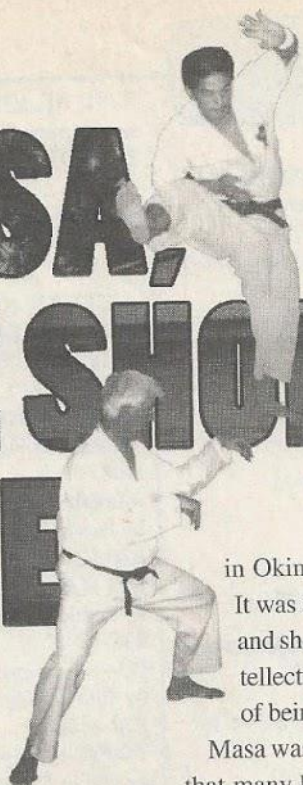


# MASA, THE SHOREIKAN, & ME

## A Legendary Okinawan Instructor Whose Influence Spanned Decades and Shaped a Life



by Glen Grabow

**H**e was "Masa" to the few of us who knew him well. Born Masanobu Arashiro in the summer of 1938 to Okinawan parents on the island of Rota in the Mariana Island group, in later life he was known as Masanobu Shinjo. Arashiro and Shinjo mean Newcastle when translated into English.

I was introduced to Masa by Mr. John Roseberry of Lincoln, Nebraska on June 21, 1961. At that time Masa was the instructor at Mr. Seikichi Toguchi's Shoreikan Go-ju ryu karate dojo in Nakanomachi, Okinawa. Masa was twenty-three years old, but appeared to be much older in experience and the ways of the world. He weighed 130 pounds and was five feet one inch tall. His muscles were extraordinarily developed and he could use his great strength very efficiently. Even at this rather young age his expertise and strength were well known in many parts of Okinawa. He was a *yondan* (fourth level black belt) in Go-ju ryu karate, a rank to which he had been promoted about one year before I met him. His promotion to yondan at the relatively young age of twenty-two was a record in itself. He was also quite expert

in Okinawa *bojutsu* and *tonfajutsu*. It was also obvious that he was head and shoulders above many others intellectually. Masa had the rare trait of being enthusiastic yet realistic.

Masa was the legendary karate teacher that many hope to meet or aspire to be. He brooked no argument from students. He believed beginners should be seen, not heard. He taught by example with few words. His motto seemed to be, "Don't talk—train!" Masa had a unique, but very effective way of dealing with noisy, lazy or argumentative students: He punched them! Many a student, both American and Okinawan, found himself on the receiving end of Masa's fast, seemingly unstoppable, breath-taking center punch. Errors in stances were often corrected with kicks—but in such a way that no permanent injury occurred.

### Finding the Laughter

For the first several months that I knew him, Masa seemed lacking in humor. I later learned that he, like many other Okinawans, was quite shy; also, his command of English was quite limited.

Masa's humor finally showed itself in a rather unusual way. It must have been in December, 1961, during an evening class. We were practicing an unusual exercise: Masa would step in front of a student; the student would close his eyes, and remaining upright, fall forward. Masa would stop the fall by placing the palms of his hands on the student's chest and then pushing him upright. As he was

about to step in front of an American student, Masa was distracted by someone entering the dojo. The student by this time had closed his eyes and had fallen forward, crashing on the floor. Masa did not immediately understand what had happened. Our giggles and not-so-restrained laughter added to his confusion. However, when he turned and saw the student on the floor with a questioning look on his face, Masa's face lit up with amusement. As Masa beamed, we students exploded into laughter; and the unfortunate student stood up and joined in the mutual hysterics. The ice had been broken.

### Severe Training

At the Shoreikan, training was intense and severe. Evening classes began at 7:30 and lasted for two hours. Preliminary exercises included stretching, leg swings, knee rotations, eight-count push-ups, and other calisthenics for 45 minutes. Punching and blocking were covered extensively: At least 50 upper, center, and downward punches and blocks were practiced. One of Masa's favorite exercises was the square stance and 50 center punches. Kicks included the frontal, foot edge, heel, cross and knee strike—50 times each. *Kote kitai* or pounding the arms was a unique and painful exercise which consisted of training partners pounding each other's forearms with their own forearms. This exercise would eventually build up calcium on the bones, thus making a stronger blocking technique—the pain of this exercise also drove some students from the dojo.



