

**Overwatch**  
**The “Cult of the Sniper”**

Frank Louis Blair Koucky III

March 23, 2015

“The enemy is invisible. Ambushes out of basements, wall remnants, hidden bunkers and factory ruins produce heavy casualties among our troops.”

- General Karl Strecker, Commander, XI Corps, Wehrmacht Sixth Army, Stalingrad

“If only you could understand what terror is...At the slightest rustle, I pull the trigger and fire off tracer bullets in bursts from the machine gun.”

- captured letter home from a German 6<sup>th</sup> Army gunner at Stalingrad

“The German Landsers came to harbor a special fear of the Siberians from Colonel Batyuk’s 284<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division, who were considered to be natural hunters of any sort of prey.”

- historian Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad*

“The only nation known to have devoted attention to sniping techniques between the First and Second World Wars was Soviet Russia...and by the time of the Second World War...its snipers could operate like a well-drilled football team, each man knowing where to move and what to do on each play.”

- *US Army Sniper Training Manual*

When I visited the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow, I saw huge dioramas of the war’s major battles, some in commemoration of the Hero Cities that held out against impossible odds in total war. I was alone on a rainy day except for an old, old babushka, a wrinkled great-grandmother wearing her traditional headscarf, in the quiet room before the amazing diorama of Stalingrad, considered by many to be the decisive battle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The diorama is not of direct combat but of victory as the Red Army closes the ring and forces the surrender of an entire German army. On the back wall is a huge painting of the smoking city in ruins and in the corner is painted a small tired man with a scoped rifle wearing white winter camo, resting amidst the ruins and smoking a cigarette. I pointed to him and said “Zaitsev.” The old lady’s tired eyes lit up as a huge and youthful smile crossed her face. Then her eyes teared up and she said proudly “Da, da. Zaitsev.”

His name is still magic and brings memories and pride to those Soviet people who survived the loss of 27 million dead in the Great Patriotic War’s invasion, as Vasili Zaitsev was a great hero to all the Soviet Union and the founder of the Red Army’s “Cult of the Sniper,” a field sniper school forged from desperation in Stalingrad’s ruins. That school and its graduate snipers grew to supply badly needed heroic news and propaganda and spread his tactics and skills to sniper schools worldwide. Zaitsev’s careful methods

and skills are now part of the training of military and police snipers from dozens of countries such as our own Marines, Army and Navy sniper teams, our SEALs and Rangers and Marine Scout/Snipers as well as Russia's Spetsnaz. The elite British and Canadian snipers who now claim long range record kills of almost a mile and a half and the snipers of dozens of nations and many faiths all know one name above all other snipers: Vasili Zaitsev.

When the three prongs of the mighty German war machine invaded Russia and Ukraine in June of 1941 they caught the Soviets by surprise, capturing vast stocks of men and supplies, sweeping rapidly forward into what seemed at first a quick victory. At the cost of tens of thousands of lives the Red Army slowed them, a delay bought with suicidal onslaughts and constant sniper attacks, while the Soviets frantically moved over a thousand factories and their workers to safety behind the Ural Mountains, out of reach of German bombers and troops. Among the vital industries moved was the famous Tula Arms Factory, founded by Peter the Great, and the vital Progress Optical Plant, moved from Leningrad as Army Group North advanced to besiege and blockade the city.

The beautiful small city of Tula had been the site of the development of what became a national inspiration and a terror to the invaders, the now-famed Russian Mosin Nagant sniper rifle, first made at Tula and then during the war moved to combined factories at Izhevsk. It combined hand-picked and accuracy-tested examples of the standard Mosin Nagant 91/30 infantry rifle with a series of simple but robust optics made at various locations to create what became the personal weapon for some of the bravest and deadliest soldiers of all time, the men and women of the Red Army's "Cult of the Sniper."

In 1930 the Red Army saw the need for a defensive weapon both simple to produce and inexpensive. Remembering the horrors of WWI trench warfare, when German sharpshooters wreaked havoc on advancing soldiers, they saw the need for a dedicated sniper rifle. Optics plants built a Russian replica of top German Zeiss scopes, producing in 1932 a superb clear and powerful Russian-built 4X scope with a German post reticle and an adjustable focus. This was mounted on specially selected and "Cn" sniper-marked rifles from Tula's Mosin Nagant assembly lines, tested to be able to repeatedly hit to about 1 1/4 inch at 100 yards, accuracy difficult to attain even now with most production rifles. Weatherby, a US producer of very expensive near-custom hunting rifles, boasted recently of being able to shoot to 1 inch at 100 yards with top ammo, a feat the Russians basically achieved by the mid-1930s in tens of thousands of mass-production military sniper rifles. Another Soviet rifle, the SVT-40 which featured rapid 10 round semi-auto fire capabilities, did not prove accurate enough or easy to maintain in harsh field conditions, so the older Mosins continued as the sniper favorite throughout the war.

