

It was January, 1964; the place was Japan. I was in the United States Marine Corps and had been transferred from the 3rd Marine Division based on Okinawa to Marine Barracks, Atsugi, Japan. I had spent three and three quarter years on Okinawa and while there had been promoted to shodan in judo and shodan in Go-ju ryu karate. I felt on top of the world.

A day after arriving at Atsugi, I called Shoichi Yamamoto, a Japanese friend who lived in Tokyo and who was a nidan in Go-ju ryu karate. His teacher was Mr. Seikichi Toguchi (now 9th dan, Okinawa Karate Federation). Mr. Toguchi also was

the director of the Shoreikan Go-ju ryu karate dojo in Nakanomachi, Okinawa where I had studied for two and a half years and had been promoted to shodan by the Okinawa Karate Federation in December, 1963. Shoichi arranged an interview for me at Mr. Toguchi's residence. I had spoken to Mr. Toguchi on several occasions on his various trips to the Shoreikan on Okinawa, but never had anything approaching a private interview. In 1964, Mr. Toguchi was forty-eight years old, he had been studying Go-ju ryu for about thirty-three years. He was a black belt—not a *shodan*, *nidan* or *rokudan*, but a black belt—Mr. Toguchi was not on Okinawa when the Go-ju ryu branch of the Okinawa Karate Federation

adopted the *dan* ranking system, and previously there had been only white and black belts in Go-ju ryu. Several years later, Mr. Toguchi was promoted to *nana dan* (seventh level) by the Okinawa Karate Federation—a promotion based on true honor and accomplishment, in sharp contrast to promotions for money, honorary promotions, and mail order promotions, that some organizations take part in today.

Karate Triangle

Mr. Toguchi's residence was quite small. We were served hot tea as soon as we were seated, and Mr. Toguchi remembered me from the Shoreikan on Okinawa, so the

Karate by Glenard A. Grabow in a *Shinto Shrine*



Photos courtesy of Glen Grabow

Glen Grabow performing Seisan, Japan, 1964

introductions were rather abbreviated. The interview was remarkable in that he never addressed me, although we were there for an hour. I was seen, I was very attentive, but I was not heard. During the interview Mr. Toguchi showed us the karate *sankaku*, or karate triangle. The base of the triangle—the strongest side—is occupied by *kata*; one side of the triangle is occupied by *hojo undo* (supplementary exercises) and *kumite* (sparring); and the other side of the triangle is occupied by *junbi undo* (preliminary exercises). In a triangle, point A—that at the top—is sought. The karate student must establish a base with *kata* and then “travel”—through study and training—from the base and up both sides of the triangle. When he reaches point A, he will be a well trained *karateka*.

Passing the Test

Mr. Toguchi also explained the difficult *zuri-ashi* (slide foot) technique found in the *koryu* (ancient tradition) *kata Seisan*. He compared it to children sliding for fun on a wet sidewalk.

During the interview I was informed that Mr. Toguchi taught his karate classes at Shinto shrines located in various parts of Tokyo. The classes were outdoors since the shrine buildings were too small to allow the necessary activities.

The interview was concluded; I had not spoken a word. After leaving Mr. Toguchi's residence, Shoichi told me: “Mr. Toguchi likes your attitude.” Evidently I had taken a test and passed.

Ancient Training in Modern Times

Two days later found me at Naruko Tenjin, a Shinto shrine in the Shinjuku ward of Tokyo. Even though I occasionally went to the shrines in Meguro and Meijuro (wards in Tokyo), I usually trained at Naruko Tenjin. The shrine building was about twelve feet square, the courtyard was dirt, and there were no trees or shrubs. It was hot in the summer and cold in the winter. We cleaned the courtyard of stones and debris, and in the summer sprinkled it with water to hold down the dust. If it rained we trained in the mud. There were about eight students training at Naruko Tenjin—I was the only foreign student—and Mr. Toguchi taught there once or twice a week.

