

ADVENTURES OF THE ACTON SAMURAI

Guelph, Ontario

Have sword, will travel. My dojo mate Alex Markauskas and I left Massachusetts on a new adventure. Our transport was a white corvette. It was July 14, 2004, and the destination was Guelph, Ontario. The first day we traveled as far as Grand Island, N.Y., which sits in the middle of the Niagara River just above the falls. We stayed over night after exploring the island, and in the morning crossed over the border into Ontario. On the Canadian side of the river, we took in the view of the falls before traveling on to Guelph, a college town north-west of Hamilton. We checked into the Ramada Inn and then went over to the college to find the athletic department, which has number of rooms where we would be studying for the next three days. We then stopped at a local bicycle shop so that Alex could see what was happening with Lance Armstrong in the Tour de France.

At nine on Friday morning we met our instructor Kim Taylor and, with six other people, began our first class. The subject was the Tanjo, a simple cane or European walking stick that was developed in the Meiji period into a weapon of self-defense by Uchida Ryogoro to help popularize Jodo, another stick art. The tanjo is 3 shaku in length and 9 bu in diameter (3 feet by 1 inch). There are twelve kata in the curriculum and they defend against the attack of a samurai's long sword. Alex was my partner for session. We covered all twelve kata by noon and broke for lunch.

In the afternoon from one to five o'clock we were taught the basics of Niten Ichi Ryu. This is the style developed by the sword saint, Miyamoto Musashi. Again, I worked with Alex.

That evening we participated in a discussion group that debated the importance of Japanese history and culture, and whether or not it makes the western practitioner a better student of the art. Other subjects were the differences between jutsu and do, and why we should retain the "seiza bunka" ("kneeling" (i.e. "traditional") culture).

On Saturday morning I chose to take Kim Taylor's jodo class, because I had attended two jodo seminars this past spring with John Quinn, Ben Duggar's teacher. The jo is a four foot staff with a 3/4" diameter. It is used to defend against a long sword with both sword and staff techniques. I've found the art very interesting and I wanted to learn more about it. We covered the first six kihon (basic movements) from 9:00 to 12:00, both alone and training with an attacker armed with a bokken (wooden sword). My partner was a pretty English woman. Alex chose to spend the morning class studying Tenshinsho Jigen Ryu with Deborah Klens-Bigman. It is an older iaido school from the Tokyo area.

In the afternoon Alex and I met again to learn more about Niten Ichi Ryu, and once again Kim Taylor was our sensei. Seven long sword kata were covered in which we acted as both attacker and defender. It is a very intense style that really pumps up the adrenalin. I loved it. Mike Castellani and cool French-Canadian dude named Dennis Nikitenko were my partners.

There was a demonstration planned for the evening and we were asked to perform. Alex chose 5 kata from seitei iaido. Because so many people were doing iai, I decided to do an Okinawan karate kata called Sepai. It is a high level traditional form in Goju Ryu Karate-do. One of our new friends, Bruce, had changed out of his uniform and thought he was safe from participating in the program. He had been kidding me about it, so I asked him to be my attacker and show the applications of the kata I had just performed. At the conclusion of the impressive demonstration, Sebastian Cyr performed a melody on

the Japanese flute. We topped off the evening by going out to dinner as group. We had a wonderful time getting to know one another.

On Sunday morning Alex took a class in Mugairyu Iaihyodo with Juge Ryuske, another older style of iaido. I returned to the jodo class with Kim Taylor, where we covered the remaining kihon (7 thru 12) and then moved on to the first three kata in the jodo syllabus. Jeff Broderick worked with me. For the afternoon class, Alex elected to stay with Mugairyu. I went back to the Niten Ichi Ryu to learn five kata using the long and short swords. The long sword is held in the right hand while the short is held in the left. Coordinating the movements of two weapons is extremely difficult. One hand is moving in a straight line up while the other is in a circular pattern like a windshield wiper. I was also mentally and physically exhausted from three days of intense training. It was aggravating, and I was upset with my performance as a result. My training partner, Nathan, calmed me down, and helped me get through the day's trial.

In the evening we went out for Chinese food with Kim Taylor and a few other students. Kim told us an anecdote about Jeff Broderick's fourth dan (black belt) test in Japan. It seems the test committee had just added two new official kata to the curriculum and the judges didn't allow for Jeff's six foot six stature and length of stride. Sou-giri is one of the new required kata. It is a form that comes forward for quite a few steps and when he performed the fourth cut in it, which is horizontal, his sword just cleared the judges table. The judges dived out of the way, and his last cut came down vertically and stopped just above the table. One of the bystanders breathed, "So desu neh" (Wow!). He passed the test. After dinner and quite a few laughs, we said our goodbyes and went back to crash at the hotel.

On Monday morning we left bright and early for the trip home. Coming back across the American border Alex had to show his naturalization papers because he was born in Lithuania. She asked me where I was born, and I just showed my drivers license and said Massachusetts. Alex joked that he could have saved some trouble and said the same thing. She was a young girl, but she looked him dead in the eye and said, "Then you sir, would be lying to a Federal Officer." Alex stopped smiling, we said thank you, and drove away as fast as the speed limit would allow.

There was a tractor trailer crash on the N.Y. Thruway, so we got hung up for a while. As a result, I wasn't in time for our evening iaido class in Acton. It was just as well though. Three days of training and twelve hours of driving were good enough.

Still, I can't wait for the next adventure.

Respectfully, Gordon Fisher

P.S. Alex got a speeding ticket right after he dropped me off.