In the hands of a trained Red Army sniper such a rifle was capable of hits on men to past 800 yards, eight football fields away, and was certain death to enemies within 500 yards. We call that early scope the PE and later versions called the PEM saved costs and time by eliminating the adjustable focus, figuring that Red Army snipers had eyes good enough to

need no correction. Later wartime scope designs created the more commonly seen and simpler 3.5X PU scope but the same accuracy standards were met.

Firing the powerful 7.62X54R cartridge, Mosin rifles have similar ballistics to our modern 30-06, then the cartridge of the US military, who incredibly had no dedicated sniper rifles or trained snipers at all when war broke out and suffered greatly because of it, finally cobbling together a WWI rifle with a fragile low-powered scope to make do. The Russian round can shoot right through automotive engine blocks or light armor, drive bullets through trees or cover and hit accurately to about 1000 yards in trained hands with a possible range of well over a mile in volley fire. It can penetrate 1 inch of steel at 300 yards, drive straight through a German helmet and has an amazing 80% hit percentage in the hands of a Red Army sniper at 600 yards.

A Navy SEAL teams sniper recently firing one of my Tula sniper rifles hit to 1 ¼ inches at 100 yards repeatedly in his very first shots, matching the accuracy tests from when the rifle was first made in 1943, using fifty year old surplus ammunition. He said the scope was excellent, offering advantages of depth of field to hit targets at various ranges without adjusting anything as well as allowing a very wide view. He hated the rather primitive trigger's stiff pull on the old rifle but said it was even now a "very dangerous long range weapon in good hands." That is serious professional praise for a rifle now 72 years old. I have shot 7/16 inch groups with special Russian "Extra Match" ammunition, putting five shots on a spot the size of a dime at a football field's length, so the old warhorse can still deliver surprising accuracy.

Long-range shooting tests published by well-know gun writer Mike Venturino show that the Mosin Nagant PU sniper rifle was the most capable and accurate of all the sniper rifles any nation fielded in WWII to ranges far beyond 400 yards, a fact that amazed him. It didn't amaze me, as I own and shoot many of them regularly.

In the 1970s I worked for Mercedes Benz, who you may recall made the dreaded Panzer tanks that advanced on Russia. There was an old mechanic we called "Nazi Fred" who had served as a front-line tank mechanic after his apprenticeship with Mercedes in Germany before the war, serving the mighty Panzers that drove in the spearhead of the Third Reich's conquests.

Quiet, shy and very skilled at mechanical improvisation, he sometimes surprised us, once exposing a US Colonel as a former Hitler Youth by whistling the "Horst Wessel Song" and watching the Colonel's feet start to march. "Once you have marched to that tune, you will always march to that tune." said Fred as the Colonel swore and stamped out.

For a cheap steak and a bottle of wine after work old Fred would tell me grim and detailed war stories of his long years with the Panzers, never glorifying or exaggerating or making himself sound heroic. No one else cared to listen, but Fred started me off on an interest that has brought me to Moscow, to Tula, to Kiev and Odessa and St. Petersburg in search of the places of his tales of battles, led me to build a major international-level

collection of Russian rifles and may have even helped me find my Russian wife through my travels and love of Russia's history.

Young Fred was part of "Panzer Leader" Heinz Guderian's Army Group Central October 1941 advance on Moscow, caught first in the mud and then in the icy depths of a Russian winter. He told of Russian cold so intense that vehicle engine blocks froze solid if you turned them off even for minutes, of gun oil frozen rock hard, locking the actions so German guns wouldn't fire and of the terrible fate of many tens of thousands of German comrades frozen or shot in the empty Russian wastelands with no winter coats, no hats or even gloves, under constant fire from some of the best snipers the world has ever known.