## Memorable Moments

The rigorous karate training was occasionally relieved by parties, usually on a Saturday at Moon Beach, Ishikawa Beach or Imbu Beach. Sometimes these outings were preceded by a karate demonstration performed at the USOs, military clubs and at various Okinawan cultural events.

New Year's Day also provided a change in our karate training schedule. Some years we would begin with a one-hour training session either at midnight or 6AM, followed by red bean soup and hot tea.

Other memories from those far-off days include the karate by candlelight incident. It was during the early summer of 1962. It was warm, and about 8:30 in the evening there was an electrical power outage. The dojo was cloaked in darkness. Many students took the excuse to leave, but candles were quickly found and a few of us continued our karate training by candlelight. Shortly after, several swarms of termites invaded the dojo, probably attracted by the flames. The termites, for whatever reason, flew around about three feet above the floor. An opportunity of sorts: We spent the rest of the evening kicking the termites out of the air! The summers on Okinawa were very hot and humid; this combined with the rigorous training sessions caused our karate gi—including the belts—to be completely soaked with sweat.

Another memory is the constant turnover of students in the dojo. Many pupils, particularly Americans,

would last about one month. They would come in full of noisy talk, but the first training session usually quieted them down—many honestly suffered. I saw more than one of them crawl off the floor after the training session—or even before it was over. Others found ways to avoid the training, coming in late or leaving early, or attending only three classes a week.

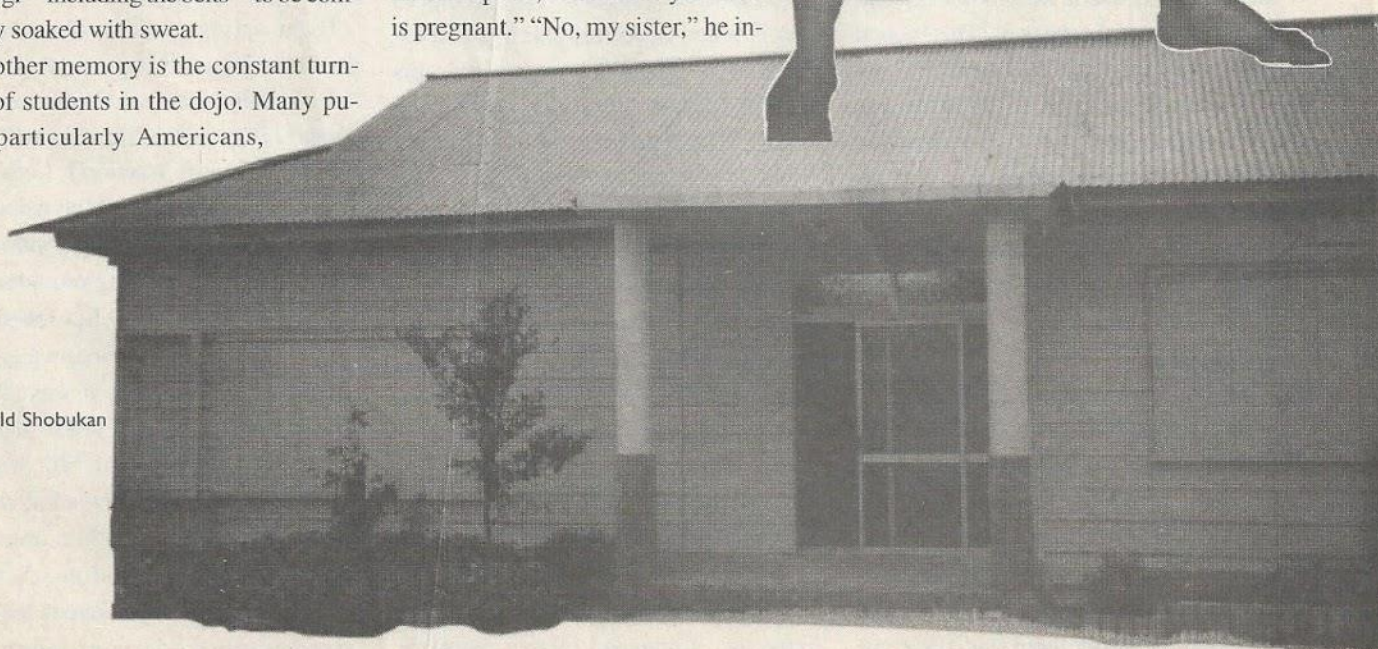
Several factors caused these students to quit. In addition to the severe training, others disliked starting at the bottom as a white belt, the mandate of being seen but not heard, or being in a group but not being able to tell anyone what to do. Others experienced culture shock: Few Okinawans could speak English, and customs differed, causing some Americans to feel lost. Still others discovered that they were not as physically and mentally great as they had previously thought.