Classes at Naruko Tenjin consisted of thirty minutes of preparatory exercises. These included stretching and loosening exercises; at least fifty upper, center and down punches; fifty upper, center, and down blocks; and thirty front, foot edge, heel, cross kicks and knee strikes. Thirty minutes were devoted to kata and thirty minutes to *kiso* kumite and *bunkai* kumite. Mr. Toguchi walked to and from the shrine from his residence, and he wore a kimono over his karate-gi, so that for all appearances he was a middle-aged Japanese man out for an evening stroll.

Mr. Toguchi was not only a karate expert, he was also an expert karate teacher. He was enthusiastic and his enthusiasm was catching. He would caution us about the *me-tsuki* (eye thrust): *Kata shita!* (shoulders down). His examples and explanations were effective and to the point: "Loosen your knee joints for kicks," "When you loosen your wrists, pretend you have bubblegum on your fingers and you are stretching it." Mr. Toguchi emphasized having the body in proper physical condition for karate. "The ankle, knee, hip, shoulder, elbow joints and neck vertebrae must be loose. The muscles must be strong, yet supple."

There was no socializing at Naruko Tenjin: Everyone was expected to train, not talk. Often there were only three or four students at the shrine and Mr. Toguchi's classes became semi-private—much like the old days: An expert karate teacher and a few students. This experi-

ence was a treasure, and I knew it!

Mr. Toguchi emphasized proper breathing in karate training. One evening, during the punching exercises, he stood behind a student for several minutes and appeared to be listening intently. A few minutes later he told the class, "You must exhale when you punch, strike or kick, and you must inhale when you block." He *had been* listening—to the student's breathing! Mr. Toguchi taught the black belt students kata; we would train with Saifa, Seienchin, Seisan, and Seipai. Often after training with the forms we would execute supplementary exercises taken from the kata. Mr. Toguchi carefully supervised this training and demonstrated various techniques: the eye thrusts in Seisan, the leg catch in Seipai, and the groin strike in Seienchin.

Like many beginning karate students (yes, a shodan is a beginner) I was obsessed with the *tobigeri* or flying kick. Mr. Toguchi put the flying kick into proper perspective when he told me, "*Tori da nai, tobi da nai*"—We're not birds; we can't fly. It wasn't until several years later that I learned that the flying kick is for training only.

The Karate Promoter

Occasionally Shoichi and I visited other dojo in Tokyo. On one of these occasions I learned about karate promoters in Japan. In Yoyogi, a ward in Tokyo, we visited a karate dojo where Go-ju ryu and Shorin ryu were being taught in the same dojo—in the same room, at the same time! When I commented on this rather unusual situation, Shoichi told me, "This dojo is run by a karate promoter." The circumstances went like this: A karate promoter, who often knows nothing about karate, rents a building, then hires some karate teachers, usually from different styles of karate. The promoter advertises, students enroll, and the teaching begins. The bad part is, the karate promoter is out to make money, so he interferes with the teachers, dictating how often and how the students will train. And since he receives all promotion fees, he dictates when the tests will be held and what they will consist of. Nice, huh? As we entered the dojo, I noticed a man in an office counting money. On our way out, he was still busily



A cat foot stance, Japan, 1964

counting money. "That's the karate promoter," Shoichi told me.

Private Gym

Due to my Marine Corps duties I was able to attend classes in Tokyo three nights a week. However, the base gymnasium at Kamiseya was next door to the Marine Barracks. I was often able to train during my on-duty days at the gym. Remarkably, I frequently had it to myself—a great opportunity: I would train with the kata, techniques etc. that I had learned the evening before at Naruko Tenjin. There was the gym floor for kata training; and mirrors in the weight room to practice punches, kicks, and strikes in front of—an ideal situation.

Traveling to Class

Traveling from Kamiseya to Naruko Tenjin was educational and often enjoyable. I took a bus from Kamiseya to the village of Tsuruma, and at Tsuruma I rode a local train to the village of Chuo Rinkan. At Chuo Rinkan I boarded a train for Shinjuku; after arriving at Shinjuku station I walked six blocks to Naruko

Tenjin. This whole process took about fifty minutes. I reversed this procedure when leaving Naruko Tenjin.

