

# BASIC INSTINCT



## MOVING COMBATIVES TRAINING FORWARD

By Sergeant First Class William C. Clark

From the Spartans to the Japanese Samurai to the Soldiers of the American Revolution, combatives training has helped produce more capable, confident Soldiers, and combatives remain crucial to the training and development of the successful warrior.

In ancient Sparta, combatives were instrumental in the training and development of the warrior school, the *agoge*, which children began at the age of 7. Children of the *agoge* were forced to fight using a style of wrestling and submission locks called *pankration*. They fought with spears, sticks and swords in brutal fashion, honing their warrior's confidence and producing an indomitable mindset that seared the tiny Greek state into the pages of history thousands of years ago.

In the modern vernacular, the word "spartan" is a synonym for austere, hard or strong. Spartan warriors and their exploits became legend, and their dedication to military excellence continues to be emulated by warriors around the world.

During the Shogunate period in Japan, the sons of the professional military class, or Samurai, were taught *bujitsu* (warrior arts) under vicious conditions that today would be consid-

ered child abuse. They learned hand-to-hand techniques based on the economy of motion, unmatched swordsmanship and archery skills that made the Samurai some of the most formidable warriors of all time. In addition to their warrior skills, the Samarai practiced *budo* (the warrior way), a belief system that gave them a calm and confidence in battle. Totally committed, they had an intense faith that their training and skills would not fail them.

The Spartans and the Samurai had an edge — it was their training, their commitment, and their faith in themselves and their doctrine. Simply put, they possessed a "warrior's mind."

In the 234-year history of the U.S. Army, hand-to-hand training has received varied attention, usually based on the degree of personal interest of those who had influence over training. Early in our military history, "hand fighting" was practiced by George Washington's forces at Valley Forge to supplement the Napoleonic warfare drills that Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben taught the Continental Army.

Throughout these early days of our military history, morale and competitiveness were fostered by boxing and wrestling contests, among other pas-

times. But hand-to-hand, fencing and close-weapons training were not merely hobbies for Soldiers who fought using Napoleonic tactics — they were vital for survival. Cavalry charges and massed formations, paired with the use of fixed bayonets, direct-fire artillery and flint-lock firearms, made hand-to-hand or edged-weapon conflict highly probable. It was crucial that the forces had training and experience in those areas, as well.

From the Pacific campaigns of World War II, the Korean War and the occupations that followed each, Soldiers and Marines returned with not only exposure to but also in some instances extensive training in, the martial arts. Judo was brought back to the U.S. in large volume first, followed closely by Okinawan- and Japanese-style karate.

After the Korean War, Soldiers and Marines brought back several Korean martial-arts styles later employed by the Republic of Korea's army in a combatives program fostered by General Choi Hong Hi. Hi supervised the publication of manuals and the implementation of the new program with an old name: *tae kwon do*. He had a manual sent to his friend in the U.S., Jhoon Ree, who began teaching and

promoting tae kwon do as a sport and as self-defense at his schools in Texas and other states.

During the Vietnam War and the Cold War era, the U.S. occupied bases in Thailand and throughout the Indochina region, including the Malay Archipelago, thereby exposing servicemen to muay thai kickboxing; kali/escrima, Philippine martial arts that emphasize stick and sword fighting; and silat, Malayan martial arts that use strikes, throws and bladed weapons). Muay thai kickboxing was particularly brutal. It includes the familiar techniques of Western boxing but also includes trips, the use of knees and elbows, and shin kicks, with bouts often ending in knockouts. This all-out type of fighting drew large crowds at stadiums and in small clubs. Demonstrations of weapons skill in the region featured weapons like escrima sticks and various edged weapons in blade-wielding dances. They featured common and concealable weapons used with grace and logical flow. Many servicemen found these displays to be efficient, captivating and exotic. During and after the war, returning Soldiers and immigrants from the region brought with them these styles of martial arts.