He told a tale that would cause me to visit those very fields, the lovely birch groves, hidden marshes and rolling endless steppes where his bold German advance bogged down and failed in the face of Soviet defenses, scorched earth policies and hard Russian winter. Old Fred's descriptions were the first time I had ever heard of the skill and dedication of the Red Army snipers and the first time I heard of the unspeakable terror that such shooting can bring to an invading army. I was impressed.

Never the one to play the hero, Nazi Fred told of when what he called "the Siberians" came to Moscow's icy expanses, invisible Russian snipers all in white, dressed in warm furs and quilted jackets beneath their winter camo, silently creeping close like ghosts out in the windy night, waiting for hours still in the snow as the Germans huddled around open fires trying to stay warm. Every time a German would cross in front of the fire in the dark, an unseen sniper would fire accurately at his outline from far away. Fred told how he and his comrades had to pile their frozen dead eight high in a circle to block the snipers, making a grim fortress wall of their icy comrades. The snipers never stopped raining death all the long Russian winter nights, and never were captured or even seen up close. Hitler ordered absolutely not an inch of retreat, so there the German Panzers and their crews and mechanics stayed stuck in the open as constant targets.

Fred said there was constant unending fear in everyone's heart, no shelter, almost no food and no sleep. There was nowhere to hide from the snipers or the cold which reached -31 degrees F. with a 40 knot wind. The German's vital attack on Moscow bogged down just before Tula and failed in that bleak winter, leaving fields of bones so thick that many fields never will be plowed. "We have two generals," said the Russians, "General Zhukov and General Winter." At the Hero City of Tula's war memorial, a Red Army soldier stands in bronze, his hand held high like a traffic policeman – "This far and no further."

When I travelled through that wide countryside recently I saw small homemade crosses on several fields. Newly found dead waited for the military mortuary teams to pick up yet more of the hundreds of thousands of unidentified soldiers still left in those vast Russian expanses of birch and grass and wetlands. Fred's forts of the stacked frozen dead were discovered almost fifty years later and described in a recent book on the Battle of Moscow as unknown in purpose. I was able to tell the author the fearsome reason they were built.

Young Nazi Fred was very relieved to stay alive. Finally shipped south after the awful Moscow failure, he passed a relatively easy summer, at least by Eastern Front standards, with good food and hot weather and endless small wins. He and his Mercedes-built Panzers led a warm and easy summer advance toward what his friends believed would be a quick and easy victory, a bombed-out city on the Volga called Stalingrad.

As a mechanic for General Hube's 16<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division, called "the battering ram of the corps," Fred entered Stalingrad with tanks, half-tracks, self-propelled assault guns, eight-wheel recon vehicles and a lot of trucks and horse-drawn wagons. None of those Panzers would ever leave the city and a million soldiers and civilians would die there soon. Again, Fred barely survived, this time facing the total destruction of the entire German Sixth Army trapped in the "Kessel," the closed cauldron of fire where the Red Army snipers earned their lasting fame.

Nazi Fred, by winter's collapse was the driver for his general when the tanks had no fuel left and the collapse was near. He told me how he was flown out of the trap of Stalingrad with General Hube in the middle of the night under fire, an event actually now referred to in the book "Stalingrad." He told how in the dark airfield the general put out his hand to his driver and said "You have a family. Come with me and live." The book says he was taken out less sentimentally, because Hitler ordered tank specialists to be saved from the encircled city. Taken back to his old commander Guderian, he was part of the armor's defense against the Normandy landings, surrendering to the Americans and ending up a mechanic for Mercedes cars rather than Panzers, the only enlisted German to survive Moscow, Stalingrad and D-Day and end up in Monterey, California.

Old Nazi Fred had called the Russian snipers at Moscow "the Siberians" and that is exactly what they were, General Zhukov's crack Siberian Rifle Regiments, brought to Moscow's defense immediately after Pearl Harbor when the Soviets knew that Japan could not fight on two fronts. They came equipped for winter warfare and ready to fight, having defeated the Japanese in 1938 under their same commander. Every year in Moscow's Victory Day Parade at Red Square, a small battalion of re-enactors in white winter camo smocks marches with old Mosin rifles to remember the winters of Moscow and Stalingrad.

