.

Many officers were picked off when carrying out the dangerous but essential duty of making a daylight reconnaissance until at last the Boche sniper dominated our trenches and No Man's Land so effectively that it became urgently necessary to take steps to deal with him.

At first this form of warfare appealed most strongly to those battalions which possessed keen hunters amongst officers and men. That is why snipers were first organised most effectively in the Canadian and Highland regiments.

On one occasion several runners had been sniped, and at last Major Garnet Hughes (now General) went round to the cook-house and called the cook, a man noted for his marksmanship and a winner of the D.C.M. in South Africa. He said, "Take your rifle and shut up that sniper." The cook dropped his spoon and was away some twenty minutes. He came back with a grim smile, and the Hun sniper was silent for ever.

One of the finest snipers I ever met was a full-blooded Red Indian—John Ballantyne. He applied all the methods of the chase, so familiar to him in his beloved Canadian forests, to hunting the Boche sniper. He had been known to wait patiently for seven days in a wonderfully prepared and concealed sniper's post for a valuable target—a Hun officer, whom he finally killed.

Opposite the front of one Canadian battalion there was a particularly clever sniper. For a long time he defied us to discover his lair, all the while taking toll of officers and

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men. At last, by persistent and systematic observation, he was discovered, but so well was his lair protected that ordinary rifle fire could not silence him. At last the help of the gunners was sought, an eighteen-pounder was detailed to help, and the sniper was driven out, but not killed. I believe his bag up to that time had been two officers and seven men. He soon began operations from another well concealed post. This was found by careful and patient observation, and he was again shelled and driven out. Some days later he resumed his sniping, and this time while the Artillery shelled his new post our snipers waited for his appearance and got him. He had probably been worth more to the Germans than a battery of field guns in the same time.

So the system went on in our ranks of selecting men whose pre-war occupation, or recreation, specially qualified them to be snipers. It spread from one battalion to another. If the Commanding Officer was keen on sniping, or if the sector was much bothered by enemy snipers, a dozen men might be detached for this duty. Other battalions were content with one or two.

I have known cases where the doctor and even the padre were with difficulty restrained, as non-combatants, from taking a hand in this fascinating game of hunting the Boche.

Very soon many privately-owned weapons began to appear in the trenches—sporting rifles of various patterns and calibre. By the irony of fate, one privately-owned rifle, fitted with a telescopic sight, which did great execution in the hands of a sniping officer of the Staffords, was a pre-war gift by the ex-Kaiser to a well-known British General.

On Hill 60, in 1915, I remember a young officer who was not altogether innocent of "eye-wash" telling me that he had killed several Huns by the simple method of firing through the enemy's sandbag breastworks with a Rigby express rifle. He could not see his targets, so I asked him how he could tell when he scored a hit. "Oh," he said, "those trenches are very wet and I hear the bodies splash when they fall into the water."

In spite of all the steps taken against the Hun snipers, these were only slightly diminished in numbers and not suppressed. A revision of methods and further organisation became necessary, and so some experienced officers were

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selected to study the problem and make suggestions. One of the first things noted was that a large number of men had been selected as snipers who were totally unfitted for the work. In order to carry out his duties, the sniper was allowed a great deal of freedom. He could wander about the trenches, selecting suitable posts from which to observe and shoot, and he was naturally excused a great many irksome tasks which the ordinary soldier had to do as a matter of routine. A sniper, therefore, came to be regarded by observant but not too energetic soldiers as a man with a soft job, and there were naturally many seekers after these posts. In the trenches, the opportunities of testing a man's ability for this special work, especially in marksmanship, were very limited, and many soldiers were given the appointment who had no idea of the job. Amongst this type were found those who sent in glowing reports as to the number of "kills" they made every day. As there were few means of checking such statements, these had either to be accepted, without proof, as genuine or disbelieved altogether. In one battalion a sniper I knew generally headed his daily report something like this:—

"Sir,
"I have the honour to report that six little wooden crosses will be required in the Hun trenches this evening, making a total of 11 this week.
"I have the honour to be, Sir,
"Your obedient servant,
"No. ——, Pte. ——, etc., Sniper."