Overall, from the mid-1940s to the early 1990s, the practice of martial arts proliferated in the U.S. and around the world. Tae kwon do and judo became Olympic sports; schools sprang up across the country with instruction in styles from around the world. Today, there are thousands of schools teaching karate, aikido, ninjutsu and judo in small towns and big cities. Some credit for that boom can be given to Hollywood, which embraced Bruce Lee, David Carradine, Chuck Norris, Steven Seagal, Jean-Claude Van Damme and others in films that cast the actors as elite Soldiers, fighters and all-around heroes. Box-office receipts, along with enrollments in gymnasiums and martial arts studios, show that Americans aspire to be strong and confident like their heroes.

The perception that martial artists are all but invincible in a fight against dozens of opponents and that they can train themselves to superhuman levels of performance has become a popular idea in the U.S. After all, there was no real forum for disproving the notion that a martial artist could knock a man out by accurately applying nerve pressure, or that Joe Blow kun do was the ultimate martial art, whose practitioners could rip out your still-beating heart.

Boxing, kickboxing and muay thai kickboxing follow a strict set of rules, including referees for enforcing Marquis of Queensbury-style fight formats. There was no way to prove which style was the best, most deadly or most efficient. That is, not until 1993 and the debut of the Ultimate Fighting Championship and a man of diminutive stature named Royce Gracie. The original UFC showcased real one-on-one arena fights with limited rules. Gracie demonstrated that the combatant who exhibited superior technique and confidence, not necessarily brute force, was most likely to prevail.

The years since the UFC first aired have shed light on the realistic application of martial skills in hand-to-hand contests. Gracie's many fights and wins against bigger, stronger opponents who were skilled in styles that did not allow for realistic training opened people's eyes and made them reconsider their training practices. Today, many have embraced the "new" mixed martial arts, or MMA, approach to training first made popular in the U.S. by Bruce Lee in the 1960s. MMA requires that training be well-rounded, focusing on skills from multiple disciplines of combat-like grappling, striking, trapping, in-fighting, takedowns and takedown defense. It favors live-contact sparring and drills over rigid forms and traditional ceremonies, more like training under a high-school wrestling coach than under Mr. Miyagi from *The Karate Kid*.

Over the last 15 years, the Army and the Marine Corps have spent more time on the subject of combatives than they did during the previous 219 years. The main reason is that everyone else in the world does, too. MMA is the fastest-growing sport in the world: UFC events, when televised, are outwatched in the U.S. only by the NFL. Other professional sporting events such as basketball, NASCAR, baseball and hockey all receive much lower ratings when they are telecast in competition with UFC events.

UFC events routinely break box-office records, and they have taken place in many states, as well as in England, Ireland and Germany. Further, MMA events hosted in Japan have packed more than 93,000 people in arenas. All this focus and popularity is due to the simple fact that Royce Gracie put himself on the line in an arena. Sharing the same edge that the Spartans and the Samurai did, he won, again and again, just as his family had been doing for more than 80 years. He

wasn't even the best fighter among his brothers! He was successful because he and his brothers trained realistically; they relied on techniques that worked in routine live sparring. Royce and his brothers had developed a true warrior's mindset. Live fighting was the norm for Royce; it was not the norm for his opponents. Royce had logged thousands of hours participating in live sparring, but his opponents' hours of live, full-contact sparring could be counted on a single hand. His family had perfected transitions between techniques, just as Soldiers perfect their transition from their primary weapon to their secondary weapon on the range. To Gracie, fighting was like clockwork. America was watching.

In 1995, Gracie was a cult hero, undefeated in the UFC. At that time, within most Army units, there was a lack of confidence in the techniques the Army taught, in the light of these MMA contests. The Army lacked quality control of its instructors, there were no program supervisors and, most importantly, there was no sustainable, train-the-trainer instructor-certification program. As it always had been, training was driven from the bottom, by an interested, mixed bag of trainers. The situation led the commander of the 2nd Ranger Battalion to reinvigorate the martial-arts training within his command. The Modern Army Combatives Program, or MACP, was the result.