Traditional karate is a continual test for all involved; it constantly eliminates those who can't adjust or those who go astray. These students offered many devious and often silly excuses for quitting karate, including, "I don't have the time," "Karate is not what I thought it would be," or "I'm not learning anything." The most unusual excuse was from a Marine who declared he was quitting because his sister was pregnant. I replied, "You mean your wife is pregnant." "No, my sister," he in-

Glen Grabow



The old Shobukan







Masa performing the Sanchin kata, Futema, Okinawa, 1962.

sisted. He just didn't have what it took to excel at karate, but was not honest enough to admit it.

The Sanchin kata brings back several painful memories. Everyone had to train with this very difficult breathing kata. Sanchin means "three battles"—apparently these are the battles for breath, muscle, and body control. While we were performing the kata, Masa would count us through it, while he and his assistant Mr. Azuma would check us. This "checking" consisted of punches and knife hand strikes to the stomach, kicks to the legs, and slaps to the tops of the shoulders while we were exhaling. Some of our bruises caused by the strikes had an interesting mix of black, blue, yellow, and green. We were getting what we paid for!

## Lessons

One interesting lesson showed itself in a rather remarkable way. It was the fall of 1962, and we had participated in a karate *undokai* (demonstration) in the city of Naha. Afterward there was a bit of socializing; Okinawans are very hospitable people once they learn that a person respects them and their cul-

ture. On the way back to Koza, Masa, Mr. Tasaki, Mr. Furugen, and I stopped in an Okinawan nightclub. Lately, Masa had been learning the kata Kururunfa and Pechurin and was discussing Kururunfa in great detail with Mr. Furugen. I was several years away from Kururunfa at that time, but I was all ears. Mr. Tasaki quietly took in the conversation also. The discussion at one point focused on the *jodan kosa uke* (upper level cross block) that is found in Kururunfa. Masa in his enthusiasm raised his hands above his head and asked, "Is the right or left hand on top?" Mr. Furugen replied "*Migi ue*" (right on top), but Mr. Tasaki quickly and quietly pointed out that a nightclub was not the place to show karate techniques. This reminder stifled any further physical techniques but the discussion continued on, low key. Mr. Tasaki, of course, was correct. Many misunderstandings and problems can arise from such public displays.

## Developing Friendship, Continuing Skill

There were several reasons why Masa and I became good friends: We were the same age, I attended classes regularly,

and once I entered the dojo, I started training immediately; Masa never had to tell me to get busy. I obeyed the "seen but not heard" mandate, we both had a consuming interest in karate, and unlike many Americans, I respected all things Okinawan. The fact that I was studying the Japanese language also helped quite a bit; we could communicate.

Masa and I were together at the Shoreikan for two and one-half years. During this time I learned the karate basics. I was also taught *saijutsu* by Mr. Choyu Kiyuna, now eighth dan, Okinawan Karate Federation. In December, 1963 I was promoted to *shodan* in Go-ju ryu by the Okinawa Karate Federation. Mr. Shoshin Nagamine signed my promotion certificate. I was a black belt, but I knew I was still in the beginning stages of karate. During 1964 I was stationed in Japan and studied under Mr. Seikichi Toguchi, ninth dan OKF, but that's another story for another time.

I returned to Okinawa in September, 1965. The first evening found me at the Shoreikan. Masa was not there. I was directed to New Koza (Yaejima) and found Masa and his wife in a restaurant. Masa was pleased to see me. It was unusual for an American to return to Okinawa; most Americans disliked Okinawa, probably because they viewed it largely through the bottom of a whiskey glass.

