

# UNITED STATES ARMY COMBATIVES COURSE

## History of Army Combatives

### HISTORY OF MARTIAL ARTS

Where do the martial arts come from? Most people would answer that they come from the orient. The truth is that every culture that has a need for martial arts has them. We have fighting manuals from medieval Europe that show many of the same techniques that we teach today. The ancient Greeks had wrestling, boxing and the pankration. There are paintings on the walls of Egyptian tombs over four thousand years old that show both armed and unarmed fighting techniques that would seem familiar to many of today's martial artists.

### JITSU vs DO

There are some very instructive things about their history that are a microcosm of martial arts in general and that are very useful in understanding American attitudes about martial arts in particular.

Every Japanese martial art ends with either the word -jitsu or -do, for example Ju-Jitsu/Judo, Kenjitsu/Kendo, Aikijitsu/Aikido. The original arts all end with -jitsu which means "the art or technique." They were created out of the necessity of violent times when there was a definite need for fighting ability. The entire reason for the existence of the training was to produce competent fighters.

The ability to fight well became less important as Japanese society became more settled and peaceful. This was true even for the members of the Warrior class- the Samurai. This, and the modernization of the Japanese military, resulted eventually in the banning of the wearing of the swords that were the badge of samurai rank, which effectively made the warrior class the same as everyone else.

This meant that there were thousands of men who had spent their entire lives training to fight who had no real need for their martial abilities. Most of them simply stopped training all together and became normal members of society, but a few of them looked deeper at the results of their training. They realized that they had gained much more than just the ability to fight. Training in the martial arts had made them into the men that they were.

This then became the new reason for training. No longer was producing competent fighters of primary concern. The principle goal was to produce better people. One very good example of this is Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo. As a young man Kano became an expert in several systems of Ju-Jitsu. However, not only was he an expert at Ju-Jitsu, he was also a teacher. He was director of the Tokyo Higher Normal School (precursor of the present Tokyo University of Education) for twenty three years and Chief of the Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education.

As Kano grew in his knowledge of Ju-Jitsu he realized that it could be used as a tool in developing better, more well-rounded people. With this in mind he formatted the Ju-Jitsu that he had learned into a better teaching tool and called it Judo. The main difference between the Ju-Jitsu that he learned and the Judo that he taught was the purpose. His teachers were mostly

concerned with his fighting ability and skills. He on the other hand was more concerned with building the character of his students:

## **THE MODERN MARTIAL ARTS**

Although we have been talking specifically about the Japanese martial arts, this evolution from Jitsu to Do, or in other words from concentrating on actual fighting ability to actual ability being of only secondary importance, is indicative of most of the modern martial arts world. If you read or listen to almost anything put out by someone in the contemporary martial arts community about training, it will almost invariably be colored by this change in the reason for training. To put things in perspective, imagine an accountant somewhere in America trying to decide whether or not martial art training is practical. If training cost him \$100 a month, he will spend \$1200 per year. What are the odds that he will be robbed in a way that his training could stop for \$1200 per year? Therefore from a fiscal perspective it makes more sense to save his money. Now consider his chances of becoming injured in training as compared with his chances of becoming injured by an assault and you soon see that, if you take away the notion that they may join the military, in a practical sense it really doesn't make much sense for the average citizen of a country at peace to train in the martial arts.

There are of course many good reasons to train that have little to do with the practical need for fighting ability. There are thousands of people across America who train to fight with a samurai sword. Very few of them believe they may need to defend themselves against sword wielding ninjas on the way to their car at the mall. They train because they enjoy it. For the same reason that people play baseball, or re-enact civil war battles or any other leisure activity. This of course is completely different from the situation of the Army.

Modern Combatives training therefore stands apart from the vast majority of martial arts training in that producing actual fighting ability is of primary concern. Both the mental and physical benefits of training produce more capable and lethal soldiers.

## **HISTORY OF COMBATIVES TRAINING**

The first U.S. Army Combatives Manual was published in 1852. It was a translation of a French bayonet fighting manual by a young Captain George McClelland. Since that time the Army has always had Combatives training doctrine although it has not always had successful Combatives training. Bayonet fencing, as outlined in the 1852 manual, remained the universally accepted training method not only in the U.S. Army but in every European style army in the world until its effectiveness was shown to be lacking on the battlefields and in the trenches of World War I.