Those tasked with developing and implementing the MACP encountered serious issues: Most of the Rangers within the battalion seemed to feel that the techniques taught in FM 21-150, *Combatives* (September 1992), were unrealistic or simply wouldn't work. The fact was that in accordance with FM 21-150, combatives were rarely taught outside basic training. The reason most often cited for that lack of training was that units with limited training time, whose battle focus was on "real" warrior skills, such as shooting, road-marching and common-core tasks at skill levels 1-3, could not waste their time with combatives. Given the vague combatives curriculum and a field manual that had not been significantly altered since the 1960s, it would have been hard to disagree.

The new MACP incorporated techniques brought together from multiple disciplines and training input from well-known martial artists such as Gracie; J. Robinson, head coach of the Minnesota wrestling program and former Iowa head coach; and muay



▲ **SMACK DOWN** Ruben Arriaga of Fort Campbell 5th Special Forces Group All-Army Combatives Team TKOs his opponent to win third place in the light heavyweight division at the 2008 U.S. Army Combatives Tournament, Oct. 5, 2008, in the Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith Physical Fitness Center at Fort Benning, Ga. *U.S. Army photo.*

thai kickboxing coaches Manu Ntoh, David Rogers and Greg Nelson. MACP included training with edged and impact weapons derived from escrima, kali and silat. Combatives training had now been standardized, revamped and made realistic. Live sparring and training was possible without the fear of excessive serious injury that came from a lack of qualified supervision. The MACP is now producing a trained and competent instructor cadre, which is the core of any workable training program. MACP is part of the answer to a serious training problem within the Army, but it is a baseline, not a catch-all.

Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman's book *On Killing* discusses the evolution of combat training and cites examples of the compulsion of modern Soldiers, predominantly from the U.S.,

to hesitate when faced with the opportunity to kill the enemy. Grossman cites some specific examples: "During World War II, as many as 80 percent of riflemen chose not to fire their weapons at an exposed enemy, even if it meant that they might be killed. Many chose instead to fire their weapons in the air, to posture by mimicking the actions of war, or to busy themselves with supplies at the moment of battle." Grossman cites a survey of muskets recovered after the battle of Gettysburg that indicated nearly 90 percent of those weapons had not been fired.

In response to that kind of information, psychologists and behavioral scientists have helped modify the way we train as Soldiers. Computerized, pop-up ranges are now used to help condition Soldiers' response to fire on an enemy.

Advanced technologies have been incorporated in ranges like the Zussman Village, near Fort Knox, Ky. That range has the realistic sights, sounds and smells of war. Rocket-propelled grenades shoot across the road with a whistle and explode in a shower of sparks, and scenario-based role players are armed with immediate-feedback weapons, such as paintball guns or sim-munitions. That realism in training is the concept of "stress inoculation."

Similarly, MACP includes sustained physical contact. These live-sparring drills prepare Soldiers the same way that pop-up ranges do. When the real stress-inducing situation is presented, the Soldier is armed not with some half-forgotten techniques once glossed over by an instructor but with a system that has been reinforced

through repetition. He has been in that stressful position many times and is more comfortable in it. When incoming students at the JFK Special Warfare Center and School's NCO Academy are asked, "How many of you have ever been punched in the face in a real fight? Go ahead, count grade school," more than 70 percent of the students' hands invariably go up. The follow up question is, "Of those who raised your hands, how many have more than five minutes of actual fight time over the course of your life?" Half the hands go down. "Ten minutes?" With few exceptions, most all of the hands go down.

MACP training incorporates many fundamental aspects of fighting into a standardized format and has been made doctrine by the U.S. Army Infantry School. MACP Level III and VI certification is issued by the U.S. Army Combatives School at Fort Benning, Ga., or through mobile training teams from the school. Attendance at the school is scheduled through the Army Training Requirements and Resources System, and certification is recognized in a Soldier's records.

The program has been embraced across the Army; it even provides a competitive venue in the U.S. Army Combatives Tournament, held every fall at Fort Benning. Competition has been purposefully engineered into MACP; it allows Soldiers to test the viability of techniques against an opponent who gives no quarter. Fighting exposes people who are new to it (and if you've done it for a total of 10 minutes or less, you're new to it) to a unique aerobic/anaerobic experience and quite a bit of stress. It leaves the majority of combatants almost completely exhausted after only a minute, regardless of how much weight they can lift or how fast or how far they can run.