As the Hun snipers on this front persisted just as strongly in spite of this man's supposed heavy execution, the Brigadier finally sent a message to the C.O. saying: "In future the left ears of all Huns killed by Pte. —— will be attached to his reports, please."

It became necessary to organise and sort out these free-lances, to supervise their methods and check their results, and provide them with special training. The first thing they had to learn was how to find their targets. It was quite a common thing in so-called "quiet" sectors for men to be in the trenches for six months without seeing a Hun, and the difficulty of finding a casual head or a loop-hole can be imagined.

To train these men, some keen young officer was selected in each battalion. Sometimes he was detached from his company and did nothing else, although it was a very long time before he was given the status of an officer

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doing special duties and allowed for on the establishment. That finally came in 1918.

This officer was responsible for selecting the right sort of men, for supervising their duties when in the trenches and training them when out of the trenches He was known as the "Sniping Officer" at first.

As time went on it was realised that if a sniper was doing his duty properly by keeping his front under continual observation and being ready to fire on enemy snipers or observers, or anyone else who exposed himself, he must also see a host of other happenings. Although these were not directly bearing on his work as a sniper, they would, if reported to the proper quarter, provide valuable and continuous information about the enemy.

Consequently, snipers were now trained to write detailed reports on what they had observed during their tour of duty. These details were recorded in a report by the Sniping Officer, who now became more generally known as the Battalion "Intelligence" Officer.

By this system of reports snipers were able to provide information about such extremely important matters as the identification of the enemy on any front, the time and method of reliefs, the presence of mining operations, and so on. Trench warfare may be said to have brought this system of collecting Intelligence into existence, and the sniper became the machinery for carrying it out.

In December, 1915, a school for training snipers and Intelligence officers was started near Ypres by the Second Army, with such excellent results that similar schools were soon established for all the other Armies in France.

As there was no previous model on which these schools could be framed, their methods of training had to be based upon actual experience in the field and continually modified to suit new conditions. At first the shooting was considered the main thing, but later, when the importance of observation was realised, they became schools of "Scouting, Observation and Sniping."

At these Army Schools all the students were tested first on the ranges as marksmen. If they failed in that test they had either to have good qualifications as observers or scouts or rejoin their units. In a number of cases, if a man were an indifferent shot, but was very good at Observation, making sketches or map-drawing, he was earmarked for

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such duties and usually found special work of this kind to do at the Brigade or Divisional H.Q., where marksmanship was of secondary importance. This helped more than anything to eliminate the "lead-swinger" from the snipers' ranks.

It is interesting to note that experience showed us that a good "competition" shot of, say, a high Bisley Meeting standard did not necessarily make a good sniper. There is the width of the world between the leisurely peace time business of firing at a distinct target at a known or easily calculated range, after studying wind, temperature, mirage, light, the error of the day, and all the mysteries which make the Bisley Meetings such a pure delight to the "pot-hunter," and getting one quick and accurate shot at such almost invisible and momentary targets as the Boches presented in trench warfare. The fact also that in many cases the Boche was shooting too made it a short, sharp duel, the winner being he who got his shot in first, and the loser probably losing his life as well as the trick. The realisation of this called for nerve and courage of a high order. All the same, old snipers will tell you that it was this very risk which gave "the game," as they called it, its great fascination.

At these schools men who were proved good shots were shown how to construct and conceal snipers' posts—some for shooting from and others purely for observation; and because when they were in the line this work had to be done at night, much of the training was carried out in darkness and perfect silence.

Compared with the average Boche post of a similar character which I have inspected since November, 1918, we were certainly not behind the Germans in this respect. The use of "camouflage" was also practically illustrated. Demonstrations were given in the use of such devices as snipers' suits painted to merge into grounds of different colours; dummy heads for exposing above the trenches and drawing Hun snipers' fire in order to detect his position by flash or smoke of his rifle; white suits for use by night patrols when snow lay on the ground, and many other clever ideas for protecting the sniper or observer when he had to expose himself to enemy view. The Boche, of course, used many similar devices, but I think we beat him at the game.

(*To be continued.*)

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