In the spring of 1965, Masa had left the Shoreikan and opened his own karate dojo in Yaejima, Okinawa. Masa named his dojo the Shobukan (Hall of the Beginning of Warriors). Located in an old school house, a new plywood floor had been installed, sliding windows on each side of the building provided ventilation, there were three full-length mirrors, and there were various weights for strengthening the body. It was all very elemental with no distractions—a perfect traditional karate dojo! Mr. Meitoku Yagi, tenth dan OKF, served as the adviser, illustrating a rather important Okinawan karate custom: When a younger karate teacher opens his dojo, he will usually ask a senior karate teacher



to be his adviser. This is a somewhat loose but respectful relationship. The younger teacher benefits from the adviser's experience, and the elder is given recognition for his knowledge and expertise. The younger teacher generally follows the curriculum found in the adviser's dojo: the number of kata, how they are taught, and the meanings of the movements found in them. The younger teacher usually devises his own kumite, but is polite enough to use the same number found in the adviser's curriculum.

Masa ran a tight ship at the Shobukan. Classes were from 7:30-9:30, six nights a week, beginning with 20 minutes of stretching exercises. The three basic punches and blocks were covered extensively. The five basic kicks were given minute attention. Again, 50 punches from the square stance was a favorite exercise. Masa had about 20 Okinawan and American students in the Shobukan at this time and there was a *kamban* (name board) on the wall for each of them.

The classical kata at the Shobukan were taught slightly differently from those at the Shoreikan. Masa used the students for karate experiments: He had us perform some of the kicks from the attention stance rather than the conventional small forward stance. Masa was also in the process of developing his third kumite and frequently used us in his experiments. This was really quite educational since we too learned from it. Masa's favorite kata at this time was Pechurin—the longest classical kata in Go-ju ryu, and arguably the most difficult.

There were not many American students at the Shobukan in 1965. Those who were there were typically

American: They wanted to stand around and talk rather than train. I led many of the classes at the Shobukan at this time. One night when Masa was absent I conducted a little experiment of my own. Among the students were two U.S. servicemen who arrived and left the dojo together. They would not do anything alone. This particular night I did not hold a class; I let everyone work out on his own. Without seeming to, I observed these two servicemen very closely. After talking and looking out the window for about a half hour, they finally got out on the floor and went through some uninspired motions for about 20 minutes, then left the dojo! They obviously did not understand that they had plenty to work on, that the teacher can only show the way. Ultimately it is the responsibility of the individual student to learn karate.

Masa did not employ any kicking techniques in his third, most advanced, kumite. When I asked why, he replied, "In a real situation, we might overreact and lose our balance. Often the footing will be slippery, rough or uneven; these factors can cause us to lose our balance.

