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Sniper Attacks Adding to Peril of U.S. Troops

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Sgt. Jesse E. Leach of the Marines assisted Lance Cpl. Juan Valdez-Castillo, who was shot by a sniper in the town of Karma. He survived.

KARMA, [Iraq](#), Nov. 3 — The bullet passed through Lance Cpl. Juan Valdez-Castillo as his Marine patrol moved down a muddy urban lane. It was a single shot. The lance corporal fell against a wall, tried to stand and fell again.

His squad leader, Sgt. Jesse E. Leach, faced where the shot had come from, raised his rifle and grenade launcher and quickly stepped between the sniper and the bloodied marine. He walked backward, scanning, ready to fire.

Shielding the marine with his own thick body, he grabbed the corporal by a strap and dragged him across a muddy road to a line of tall reeds, where they were concealed. He put down his weapon, shouted orders and cut open the lance corporal's uniform, exposing a bubbling wound.

Lance Corporal Valdez-Castillo, shot through the right arm and torso, was saved. But the patrol was temporarily stuck. The marines were engaged in the task of calling for a casualty evacuation while staring down their barrels at dozens of windows that faced them, as if waiting for a ghost's next move.

This sequence on Tuesday here in Anbar Province captured in a matter of seconds an expanding threat in the war in Iraq. In recent months, military officers and enlisted marines say, the insurgents have been using snipers more frequently and with greater effect, disrupting the military's operations and fueling a climate of frustration and quiet rage.

Across Iraq, the threat has become serious enough that in late October the military held an internal conference about it, sharing the experiences of combat troops and discussing tactics to counter it. There has been no ready fix.

The battalion commander of Sergeant Leach's unit — the Second Battalion, Eighth Marines — recalled eight sniper hits on his marines in three months and said there had been other possible incidents as well. Two of the battalion's five fatalities have come from snipers, he said, and one marine is in a coma. Another marine gravely wounded by a sniper has suffered a stroke.

A sniper team was captured in the area a few weeks ago, he said, but more have taken its place. "The enemy has the ability to regenerate, and after we put a dent in his activity, we see sniper activity again," said the commander, Lt. Col. Kenneth M. DeTreuX.

Marines in two infantry companies recounted more cases, telling of lone shots that zipped in as if from nowhere, striking turrets and walls within inches of marines. They typically occur when the marines are not engaged in combat. It is as if, they say, they are being watched.

By many measures, the Iraqi snipers have showed unexceptional marksmanship, usually shooting from within 300 yards, far less than ranges preferred by the elite snipers in Western military units.

But as the insurgent sniper teams have become more active, the marines here say, they have displayed greater skill, selecting their targets and their firing positions with care. They have also developed cunning

methods of mobility and concealment, including firing from shooting platforms and hidden ports within cars.

They often use variants of the long-barreled Dragunov rifle, which shoots higher-powered ammunition than the much more common Kalashnikov assault rifles. Their marksmanship has improved to the point of being good enough.

“In the beginning of the war, sniping wasn’t something that the Iraqis did,” said Capt. Glen Taylor, the executive officer of the battalion’s Company G, who is on his third combat tour. “It was like, ‘If Allah wants that bullet to hit its target, it will.’ But they are starting to realize how effective it is.”

The insurgents are recruiting snipers and centralizing their instruction, the captain said, meaning that the phenomenon is likely to grow.

“They have training camps — they go around and advertise,” he said. “We heard from some of our sources that the insurgents were going around with loudspeakers, saying that if you want to be a sniper we will pay you three times whatever your salary is now.”

The marines also express their belief that the sniper teams have a network of spotters, and that each time the marines leave their outpost, spotters hidden among the Iraqi population call the snipers and tell them where the marines are and what they are doing. The snipers then arrive.

For the infantry, Iraq’s improved snipers have created confounding new dangers, as an unseen enemy plucks members from their ranks. Most of the time, the marines said, the snipers aim for their heads, necks and armpits, displaying knowledge of gaps in their protective gear. They typically shoot once and disappear. And they often fire on the opposite side of obstacles like canals, which limits a unit’s ability to capture the sniper or respond with fire.

“That’s the biggest thing that tears marines apart,” said Cpl. Curtis S. Cota-Robles of Company G, who was standing beside a marine who was shot through the collarbone in late September. “They hit us when we are vulnerable, and then they are gone.”