## **BAYONET FENCING**

Bayonet Fencing was a skill based system. Competitions were held regularly across the Army and it was accepted even outside of the Army. It became the fourth internationally recognized form of fencing along with Foil, Epee' and Saber, and it was even an Olympic sport until 1936. Trench warfare changed all of that. In the confined space of a trench the techniques and weapons

designed with the fencing strip in mind proved themselves worse than useless. It did not take Soldiers long to realize that they were better off with an e-tool and a bag full of grenades.

## **EARLY FOREIGN INFLUENCE**

This time saw the first attempts to teach unarmed fighting to Soldiers in an organized way on any kind of large scale. There were several attempts to teach Ju-Jitsu and Judo which had been known in the United States since even before President Theodore Roosevelt had trained with Yamashita Yoshitsugu- one of the best students of Kano Jigoro. Theodore Roosevelt actually had a “judo room” at the White House. Yamashita later taught at the U.S. Naval Academy. In 1920 a training manual was published at Ft. Benning, Georgia written by CPT Allan Corstorphin Smith who had been awarded a Judo black belt from the Kodokan in Japan in 1916 and who was the hand-to-hand combat instructor at the Infantry School.

With the rapid expansion of armies demanded by the World War, there was little time available to teach the average Soldier the complex techniques of Judo and Ju-Jitsu taught by CPT Smith and others. The Army lost faith in skill based Combatives training because of this and the failure of Bayonet fencing as a training method for trench warfare. In the interwar years such non-skill based training methods as Pugil sticks and the bayonet assault course gained prominence.

## **WORLD WAR II**

World War II saw a flowering of attempts at successful Combatives training. Many of the top names from boxing and wrestling at the time were brought in to train the various services. Most had very limited success because of the limited amount of training time available with the demands of fielding an Army of several million men.

The most successful programs were offshoots from the British Commando training taught by William E. Fairbairn and Eric A. Sykes. These two had trained the police force in Shanghai, China before the war, and Fairbairn- a second degree black belt in Judo- had been brought back to Britain early in the war. Fairbairn and his American protégé COL Rex Applegate, created a program that emphasized a limited number of simple, effective techniques and stressed the aggressiveness and incivility of real fights (COL Applegate wrote a manual titled “Kill or Get Killed” in 1943 and Fairbairn often referred to what he taught as “Gutter Fighting”). They were able to somewhat overcome the limitations of limited training time. COL Applegate also used feedback from the field to adjust the curriculum. By the end of the war thousands of Soldiers had been trained in their methods.

## **POST WAR YEARS**

Combatives training in the Army virtually ceased with the drawdown at the end of World War II. Without a “train-the-trainer program,” virtually all of the training had been done by a very small number of instructors such as Fairbairn and Applegate, and the lack of a follow-on training plan instead of continuing to practice the same limited number of techniques led to the slow death of

any meaningful training. There was a Field Manual, however actual training was reduced to initial entry training and was taught by drill sergeants with very little official training. Quality inevitably plummeted.

Periodic attempts were made, especially as martial arts became more popular in the United States, to introduce various training methods and techniques to the force. These attempts were generally fruitless because of the lack of any mechanism for insuring quality instruction or training. There were two notable exceptions: the Air Force and the Marine Corps.

### **AIR FORCE INSTRUCTOR COURSE**

The Air Force Strategic Air Command under General Curtis E. LeMay implemented a Judo program beginning in 1950. In 1952 the first class of 13 instructors went to Japan to train at the Kodokan- the premier Judo school in Tokyo. Within the next ten years there were more than 160 black belt judo instructors within the command. Between 1959 and 1962 there was a judo instructor course at Stead Air Force Base, Nevada which graduated nearly ten thousand instructors from a five week course. The curriculum included Judo, Aikido, Karate, air police techniques, air crew self-defense, judo tournament procedures, code of conduct and training methods classes.