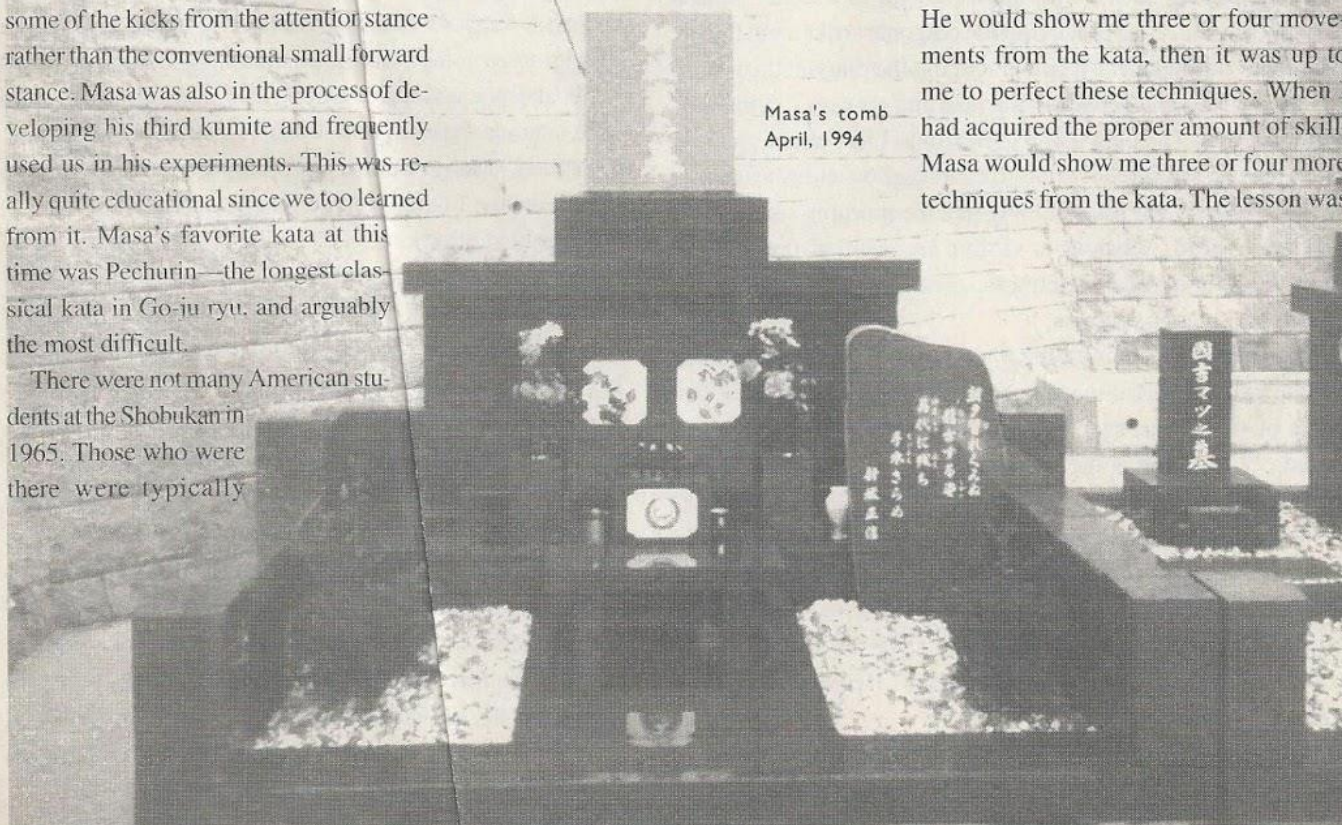
I think it is dangerous to employ kicks in a kumite." This from a karate teacher whose favorite techniques were the flying kick and the rear kick! Still, it was very good advice.

## Growing Knowledge

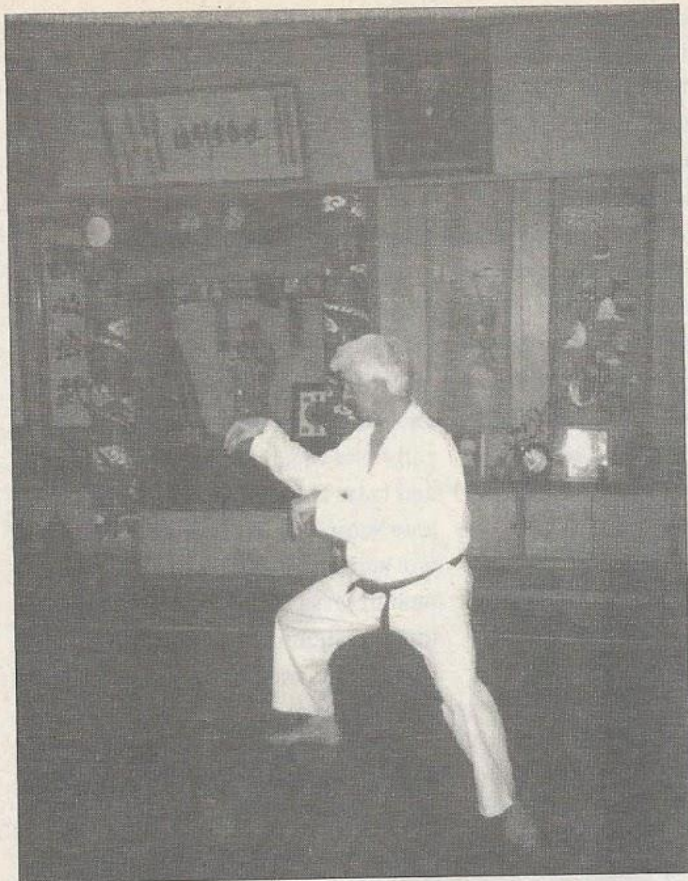
This particular stay at the Shobukan, from September 1965 to February 1966, proved to be a "golden age" of karate for me. I had been studying karate for four and one-half years, and was ready physically and mentally for new techniques and kata. During this time I learned the kata Sanseiru and Kururunfa. After I had worked with Kururunfa for about a month, Masa said, "*Joto!*" (Good!). Getting a compliment like this from Masa about karate was akin to squeezing blood from a turnip.