As part of their counterinsurgency operations, the marines working in Anbar are under orders to show restraint, a policy rooted in hopes of winning the trust of the civilian population.

Iraqi snipers seem to know these rules and use them for their own protection. They often fire from among civilians, the marines say, having observed that unless the marines have a clear target, they will not shoot. In two sniper shootings witnessed by two journalists for The New York Times, on Oct. 30 and 31, the snipers fired from among civilians. The marines did not fire back.

In conditions where killing the snipers has proved difficult, the marines have tried to find ways to limit their effectiveness. Signs inside Marine positions display an often-spoken rule: “Make yourself hard to kill.”

Many marines, on operations, do an understated dance they call “cutting squares.” It is not really a square at all.

They zig and zag as they walk, and when they stop they shift weight from foot to foot, bobbing their heads. They change the rhythm often, so that when a sniper who might be watching them thinks they are about to zig, they have zagged.

Now and then they squat, shift weight to one leg and stand up beside the place where they had just been. Maj. Sean Riordan, the battalion executive officer, described his own unpredictable jigs as “my little salsa dance.”

As they move, the marines often peer down their own scopes, looking at windows, rooftops, lines of brush. Then they might step backward, or forward, or duck, as if saying: try to shoot that.

But as operations drag on, some marines begin to stop cutting squares. And sometimes even those that are moving are still shot. And there are special dangers.

Lance Cpl. Colin Smith, who was shot on Monday, was behind a machine gun in a vehicle turret, a position that placed him higher in the air than a walking marine. Turret gunners are protected by armor shields, but their heads are often exposed. He was struck in the skull. He survived but fell into a coma and was placed on life support.

Lance Corporal Valdez-Castillo, who was shot on Tuesday, was a radio operator — a preferred sniper's target since radios and rifles first mixed on the battlefield many decades ago. A tactical radio can provide a link to mortars, artillery, air support and other infantry units.

Ten marines, several soldiers from the nascent Iraqi Army and two journalists were walking exposed in a column when the shot was fired and he went down; his antenna probably made him the sniper's pick. Lance Corporal Valdez-Castillo has been flown to a military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. He is in good condition and has spoken to his unit.

In both cases the sniper fired from the other side of a canal, among civilians and a group of buildings. The advantages were his.

Seeing the risks, the commanders have been shifting tactics to reduce the marines' vulnerability while still trying to keep them out on the streets, interacting with Iraqis and searching for insurgents and arms caches.

Some units have limited their foot patrols by day, finding them to be too dangerous. They still enter neighborhoods in armored vehicles and dismount, but often quickly step into buildings to interview people inside.

They continue to patrol on foot at night, because the Iraqi snipers have not yet shown the sophistication to fire with precision in the dark, and the marines' night vision equipment and weapons sights give them the upper hand.

They also cover most of their vital organs with protective armor plates, which have saved several of them when the Iraqi snipers have fired.

One marine, Gunnery Sgt. Shawn M. Dempsey of Weapons Company, was shot in the back as he helped a small girl across a street. The plate saved him. He remains on duty as a platoon commander.

Another, Lance Cpl. Edward Knuth of Company G, was hit as his squad searched a watermelon market beside a main road. No one in his squad heard the shot, which he said was probably made from a vehicle parked on the highway. All they heard was the impact of the bullet on his plate.

"It was like a smacking sound," he said.

The force of the impact, like being struck with a baseball bat, knocked him to his knees. A marine swiftly dragged him to cover. Then his squad rushed the line of cars. They found nothing. The sniper had escaped.

“They’re good,” Lance Corporal Knuth said, showing a crumbling, coin-sized hole in his armor where the bullet stopped. “They take their time. They’re patient. They only take one shot most of the time, and they are hard to find.”

After Lance Corporal Valdez-Castillo was shot and evacuated, a sweat-soaked, bloodied Sergeant Leach led his team through the rest of his patrol. When the marines re-entered the wire, an angry debriefing began.

Move quickly through the open areas, the noncommissioned officers told the troops. Don’t stand high on the berms. Camouflage the radios. Keep your eyes out and rifles ready.

Little was said about how to kill the sniper; the marines did not know where he was. They passed cigarettes and smoked them in the sun, and fumed.

“I’ll carry the radio next time,” said Lance Cpl. Peter Sprague. “I don’t have any kids.”