Tough Siberian riflemen, the 284<sup>th</sup> Siberian Rifle Regiment headed in August for seemingly doomed Stalingrad soon got an eager young volunteer named Vasili Zaitsev, a Navy quartermaster who had been employed as paymaster and accountant for the Soviet Pacific Fleet at Vladivostok. Under the direction of "Noble Sniper" Zaitsev and his deadly sniper teams of "Little Rabbits" (a play on the name of Zaitsev which means "rabbit" in Russian) the Red Army snipers of Stalingrad would win a reputation that is remembered today by every major army on earth.

At 27, he was a young and very skilled hunter from Siberia's Ural region, a superb and very motivated rifleman with years of hunting experience, great patience and winter survival skills. He would use them all in the months to follow. As the Germans advanced

on Stalingrad, Zaitsev asked his commanding Naval officer if he could volunteer to fight with the Red Army instead of waiting safely on the sidelines for naval battles he knew would never come. Along with about 25 other Navy volunteers, after brief training in urban combat he travelled across the Volga and entered the burning city with the 284<sup>th</sup> Siberians, a city expected by both sides to fall in days. Immediately his extraordinary rifle skills brought him to the attention of officers who made him a sniper by simply handing him a scoped rifle and sending him back into battle. After early success, they told him to build and train multiple sniper teams and go hunting in the ruins.

Only 5 feet 6 inches tall, he had been mocked for his small stature, but he became the most famed sniper in modern history and trained in his school among the rubble of Stalingrad a cadre of elite snipers who are credited with over 6000 logged kills at Stalingrad and during the long years of war that followed. He was the unassuming founder of what has been called “Sniperism” or “The Cult of the Sniper,” a public glorification of the Soviet sniper teams with medals, public praise and, more important, full recognition by the high command of what such skilled shooters can do in combat to keep their fellow soldiers alive by defeating an enemy both physically and psychologically.

By combining the skills of a Siberian hunter and a Navy accountant, Zaitsev developed, formalized and taught what became today’s modern sniper, not just a casual sharpshooter but a highly trained, motivated and terrifying force. Through Zaitsev’s much-publicized exploits the proper tactical use and value of snipers on modern battlefields was passed on to generations of military commanders worldwide.

In the darkest hours of the war, long before the Allies landed in France, the Soviet Union was being beaten. The press and the government needed heroes badly and news of a young sniper’s dozens of kills in the ruins of a great city became the stuff of legends.

Actual copies of these news stories are preserved in the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, newspapers showing a handsome young Zaitsev with detailed stories of his victories and those of the teams he trained, tales of sniper duels and brilliant tricks and tactics to drive back the invaders. The stories were more than propaganda – his snipers were helping to turn the tide in a chaos of rubble perfect for their hunting. He and his fellow snipers brought hope, victory and pride in a time when despair and defeat were all too close.

He himself killed over 400 Germans and Romanians at Stalingrad, though he took credit in his log for only those actually directly witnessed by an officer or other sniper, some 149 kills in that city. His 11 counter-sniper kills are a record as he defended his snipers and troops by hunting down and destroying hidden German snipers in their places of concealment, saving hundreds of lives. Awarded the nation’s highest medal, the Hero of the Soviet Union, he made the famous quote picked up by Stalin and now engraved on the monument to the dead at the Volgograd memorial where he himself now lies: “For us there is no land beyond the Volga.” It is a dark statement of desperate focus, meaning he

and his comrades had no task but one before them, the defense of Stalingrad. They would hold or die on their side of the river.

Zaitsev was seriously wounded several times at Stalingrad including a bayonet wound to the back, multiple concussions and a day of being buried alive by an artillery strike. Finally he was blinded by a mortar shell and finished the Battle of Stalingrad in the hospital while his famed Stalingrad PEM rifle was lost.

His sight restored by top surgeons, he voluntarily returned to sniper combat almost immediately with a new PU rifle and his deadly teams, refusing the chance to retire and make patriotic appearances. He fought across Ukraine in the bloody Dnieper River crossings to liberate Kiev and the final battle to regain Odessa. He fought along side his teams daily on the long road to Berlin and was finally gravely wounded just before Berlin fell. Recovering after the war, he went to a textile school and eventually became the manager for a large textile factory in Kiev, a city he had helped liberate. He sometimes shot competitively until his seventies and when he died, he was first buried at Kiev.