I also began to study Okinawan bojutsu. Masa taught me Shushi-no-kon and Sakugawa-no-kon. My first task was to learn the slipping hand technique that is so prevalent in Okinawan bojutsu. I worked on this technique for about 30 minutes a night for several nights. Masa then began teaching me Shushi-no-kon. Masa had a unique method of teaching: He would show me three or four movements from the kata, then it was up to me to perfect these techniques. When I had acquired the proper amount of skill, Masa would show me three or four more techniques from the kata. The lesson was

Masa's tomb  
April, 1994







Glen Grabow at the Shobukan, April, 1994.

clear: Masa could show me the techniques, but he could not do them for me. Through all of this he was closely observing me, while appearing not to. This showed itself in a rather painful way once when I was practicing the diagonal strike with the bo. Masa had warned me: "When practicing the diagonal strike, do not let the bo come between your arm and rib cage." Somehow I did just that. The pain was excruciating. I had struck my brachial plexus. After recovering from the agony and confusion, I looked at Masa. He was beaming like the morning sun, but did not say a word. Wisdom is seldom transmitted through the mouth. As far as I can determine, I was the only American to whom Masa taught bojutsu.

Masa and I often trained after the class was over. During some of our training sessions we became so engrossed that we lost track of time. One evening while working with Shisochin, I asked, "What time is it?" Masa replied: "11 o'clock." It was during these after-class workouts that I really learned the technical points of karate along with *kakushi waza* (hidden techniques) and *kata kaisai* (analysis of kata for meaning of movements). Masa would caution me about the joint locking technique in Shisochin: "*Amari takusan*" (Not too much); or the tripping action in Kururunfa: "Spring up." He would help anyone who wanted to learn.

In January of 1966, the Shobukan had a New Year's party in a restaurant on Business Center Street. It was an Okinawan-style restaurant, and we sat on tatami mats around small tables.

Seated across from me was Masa and Mr. Shonshin Furugen, one of Masa's teachers, who attended many of the Shobukan functions. "Mr. Furugen taught me Saifa, only Saifa," Masa once told me. During the course of the evening Mr. Furugen and I had a rather in-depth discussion, in Japanese, about karate. He inquired as to how long I had been studying, who my teachers were, which classical kata I knew, which weapons I was training with, etc. Near the end of the discussion, Mr. Furugen turned to Masa, and referring to me asked, "Why is he only a shodan?" Masa replied, "He has not been on Okinawa until recently; I couldn't promote him." A compliment of sorts? Coming from an old karate teacher like Mr. Furugen, the comment was better than a promotion.

### The New Shobukan

Near the end of February, 1966, the United States government arranged an extensive sight-seeing tour of Vietnam for me. So ended this particular stay with Masa and the Shobukan.

After six months in Vietnam, I was eligible for ten days of R and R. Locations such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, Manila, and Hawaii could be selected. Of course I chose Okinawa! Masa was doubly pleased to see me, since some Americans were not returning alive from Vietnam.

The Shobukan was at a new location. Masa had built a new training hall around the corner and behind the old Shobukan. It was a typical traditional karate dojo with a hardwood floor, sliding windows for ventilation, weights, striking bags, and a rack containing *bo*, *tonfa*, *nunchaku* and other weapons. Photos of Kanryo Higaonna and Chojun Miyagi were at the front of the training area. Conspicuous by its absence was a promotion chart showing subject and time in grade requirements. When I asked Masa about this, he replied, "Many people try to get around the time in grade requirements; I will simply tell them when to test."

Masa held afternoon and evening classes, and many of his students were police officers. Several old friends from the Shoreikan now trained at the Shobukan, including Choyu Kiyuna, Yoshio Shimabuku, and Kinei Nakasone. My goal during this ten-day reprieve was to review everything that I had previously been taught: kata, kumite, supplementary exercises, bojutsu, kakushi waza, kaisai, etc.