Competition introduces unique stressors like performance anxiety, self-doubt and fear into the equation. Of course it isn't war, but it's as close as you can get without biting off ears or poking out eyes. When it comes to this type of training, egos should be checked at the door, for the betterment of the force. The U.S. Army Combatives Tournament and smaller unit tournaments like it foster general interest, as well as unit and individual pride. Bragging rights go to the command that produces champion 10K racers and touch-football or softball teams, but when it comes to the business of warfare, you'd rather have the guys who can beat the crap out of the soft-

ball team.

Unfortunately, within Special Forces, the flavor-of-the-week approach to combatives training is still alive and well. Groups award contracts for teaching combatives to local providers who may never have worn full kit in their life. Combatives contracts are sometimes diluted by pairing combatives with other training, such as rock climbing or specialized fitness programs. That causes the contract arbitrator to look at things like snazzy facilities rather than at the qualifications of the combatives provider and their program of instruction.

Within the SF Qualification Course, committees and detachments include combatives training, but what is the training standard? By what point in the SFQC should a new candidate be qualified at MACP Level I? If candidates are exposed to the MACP Level I curriculum, does their next exposure pick up where the previous committee left off? Do they reiterate and cement the previous techniques, skip way ahead to Level II or start on a totally different training path, such as Israeli Krav Maga pistol-disarming techniques, because that committee's combatives guy likes Krav Maga?

The SWCS NCO Academy has incorporated MACP training, and so has the Special Operations Medical Training Battalion, but are their programs sustainable at their current level, or are they functioning only because of the cadre members who happen to be there? We should apply a standard of implementation that quantifies levels of exposure to the MACP curriculum in sequence.

In regard to combatives, SF lacks a standard for task-specific training, or TST. Depending on the group to which they are assigned, Soldiers will become familiar with different subject-matter experts and different takes on TST. Things like cuffing techniques, vehicle-extraction techniques, weapons retention and recovery, fighting in kit, and restraining compliant and noncompliant subjects may or may not be taught, and they certainly are not standardized. Will TST be addressed in the group's Special Forces Advanced Urban Combat Course, if they get it before they deploy, or by the group's combatives committee, if it has one?

By the time a Soldier arrives at his group, he should have been at least briefly exposed to TST. There is no cure-all when it comes to the fluidity of combat; still, we can establish a baseline to give SF Soldiers a standard on which to base their TST. MACP is de-

signed to give the regular Army Soldier a base from which to work; it is not an end state. Infantry Soldiers don't carry secondary weapons or operate in one- or two-man elements in semipermissive environments, as SF Soldiers are so often called upon to do. It is only logical that we should develop TST for the SF operational environment, to be used in accordance with their unit's tactics, techniques and procedures.

Such a program is already in existence; it is called the Special Operations Combatives Program, or SOCP. Greg Thompson, Royce Gracie's senior black belt, a contributor to MACP's development, and a combatives teacher to many elite special-operations units, developed his TST-based instruction based on nearly 10 years of after-action reviews. SOCP complements the MACP; it addresses SF-centric tasks not covered in the MACP. It is being implemented by some advanced-skills committees at SWCS and ideally will become the baseline annex to MACP.

The Spartan warrior was supremely confident in a fight — any fight — whether using a sword, spear, dagger or fist. He had that confidence because he had been there a thousand times before; he had felt the knee of an opponent pin his neck to the ground and knew from experience that if he only relaxed, concentrated on breathing, turned his chin to the side and lifted the opponents ankle he would easily free his neck.

The Samurai was able to manage his fear when confronted by more than one armed opponent because he accepted the fact that he would be cut as inevitability, he had trained for it a thousand times and remembered the bruises he had suffered from the wooden training swords. Without hesitation, he moved forward — whether he won or lost, it wouldn't be because he wasn't prepared.

When we standardize combatives programs and integrate them into the curriculum of the SFQC, we will do a major service for the Soldiers of Special Forces. Let no soul cry out, "Had I the training ..." *SW*

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