A few years later, his final wishes to be buried with his fellow soldiers at Stalingrad were honored. In 2006 he was reburied there in a huge state funeral, the casket carried all the way behind his famed second PU rifle, a full parade Russian honor guard followed by hundreds of veterans of Zaitsev's war, old but proud men and women with their uniforms and medals, many in wheelchairs or on crutches, followed by the young soldiers who came after. A vast crowd of Ukrainians and Russians young and old walked behind or lined the roads. Russian television showed the procession and said that as many as 600,000 people attended his service or walked behind his casket. It was the greatest state funeral of modern Russian history.

He is buried as he wished, at the site of his greatest sniper battles, the Mamayev Hill of Volgograd, above where he and his fellow soldiers held the last bit of ground left to them. Heads of military training schools from all over the world came to lay wreaths that day and our own head of the US Army Sniper School spoke in his tribute.

Amazingly, for one day a year, Volgograd resumes its old name of Stalingrad in honor of the hundreds of thousands of Soviet dead who turned the tide in what is often called the most important battle in modern history.

Many other snipers shared in Zaitsev's glory, among them his fellow team leader Medvedev, who shares the wall in the museum painting. The Soviet list of sniper heroes includes over one hundred snipers with kill records exceeding three hundred, many with more kills than Zaitsev's. Our own hit movie "American Sniper" and the previous Stalingrad sniper film "Enemy at the Gates" shows that the "Cult of the Sniper" goes on today. More important, his methods appear in the US Navy SEAL Sniper Training Manual plus the US Marine and US Army Sniper Manuals, helping defend our nation with lessons learned or relearned in the streets of Stalingrad.

So what did Zaitsev teach? The defined methods, mental conditioning and tactics of his field school were reported diligently but dangerously by the Soviet newspapers and in his reports to his command. They became the solid base not just for Soviet snipers but for the schools of many nations, first to Zaitsev's students, then to his commanders and finally into the Red Army Sniper Schools. Some tactics had been learned before in other wars and forgotten after WW I, and new skills and technology have been added, but he publically showed reluctant military planners worldwide how to use snipers and formally taught his deadly hunter's skills in repeatable training. Friends and enemies learned. Indeed, the US Navy SEAL Sniper Manual recommends SEAL instructors motivate their students by telling of Zaitsev's sniper duels. Praise indeed!

Zaitsev mastered and taught the use of dedicated and trained sniper teams, a sniper and spotter as we now call them. The spotter is also trained as a sniper for back-up, finding and ranging targets and calling the shots through scope or binocular, watching the impact of rounds by the sniper to correct misses. Zaitsev's spotters also provided what we now call "security" to the sniper, armed with an automatic weapon and grenades for close-range defense, as do our own today. Not just a designated marksman attached to a platoon, these were and are independent teams capable of detached decisions and action in sniping and recon.

Zaitsev personally developed to an art and promoted the tactic called "overwatch" where sniper teams carefully set up above a pending infantry advance, using the superior range and accuracy of their rifles to protect advancing troops below. Useful in street fighting and in open country, this became a staple of Soviet tactics in taking back cities and in the advance to Berlin, in breaking down and pursuing the blockading Army Group North at Leningrad and was used by Russian Spetsnaz snipers fighting in Afghanistan, covering ambushes and dangerous advances from behind. Zaitsev's classic overwatch tactic is shown in the recent movie "American Sniper" as sniper Kyle protects advancing Marines from a rooftop, clearly seeing what troops cannot see or hit from ground level and protecting the advance from a high position.

Vasili was the master of the "sniper's hide" using his hunter's concealment skills to prepare elegantly hidden shooting locations invisible to the enemy. He taught careful selection of ground for ambushes, changing locations quickly, using crossfires to avoid detection, developing the deadly tactic now called "sixes" by modern Russian snipers, where three teams of two sniper/spotters are set in concealed watches of crossing fire so as not to reveal their hides. By shooting at crossed angles, they become far less detectable and can cover large areas without discovery, each sniper team sweeping up to 700 yards on each side of his position. Well over a mile of ground can be held this way by only three hidden sniper teams.

It was in advanced concealment and attention to detail that Zaitsev excelled, teaching the same to his students. How to set up in a house away from shadow or window exposure, how to remove a single brick or make a rubble hide, how to carve out a hole to shoot from without a single bit of disturbance being visible before or after, that was Zaitsev's

lesson. Combined with infinite hunter's patience and rifle skill, the modern sniper team was born.