I was promoted to *nidan* in January of 1967. I did not take a test, but was recommended for promotion by Masa. Mr. Kenji Kawakami, a friend from the Tokyo dojo, was instructing at the Shoreikan, and he and I were directed to Mr. Meitoku Yagi's Meibukan karate dojo. Mr. Yagi referred us to Mr. Eiichi Miyazato's Jundokan dojo. If I recall correctly, the test fee was six dollars. A week later I received the certificate promoting me to *nidan* by the OKF; it also was signed by Mr. Shoshin Nagamine.

Returning to Vietnam, my thirst for karate and *kobujutsu*



continued unabated. Therefore, while in Vietnam in March, 1967 I extended my overseas tour for a six-month stay on Okinawa. This would be my third stay at the Shobukan. I had some definite goals: I wanted to learn Pechurin, the longest and possibly the most difficult of the Go-ju ryu kata, and Tensho, the advanced breathing kata. I also wanted to learn more bojutsu. All of this would be a relief from the alternating boredom and madness that was prevalent in Vietnam.

At this time, both Masa and I were single again. We did quite a bit of socializing after classes, always selecting a quiet, out-of-the-way Okinawan club where we discussed many things. A favorite song in Okinawa in those days was "Danny Boy." Although most Okinawans did not understand this song, the lyrics were pleasing and relaxing.

I studied karate at the Shobukan three nights a week; I also studied bojutsu at the late Katsuyoshi Kanei's Jinbukan karate dojo in Chibana, Okinawa three nights a week. I paid the full fee at both dojo. Both Masa and Kanei were good friends of mine, and to do otherwise would have made me look cheap. I was willing to pay for what I got.

During this six-month stay I did learn Pechurin—at least the sequence and the meaning of some of the movements. I had a long way to go. Masa told me: "Pechurin was composed by Chojun Miyagi in the 1920s from three Naha-te kata." Again, Masa proved to be the karate teacher whom many hope to meet or aspire to be. He was very demanding, even of the smallest details: "The forefinger must be bent when practicing *yari uke*" (muscular tension block). "*Mata wasureta*" (You've forgotten again) in reference to a very difficult, turning, blocking, punching technique in Pechurin. Six months is merely a start when learning Pechurin; three years of constant training will unlock many of the secrets found in this kata. Masa also helped me with *saijutsu*: "When practicing the basic *sai* technique, do not let the point of the *sai* come near your face or stomach." In ad-

dition, he showed me a blocking, pushing, thrusting technique with the *sai*.

I learned the bojutsu kata Tenryu-no-kon and the oar kata Tsuken Akachu-nukubo from Katsuyoshi Kanei during this six-month stay on Okinawa. The oar kata is very difficult; I often practiced it ten or 12 times a night. I also reviewed Shushi-no-kon and Sakugawa-no-kon.

A rather amusing memory during this stay at the Shobukan was a dinner we had one afternoon. Traditionally, many Okinawans eat goat meat once a year, believing it will give them strength and long life. When Masa offered me a bowl of goat meat and boiled vegetables, I detected that many of the Okinawans present were watching me rather intently. I ate the goat meat and vegetables like it was everyday fare, surprising many of the Okinawans. Actually, I had been introduced to the meal several years before at Mr. Takeshi Matsumoto's judo dojo in Goya, Okinawa. The goat meat does have a strong odor, but is quite tasty!