### **MARINE CORPS INSTRUCTOR COURSE**

The Marine Corps adopted the Linear Infighting Neural Override Engagement (LINE) Combat System in 1988. Primarily designed by MSgt Ron Donvito, the LINE system was a systematic way to teach and practice techniques derived from traditional martial arts in an organized fashion. Techniques were presented in subsets, termed ditties. Each subset was made up of related techniques such as defense to grabs or defense to punches. The training was done in unit formation and facilitated training in Initial Entry Training and other institutional environments. There was also an instructor training course at Quantico Virginia.

### **FOLLOW ON TRAINING**

Both Air Force and Marine Corps programs had limited success but died out or were replaced for various reasons. The Air Force program was built around a club system. Instructors were placed at gyms around the force. All Airmen were given basic instruction in the institutional training pipeline and follow on training was made available at the post gymnasiums. This training plan resulted in a reasonably large group with real expertise. The instructor cadre formed an Air Force “Black Belt Association” that eventually outgrew the Air Force becoming the “United States Judo Association,” which is the largest Judo organization in America. However, the club nature of the training meant that real skill was essentially limited to those who were self-motivated enough to attend the training sessions. This, the fact that the training methodology of judo was not built around producing proficient fighters quickly, and the reliance on the enthusiasm of local commanders meant that the skill level of the average Airman remained low. Eventually command influence waned and the program within the Air Force died.

Although the LINE system had more wide spread success than even the SAC Judo program, it suffered from different deficiencies. Principle among these was its training methodology which was built around formal methods of instruction best suited for institutional training and an insistence that every technique be “deadly.” A reliance on formal training settings and formations which are less likely in regular units than in an institutional setting meant that LINE training must compete with other formal training events such as Physical Training. The result was that training was less likely to be conducted in the force. The insistence on “deadly” techniques did not fit the needs of the Marine Corps or the demands of the modern battlefield. Additionally, the techniques of the LINE system (defense to a grab, punch, chokes, etc.), which had been drawn from civilian martial arts, were reactive in nature. Reactive techniques, where the enemy initiates the action and the Soldier must react, are the norm for self-defense systems and passive martial arts of the civilian world. They do however have serious drawbacks as a basis for a Combatives system.

## **RUSSIA**

The Russian system of SOMBO was developed specifically for the Military. SOMBO combines the techniques of Judo and Greco-Roman Wrestling as its foundation. The feeling was that the success of SOMBO was linked in its similarity to wrestling, making its basic components easier to learn, and less dependent on size and strength. Another, feature of SOMBO is that it has a competitive component that serves to spur on further training. However it also has some distinct problems, not the least of which was that the competitive form has, in the opinion of some, changed the techniques that were emphasized. Nonetheless, the Ranger committee tentatively decided that the new system would be based on grappling..

## **MODERN COMBATIVES TECHNIQUES**

In 1995, when the Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion ordered a reinvigoration of Combatives training within the battalion, it didn't take long for serious problems with the techniques in the Army's existing Combatives manual to surface. There was a general feeling among the Rangers that they would not work and that it was a waste of valuable training time.

The Army had a Combatives manual (FM 21-150 (1992)) but had no program to produce qualified instructors or any system for implementing the training in units other than the vague approach of leaving it to local commander's discretion. Unit instructors inevitably ended up being whatever martial arts hobbyist happened to be in that unit and the training progressed along the lines of whatever civilian martial arts those people had studied in their off duty time. In most units there was no training at all.

A committee was formed and headed by Matt Larsen to develop a more effective program. J. Robinson, a Ranger combat veteran during Vietnam and the head coach at the University of Minnesota wrestling program, came out to evaluate the emerging program and gave some valuable advice. He pointed out that any successful program must have a competitive aspect in order to motivate Soldiers to train and that it must include “live” sparring in order to cultivate a growing Combatives culture. The committee began to develop a program based around wrestling, boxing, and the various martial arts they had experienced such as Judo and Muay

Thai. Initially, SOMBO was the art that the committee wanted to adopt. Realizing that there were not enough SOMBO instructors available, though, the Rangers began to look for a similar system as a base for their program. After looking at many different systems, the Rangers sent several men to train at the Gracie Ju-Jitsu Academy in Torrance, California.