Equally important, Zaitsev's incredible hunter's patience and preparation became the inspirational model for modern snipers whose motto of "one shot, one kill" goes right back to his willingness to wait even days for a clear shot at a desired target. For one of Zaitsev's "hares" to shoot even five shots in a day was remarkable, but they hit what they aimed at and were taught priorities, not quantity, was what counted, just as snipers today do not give themselves away for low rated targets. Zaitsev himself concentrated on the deadliest game of all, enemy snipers, and modern countersnipers all know the stories of his duels, where a flash of a lens or a single movement or a visibly moved piece of masonry could cost a sniper his life..

Zaitsev taught formal target priorities, teaching his teams to identify and hit officers, artillery observers and machinegun crews as main targets. It is said that Soviet sniper teams sometimes killed 60 German officers in a single day at Stalingrad, while passing on lesser targets to stay hidden. The modern practice of wearing "subdued" uniform insignia traces itself to Stalingrad, where any German officer showing his rank was a sniper's top priority and didn't last long. Unlike the movies, no sane officer on either side (except maybe Patton) soon went into combat in a fancy uniform showing rank because of the snipers, a mistake that long before cost Britain's Lord Nelson his life when he wore his medals and full dress into battle and was shot from the enemy ship's tops.

In the movies arrogant SS officers strut into battle in black dress uniforms covered with shiny medals and insignia of rank with fancy black Totenkopf death's head hats and pins gleaming neatly in place – they would have not lasted minutes at Stalingrad, where even carrying binoculars or a flash on a collar or a glossy map case betrayed a top target to Zaitsev's teams. Nowadays our military uniforms and those of most armies hide rank until very close up, all because of the snipers.

At Stalingrad Zaitsev, a trained accountant, worked out the interesting and previously relatively uncharted fact that bullets travelling up or down steep angles do not follow the same path as those fired on the flat. This has later been incorporated into ballistic laser viewfinders and ballistic calculators, but he did the calculations the hard way after missing shots off a tall tower. Now the ballistics for such shots can be dialed in, but Zaitsev taught rough elevation calculations to his teams, vital facts for accurate shooting at long ranges that all snipers now know well.

The teams at Stalingrad showed high command that snipers could sometimes be used without infantry support as a powerful blocking force, stopping advances of superior numbers across open fields or city blocks by careful aimed fire. This tactic, placing snipers to challenge advances until support came up, allowed thinly stretched troops to hold much greater areas as enemy troops without armored support simply could not cross sniper-controlled areas. A rifleman or two could often block much larger forces if advancing officers were shot and key commands could not be given, while sheer terror might dominate troops under such accurate fire.

Another tactic, sniper volley fire, which he used on occasion proved to be the key to the US Navy SEAL sniper kills of Somali pirates, freeing hostage Captain Phillips in the Red Sea. Just as Zaitsev had taught his “Hares” to do, three skilled snipers fired absolutely simultaneously to assure hits and keep the element of surprise.

Instead of just having sniper teams attached to a specific platoon or one trench or wall, Zaitsev taught officers their value as hunters, given free rein to find their own hides and targets, roaming on huge battlefields like knights on a chessboard. This became the basis for much of our Marine Scout/Sniper doctrine, where invisible snipers penetrate deep into concealment for targets they themselves find. The master of this in more modern times was the famed US Marine sniper Carlos Hathcock, Wimbledon Cup champion shooter, who in Vietnam earned his reputation as “The White Feather” with 93 kills and a 2500 yard measured shot.

Zaitsev’s major contribution was perhaps teaching military planners and command just what even one or two good snipers could do psychologically to an enemy. It is the terror of unseen and unexpected death from afar that Zaitsev and his fellow Red Army snipers proved most of all to the world. An enemy fearing snipers advances slowly and shakily and even tanks needed to be buttoned up tight, restricting visibility. The psychology of snipers was demonstrated time and again by Red Army snipers and the Germans learned the hard way, soon turning their own snipers loose in similar ways on the Soviet and American advances into Germany. We learned this a bit late as German snipers often slowed and damaged our US advances through Italy and later through the hedgerows of France, with our officers going so far as using tanks to blow the steeples off upcoming churches to avoid German snipers in the bell towers. Our US Army Sniper Manual says “Realization of the sniper’s presence instills fear in enemy troop elements and influences their decisions and actions.” That puts it mildly.

