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'The sniper knows if his target is happy or sad. It's personal'

Neil Tweedie spent several days at a British-run sniping school in Serbia. How does a new computer game, Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2, compare - and why are women better shots?



Neil Tweedie: "Now, remember what he said," you think. Take your time, no rush, and find a comfortable position. Then acquire the target, relax your breathing and squeeze the trigger gently with the tip of the finger on the out-breath. Bang!



By Neil Tweedie 5:36PMBST 12 Apr 2013

The best snipers leave a signature. For one woman, a member of Alpha Group, the anti-terrorist arm of the Russian special forces, it is a shot to the victim's left eye.

Branko explains this as he readies the rifle, a custom-built weapon equipped with a Romanian telescopic sight, Serbian bolt-action and Austrian barrel. "I was in Russia training with the Alphas and met someone, and it was amazing," he says. "I was looking at her, she was so normal, a mother, but my friends told me that she had killed. Women are much better for this kind of execution because they always want to come back to their family. The man is looking for glory but the woman wants only to survive. "She was about 50 and told me there is one more woman in the unit, older than her. I said, 'Any younger?', and she told me, 'No, the young women don't want to suffer, like you have to suffer'."

It is time to fire. Five rounds, 7.8mm, 100 metres. With ear defenders on, the world closes in on that sight, a black-rimmed circle of light divided by crosshairs. The target is a head and torso drawn on paper and nailed to a post - reasonably distant to the naked eye but within touching distance through the scope. "Now, remember what he said," you think. Take your time, no rush, and find a comfortable position. Then acquire the target, relax your breathing and squeeze the trigger gently with the tip of the

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finger on the out-breath. Bang!

Even with ears covered the rifle's report is a shock, a mighty crack that reverberates around the small wooded valley until fading eventually into the far distance. The weapon's kick is a surprise, too. The uninitiated sometimes make the mistake of allowing the rim of the scope to get too near to the eye, resulting in a neat and painful red circle. Four more shots and it is time to take a look. One bullet has hit the "head", more by accident than design, and one the left arm. The other three shots are well-grouped, however, towards the middle of the chest.

"I'll call you the silent assassin," jokes Branko, not his real name. He has been training snipers for a few years now, part of a British-run operation in this quiet corner of rural Serbia. Men and women from all over the world come to learn how to shoot at extra-long distances, how to survive in difficult terrain, how to hide and, after the job is done, escape. Clients tend to be former soldiers and police looking to "up" their skills before moving into private security. There is always a demand for competent sharpshooters, most obviously to defend tankers sailing through the pirate infested waters off Somalia. "We have a good relationship with some international companies," says Branko, who is also an instructor in the police school on the outskirts of Belgrade. "We require these companies to guarantee that the people coming here are clean, with no criminal background."

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The trip to this discreet killing school has been arranged to promote a computer game, Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2, which has just been released. The cyberworld caters for all manner of morbid urges, not least those of the young bedroom wannabe marksman. Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 allows the player to follow his or her bullet as it coils its way inexorably towards the Serb baddie executing innocent civilians in war-torn Sarajevo. Odd, then, that the makers have chosen Serbia for the trip. Branko, though, is untroubled by the game's setting. He served as a sniper in the wars of the former Yugoslavia and says his were genuine military targets, not innocents. But the terms "military" and "civilian" were notoriously elastic during the bloodletting in Croatia, Bosnia or Kosovo.

"Never shoot from the window, never get close to the window," he says during his introductory talk. "Go in the room behind the window and cut a hole in the wall, take the brick out and look what's going on, then put it back and wait. Always choose low-light places. If you have to find cover, shoot through a blanket."

The sniper is the bogie man of the battlefield, a fixture since the 18th century, when reasonably accurate long-range shooting became possible. A notable early success occurred during the American War of Independence when, on October 7 1777, a rebel marksman killed the British general Simon Fraser.

A month earlier, during the Battle of the Brandywine, Captain Patrick Ferguson managed to get a tall American officer, quite possibly George Washington, in his sights. But Ferguson decided not to shoot because the man had his back turned towards him. Such gallantry was not to last. During the two world wars the sniper was both feared and loathed, with capture often resulting in summary execution. The clinical nature of sniping, studying the target before choosing the moment of execution, inspired hatred in ordinary infantry, who often felt helpless in the presence of a deadly, unseen enemy. To this day, there is something unsavoury about the "art" of sniping. In the curious league table of wartime morality, indiscriminate killing by bombing or artillery barrage is rated above shooting a man or woman at long distance from a concealed

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position, with a low risk of collateral casualties. "You are master of somebody's life," says Branko. "You know him, you see him, his face. You are killing a human being. Artillery is killing something not seen, but the sniper knows if his target is happy or sad. It's personal.

"A good shooter is far from a coward. He must be prepared to go looking for trouble, to step over into No Man's Land, into enemy territory. It's not just about accuracy, it is a mental game. You must be able to function without someone else – most of the best snipers have been hunters, used to being alone, feeling nature around them. You must be able to plan your approach and escape, to stay in one position for a long time, living for days on a few pieces of chocolate or just water, dirty and filthy. You must control your emotions. It is a brave thing compared to operating a drone from the other side of the world by satellite, then going to your house for dinner."

After a few hours on the range, 100 metres appears quite straightforward, and the range is increased to 200 and then 300 metres. Police marksmen commonly fire over ranges of about 100 metres but not at stationary pieces of paper. A hundred metres is lot when the target is a deranged gunman weaving in and out of a crowd. Military distances are far longer. The record for a kill is thought to be held by an Australian soldier serving in Afghanistan. Range: 2.8 kilometres. "When your heart is beating and you're taking your breath, you can see the scope moving," says Branko. "Russian snipers are trained to fire the shot between two heartbeats so the rifle doesn't move."

The Russians are deadly practitioners of the sniper's art. Vasily Zaytsev became the darling of the Soviet propaganda machine after chalking up 225 kills during the Battle of Stalingrad. Lyudmila Pavlichenko killed 309 Germans, making her the most deadly female sniper in history. They, like all snipers, had to learn to wait. "When you are alone and in position you must try to occupy your mind with nice things," says Branko. "If you start thinking about stupid things you will go crazy." Alexis Trust both plays and makes her living from computer games. She runs a computer gaming league that offers prizes of up to £15,000 to those who can clock up a winning body-count in games like Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2.

"We have about 3,000 people turning up to events," she says. "Sniper games started out very niche but it's getting bigger. People like the Hollywood aspect of sniping. It plays to the peculiar satisfaction of being the hunter who makes the enemy feel helpless." Does she enjoy it? "I do, I love it." Has she tried the new game? "Yeah, and it's such a huge improvement on the last one, smoother, crisper, cleaner. They have paid a lot of attention to the battlefield." But why would someone enjoy watching an animated head explode?

"You seriously need to be questioning your own reality if you can't find the line between what's real and what's fake," says Alexis. "These games allow people to pick up a remote control, become a soldier for half an hour and then return to normal life."

Real snipers must be able to do that also – live an extreme existence and return to the mundane. "Only few people can shoot and be normal afterwards," says Branko. "They are so stable in their head. I am not talking about crazy men but family men who go do a very dirty job and live with that. Somebody must do this job in war." He has warning.

"Never look in the eyes of the target, never. Because you won't, you can't, forget the eyes. The eyes are the mirror of the soul."

Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 is available now to buy on Xbox 360, PS3 & PC

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