The Ju-Jitsu taught at the Gracie Academy fit many of the battalions needs. The Gracies had been originally taught by Meada Mitsuyo who was a representative of the Kodokan but had added the concept of a hierarchy of dominant body positions which gave both a strategy to win fights and an organized framework for learning. It was therefore easy to learn. It also had a competitive form, and was proven effective within the realm of one-on-one unarmed arena fighting or challenge matches. It did however have the major problem of being principally designed for the venue that had made it famous.

Rorion and Royce Gracie made three trips to the battalion over the next couple of years and a few Rangers made the trip down to Torrance to train on their own. During this time Larsen was developing a drill based training program that became an essential element in the “Modern Army Combatives Program.”

As the system matured he began to realize what it was about the techniques of Ju-Jitsu that made them work, such as the ability to practice them at full speed against a fully resistant opponent. With this approach, techniques that do not work are quickly abandoned for those that do. He also began to draw from other martial arts that share various levels of this “live” training to fill in the tactical gaps of the Ju-Jitsu learned from the Gracies, which primarily focused on unarmed ground grappling.

Exploring the various training methods of the other feeder arts shed light on the ways they complemented each other and the way they exposed each other’s weaknesses. The concept of positional dominance from Ju-Jitsu was expanded to the other ranges of combat and blended with techniques from wrestling, boxing, Muay Thai, and Judo to name just a few. With weapons fighting lessons from Kali, the western martial arts, and the Rangers’ own experience from years in the infantry (including the limited combat of that era), by September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 the basis of a totally integrated system of “Close Quarters Combat” had been developed and a sound foundation from which to learn the lessons of the battlefields was created.

## **UNITED STATES ARMY COMBATIVES SCHOOL**

As the program grew technically, its success made it grow outside of the battalion as well. At first the training spread to the rest of the Ranger Regiment, then throughout the infantry, and eventually, with the publishing of the new Field Manual 3-25.150 (2002) written by Matt Larsen, it became doctrine Army wide.

The Commander of the 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, COL Mike Ferriter, brought Matt Larsen over to establish a training course for the cadre of the Regiment. This would eventually become the Level I Combatives Instructor Course. The need became clear for an additional course to provide

more supervision of the training as training spread through the unit. This would become the Level II course. These courses were limited to ground grappling because of skepticism from senior commanders at the time. Many leaders who had grown up during the period after Vietnam but before September 11, 2001 had the mistaken idea that there was a division between the “Combat” and the “Non-combat” Soldiers. Attempts to integrate Combatives and Close-Quarters Battle were looked upon as unnecessary. Hand-to-hand fighting was viewed by some as a tool to build confidence in Soldiers just as it had been with pugil stick fighting and the bayonet assault course that had been around since World War One.

When fighting started in Afghanistan, what would become the U.S. Army Combatives School at Ft. Benning, Georgia had already been established to train instructors for the various Infantry schools at Ft. Benning and the first two levels of Combatives Instructor qualification were in place. The need to push the training into operational units and to make it more directly applicable to the battlefield as well as the need to provide higher level instructors to meet the needs of a global Army required the development of a longer instructor certification course for battalion master trainers. This would become the Level III course. An interview format and procedures to draw out the lessons that might be missed in a simple narrative was developed and post action interviews with Soldiers who had been involved in hand-to-hand fighting began. The equipment that Soldiers wore, the tactical situation, and other essential information was gathered. Hundreds of these interviews were conducted and the curriculum evolved with the lessons learned. Eventually the need to manage Combatives programs in larger units such as brigades or divisions required some instructors to have a higher level of training. This would become the Level IV instructor course.

## **A LEARNING PROGRAM**

The program in this basic form continued to spread throughout the Army. There were, however, those who continued to oppose it. The primary reason was the perception that it was not directly relevant to the battlefield because of its focus on ground grappling in the early stages of training and the tendency of young Soldiers to identify too closely with the civilian Mixed Martial Arts community, which has very little to do with Soldiering. The tactical training methods taught in the Level III and IV courses were slow to become standard in the force. Because of this, although the program was extremely popular in some parts of the Army it had been in danger of going the way of the Strategic Air Command program and failing in its promise to bring realistic Combatives training to every Soldier.