From Zaitsev’s school at Stalingrad and the national fame of Soviet sniper heroes came the Red Army and Soviet media’s “Cult of the Sniper.” Thousands more were trained as snipers in 1943 and beyond. The supply of sniper rifles and the new PU scope continued to escalate, as did the hundreds of volunteers for sniper school, each hoping to do what Zaitsev had done and drive the enemy from their homeland.

The Soviet Union shared the medals and glory among hundreds of snipers, awarding honors to many with top medals going to men and women alike, regardless of sex or race. Asians, Tatars, Muslims of Arabic descent, Jews and Russians from all walks of life fought as snipers, won military honors and faced terrible odds in the years of combat. To be a distinguished Red Army sniper carried risks, as the sniper’s war was always right at the front and the mortality rate were high. Zaitsev himself was awarded medals as Hero of the Soviet Union, Order of Lenin, Order of the Red Banner (twice), Order of the Patriotic War (First Class), Medal for the Defense of Stalingrad and the Medal for the Victory Over Germany.

2000 woman snipers were trained by the Red Army in 1943 including the beautiful 23 year old Rosa Shanina who died in battle after 59 kills, and famed Lyudmila Pavlichenko, with 309 kills, the greatest woman sniper in history, the subject of Soviet postage stamps, the first Soviet citizen to be a guest at the White House for whom Woody Guthrie wrote a song how “over 300 Nazis fell by her gun.” The woman snipers proved their skill and courage, but took 60% casualties killed or wounded. A Nazi general wrote at Stalingrad “The Russian woman has long been fully prepared for combat duties...Russian soldiers treat such women with great wariness.” So did the Germans.

During the entire war the number of Soviet snipers is still not known. Some sources say that close to 20,000 men and women took up sniper rifles. Books by both Russians and Germans tell of the effective sniper fire from the besieged city of Leningrad, where master gunsmiths crept in to service the rifles and trained Russian snipers held out on the front lines for almost 900 days of starvation and cold. When the siege was broken, the snipers, Soviet Marines and soldiers and Leningrad worker’s militias pursued the broken German Army Group North survivors all the way down to Latvia where they finally surrendered.

Snipers are now a vital and well-recognized part of all major armies. Unlike the first days of WWII when the US army had no sniper rifle and no sniper training school, almost all developed nations have developed specialized rifles and powerful optics suitable for their requirements and possible environments, including extreme cold and tropical heat, dust and mud and endless rain. British, Canadian, Australian, Chinese, Korean and US snipers go into conflict well-trained, as do Russian and German and French snipers. Finns have distinctive sniper rifles, as do the forces of Italy, Denmark and every other power.

The range of modern .50 Barrett and .338 Lapua sniper rifles extends to over a mile, with the longest recorded kill currently being set by UK’s Corporal Harrison at 2707 yards, over 27 football field lengths away. The big Barretts are used primarily as anti-material rifles, precisely damaging trucks, cars, water or gasoline tanks, warehouse stores, airplanes, helicopters, generators, power transformers and munitions, but they definitely can be used as anti-personnel weapons as well.

Our current specialized .338 Lapua anti-personnel rifles reach out much further than previously possible and appear in the recent “American Sniper” film, but the real work of the US snipers is generally done by a cartridge similar to the old Russian one, the .308 in various nation’s sniper builds. The Russians still use their old and reliable 7.62X54R cartridge of Zaitsev’s day in their famed semi-auto SVD Dragunov sniper rifles, less accurate at long range than our current bolt action rifles, but capable of ten quick shots to 800 yards and now using specially accurate sniper ammo. Still, even today, the old Mosin PU rifles like Zaitsev’s turn up in combat in odd locations, sometimes photographed in places like Ukraine or even in the hands of Russian Spetsnaz units in Georgia and elsewhere.

Anti-terrorist missions in civilian areas have brought precision shooting to the forefront as accurate hits with no collateral damage are the specialty of the sniper, able to target

just what is ordered and nothing more. Rifles and optics keep improving, with 16X scopes available and even superb night vision capabilities. Specialized ammunition and synthetic stocks have moved far beyond the birchwood and mass produced ammo of Zaitsev's day, but behind every sniper's training is a memory of the Red Army snipers of Stalingrad, when determined men and women with rifles and skill helped to destroy the largest invasion force ever sent across a border. Every sniper today learns that no ballistics computer, fancy optics or weapons technology is more important than the patience, steady eye and die-hard motivation learned from the little Russian hunter who said "For us there is no land beyond the Volga."