There was a small Japanese restaurant outside the main gate at Kamiseya, and I often stopped there after returning from Shinjuku. The *yaki soba* (fried noodles) were particularly good and the cook was very knowledgeable about Japanese history—a great ending for a busy day. On many of the train trips I was approached by Japanese eager to practice English. Since I was studying Japanese it was usually an enjoyable and educational conversation.

Traveling in Japan can also be educational in other ways. Several times during this year in Japan I was approached (usually in Tokyo) by obviously hostile people because they assumed correctly that I was an American. Since I didn't need an altercation in the middle of Tokyo, I precluded any further discussion by announcing in Japanese that I was a Russian college student newly arrived in Japan; Shoichi Yamamoto was with me on one of these occasions and we laughed long and hard (afterwards) at the look of confusion on one man's face when he heard this.

A Lesson in Manners

Under Mr. Toguchi's tutelage, I was able to polish the kata Seipai considerably, although it was many years before I could truthfully say that I understood it. Seipai is Mr. Toguchi's favorite kata, and also the favorite kata of Mr. Chojun Miyagi, the founder of Go-ju ryu. It is also my favorite kata—a coincidence, but nevertheless a good feeling.

It was during one of these Seipai sessions that I was part of a lesson in good manners. I was performing Seipai for Mr. Toguchi. Seipai has a rather difficult jump and 180-degree mid-air turn in it; upon landing, my right foot found the only depression in the shrine's courtyard. The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back looking up at the evening sky and Mr. Toguchi. I quickly recovered and completed the kata. I knew most of the students had seen me slip and fall. No one however, appeared to notice. There was no laughter; no smiles, or comments.

Everyone continued with their training—it would have been bad manners to do anything else. Also, no one displayed bad manners in front of Mr. Toguchi. Mishaps of this nature are bound to happen; the important part is how quickly we recover and continue with the task at hand.

One Year, One Kata

I learned one—that's right, one—new kata during this one-year stay in Japan. One evening after training with Seipai, Mr. Toguchi introduced me to Shisochin. Let me make a rather important point at this time: I did not ask Mr. Toguchi to teach me Shisochin—that would never do—I had to wait until he felt I was ready for it.

This was the ultimate experience: An expert karate teacher teaching me a classical karate kata in a Shinto shrine in Tokyo. The next day in the gymnasium at Kamiseya I would train the techniques I had learned the night before. When I left Japan in January, 1965, I knew the sequence of Shisochin and the meanings of its obvious techniques. Shisochin, like the other classical Go-ju ryu kata has several *kakushi waza* (hidden techniques) in it; I have since learned several of them.

Old and New Gi

Compared to other styles of karate, Go-ju ryu has quite a few throwing techniques. On many evenings my white karate-gi was brown from the dirt in the Naruko Tenjin courtyard. The next day found me dutifully scrubbing the mud out of my gi. My fellow Marines, always concerned about my welfare, would comment, "Playing in the mud again, huh?"

Another excursion found Shoichi and me in the Tokaido shop which I believe was located in the Yotsuya ward of Tokyo. I had a karate-gi custom made for myself; the price, if I remember correctly, was 3600 yen, then about \$10 in US money. The shop was very small, about twenty feet square. Now, Tokaido is a worldwide distributor of martial arts equipment.

Festival Performances

In those far off days, the Okinawan people living in Tokyo held an annual festival celebrating their heritage. This festival

was usually held in a theater or meeting hall, and included Okinawan singing, dancing, folklore and karate. With Mr. Toguchi acting as master of ceremonies we demonstrated Go-ju ryu karate and kobujutsu. I performed Seisan and a saijutsu kata. Rewards in karate sometimes come in subtle ways: When we were leaving, an elderly Okinawan man approached me and said: "*Subarashii, subarashii*" (Wonderful, Wonderful).