In 2009 Major General Mike Ferriter became the Commanding General of Ft. Benning. In order to revitalize the program he brought together Combatives training experts from around the Army and the civilian experts who had helped the program in the past in a symposium to find ways to improve the program. A major contributor in aiding the process of going from the old program to a more tactical program was Greg Thompson, the head instructor for the Special Operations Combatives Program (SOCP) School located at Ft Bragg, NC. Mr. Thompson spent many hours refining the tactical instruction given at the USACS and created many new techniques that were added to the new program. The curriculum of the Level I and II courses were updated with new tactical techniques and training methods which previously been taught in the Level III, IV and

SOCP courses, and the new courses' names were changed to the Basic Combatives Course and the Tactical Combatives Course.

## MODERN ARMY COMBATIVES

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### BASIC FIGHT STRATEGY

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When two untrained fighters meet, they instinctively fight using the *universal fight plan*: they pummel each other with their fists until one of them receives enough damage that they cannot fight back effectively. Most forms of martial arts training are designed to make fighters better at executing this strategy. However, this approach has two drawbacks:

- One or both fighters are unarmed.
- Progress is solely dependent on the development of skill.
- Bigger, stronger, and faster fighters have a natural advantage. Developing enough skill to overcome these advantages requires more time than can be dedicated during institutional training.

The Combatives Program uses a more efficient approach, Fighting is taught in the context of strategy: the basic techniques serve as an educating metaphor to teach the *basic fight strategy*. Fighters learn to defeat an opponent by controlling the elements of the fight: *range, angle, and level*. The most important element of a fight is range. The Combatives Program has four ranges:

- Projectile.
- Striking.
- Clinching.
- Grappling.

According to the circumstances surrounding the conflict, fighters can use certain techniques to disable an opponent or force the opponent to submit.

## SOLDIER'S TACTICAL OPTIONS

### CREATE SPACE

When in combat, a Soldier's primary goal should be to establish space between him and his attacker. He must create enough space to transition to his primary weapon.



## **MAINTAIN SPACE**

When in combat, Soldiers may be unable to create enough space and transition to their primary weapon. If unable to do so, they may need to maintain space to transition to their secondary weapon or close the distance, gain dominant body position and finish the fight.

## **CLOSE THE DISTANCE**

When training Soldiers, the primary goal should be instilling the courage to close the distance. The willingness to close with the enemy is a defining characteristic of a Warrior, and the ability to do so against an aggressive opponent is the first step in using range to control a fight.

## **GAIN DOMINANT POSITION**

An appreciation for dominant position is fundamental to becoming a proficient fighter; it ties together what would otherwise be a list of unrelated techniques.

## **FINISH THE FIGHT**

If a finishing technique is attempted from dominant position and fails, the fighter can simply try again; if a finishing technique is attempted from any other position and fails, it will usually mean defeat.

It is important to remember that these basic plans are not the “end all” of fight strategies but simply the first step in understanding the concept of controlling and winning fights by having superior tactics. To understand this better, we can use an analogy from the Mixed Martial Arts world. Imagine how someone who has trained in traditional Brazilian Ju-Jitsu can beat an experienced wrestler who has also trained in striking skills. The Ju-Jitsu trained fighter, who has concentrated most of his training on being the better ground grappler, will most likely win the fight if the wrestler is aggressive and takes him to the ground. He will, however, have a very difficult time against a wrestler smart enough to use their skill defensively and who is the better striker.

Dominating your opponent is not dependent on gaining skill to be effective, rather it is based on employing effective and efficient tactics. Regarding most people who are only familiar with the universal fight plan, you can simply tackle them, fight for dominant position which your opponent will not understand, and then finish the fight by striking. The classic example of this strategy is Royce Gracie in the early Ultimate Fighting Championships. Royce was able to easily take most of his opponents, trained only to be better at the universal fight plan, out of their game plan and defeat them.

*“The defining characteristic of a warrior is the willingness to close with the enemy.”*