Tokyo Coffee Shops

Shoichi and I often frequented the coffee shops of Tokyo. The conversation was usually focused on karate, Japanese history or the Japanese and English language—studying the language and culture of a people tells them that you care about them.

Tokyo is beautiful at night; the varicolored neon signs can be seen for miles. We often went walking after leaving the

Abunai! (Danger! Danger!).

One evening, an elderly Japanese man who spoke very good English was watching our training. He complimented us on our hard work and dedication. I asked him if he studied a martial art. He replied: "No, I'm too busy making money." I have noticed this same situation in the United States, people so busy making money that they don't have time for anything else.

It was about this time that two fellow Marines informed me that they wanted to learn karate and asked me to take them to classes. I had misgivings about this; many Americans are quite rude when overseas, and I had long ago lost my patience with them. I told them, "Karate might be quite different from what you expect." They lasted about two months. Doing the same thing night after night cleared their minds of any delusions they had about karate and they—like many others before and after—learned that karate is demanding, difficult, time-consuming, and just plain hard work.

Fighting Nature

I learned some other things during that one year in Japan. Being possessed of a reasonable amount of stupidity, I one day decided to argue with Mother Nature. It was in November, 1964, it had snowed lightly the previous night, and there was a definite chill in the air. By mid afternoon most of the snow had melted. I was a shodan in karate and judo—I could handle it! That evening I traveled to the Meguro shrine. It was rather chilly. For some reason the teacher did not show up that night; and there was only one other student there. After one hour of training, the mud had congealed a bit; my feet had taken on a bluish white color and were a bit numb, but what's a little mud? After the workout, while washing my feet, I detected a slight pain in the big toe of my right foot. The pain increased as I walked from the shrine to the train station. By the time I had arrived at back at Kamiseya, I was certain an invisible demon was applying a blow torch to the big toe of my right foot. At the barracks I peeled the sock off my right foot – along with most of the epidermis that was on my big toe. I did not sleep that night. At every heart

beat there was a stab of excruciating pain in the big toe of my right foot. The next morning at sick call the doctor said, "You have quite a case of frostbite there." My fellow Marines, always concerned about my welfare, made comments such as: "Playing in the mud and snow, huh?" or, "Didn't your mother tell you to come in out of the bad weather?" What bothered me the most was the fact that they were right. It was dumb. I should have trained in the base gym that night. The fact that I wasn't as great as I had previously thought didn't help either. By this time I was training with five classical kata, sanchin, several kiso kumite, and several bunkai kumite. I had my hands full.

Leaving Japan

In November, 1964, the Inspector General of the United States Marine Corps visited Marine Barracks, Atsugi, Japan. In addition to other things he became concerned about my citizenship status—I had been overseas since March, 1960—and accordingly ordered me back to the United States. I didn't really want to leave Japan, but it is futile for a Marine enlisted man to argue with a Marine General. Therefore, in early January, 1965, I found myself on an airplane headed for California, saying hopefully to Japan, "*A mata ne*" (see you again). **W**

Glennard Grabow is an Okinawan Go-ju ryu karate and kobujutsu teacher and free-lance writer based in Jamestown, New York. He is the chairman of the Okinawa Kobujutsu Kyokai (Okinawa Ancient Martial Arts Society). He is also the owner of Okinawan Adventures, a company that specializes in ancient Okinawan weapons and karate and kobujutsu videos.

coffee shops, and on one of these walks in Shinjuku we stopped at a small Japanese restaurant and ordered noodles. A middle aged woman served us and began a conversation. During this conversation, she asked me in Japanese, "Who was the worst person in Japanese history?" and answered her own question by saying, "Hideki Tojo," the Prime Minister of Japan during World War II. I quickly answered, "No. Ashikaga Tokauji," a baron during the era of warring states known for deceit and treachery. The woman was filled with surprise and disbelief that a foreigner would know a fact like this. She said, "Your food is free; you are a friend of Japan."

Visitors

Young children often watched our training at Naruko Tenjin. For the most part they were quiet and well mannered. If they ventured too close, we would say *Abunai!*

A Japanese Shinto Shrine