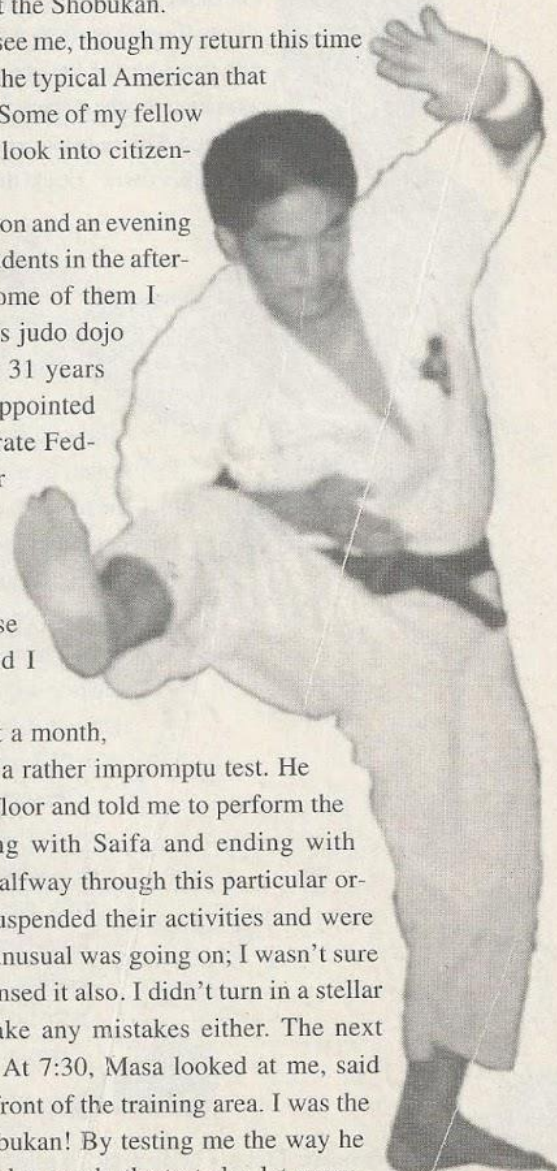
## Ordered to Okinawa

I returned to the United States, and during the summer of 1969, while stationed at Quantico, Virginia, the USMC once again informed me that my presence and expertise were needed in Vietnam. Good luck shows itself in many ways: After a short tour, my unit was given marching orders for Okinawa! This 1969-1970 tour on Okinawa was my fourth time at the Shobukan.

Masa was, of course, glad to see me, though my return this time did not surprise him: I was not the typical American that most Okinawans were used to. Some of my fellow Marines even suggested that I look into citizenship status on Okinawa.

Masa was teaching an afternoon and an evening class six days a week. Many students in the afternoon class were policemen; some of them I had known at Mr. Matsumoto's judo dojo eight years before. Masa was 31 years old at this time, and had been appointed chairman of the Okinawa Karate Federation. Some of the older Okinawan karate teachers were envious of his position. "I'm too young, many are jealous," Masa told me. Something else was rather evident: Masa and I were growing older together.

After I had been there about a month, Masa made me the subject of a rather impromptu test. He called me to the center of the floor and told me to perform the eight classical kata beginning with Saifa and ending with Pechurin. By the time I was halfway through this particular ordeal, the other students had suspended their activities and were watching closely. Something unusual was going on; I wasn't sure what, but the other students sensed it also. I didn't turn in a stellar performance; but I didn't make any mistakes either. The next evening things became clear. At 7:30, Masa looked at me, said "Grabow" and pointed to the front of the training area. I was the assistant instructor at the Shobukan! By testing me the way he did, Masa knew I was qualified to teach; the test also let every-





one else that was present that night know that I was capable. An American assistant instructor in an Okinawan karate dojo! It was an honor, a great responsibility, and a good feeling as well.

I learned many things while teaching—things that probably would not have shown themselves otherwise. Many of karate's inner teachings came to light during this stay at the Shobukan. "Put your back against a wall if you get in a fight; that way no one can strike you from behind," Masa told me. He also introduced me to the rule of three, or *mitsu no horitsu*: "Select the three classical kata that you perform the best; work on them. You will not be able to keep up with all of the kata." Through the years, this rule of three has proven itself many times. This selection process is also referred to as *tokui kata* (favorite kata). My three favorite kata at that time were Seipai, Shisochin, and Kururunfa; Masa seemed to favor Pechurin, Seisan, and Kururunfa. Masa also gave the advice, "A few highly polished techniques are much better than many sloppy techniques" and "More than three bojutsu kata are redundant."

During this tour I was promoted to *sandan* by the Okinawa Karate Federation. The test was at the Shobukan; the promotion board consisted of five Go-ju ryu teachers. Mr. Eiichi Miyazato, now ninth dan OKF, was the president of the promotion board. The test was a rather simple affair. When called to the floor, the person

testing would bow and then announce the name of the classical kata that he had selected. I selected Seipai, one of my three favorites. After this first kata was performed, the president of the promotion board would select a second kata for the person testing to perform. Mr. Miyazato selected Shisochin—another of my three favorites for me to perform. Luck does show itself in many ways.

After performing Shisochin, I glanced at Masa. From the look on his face it was obvious that he was as pleased as I was. The students testing then performed Sanchin and kumite. I was presented my certificate for sandan at a restaurant on B.C. Street. Masa and I faced each other across the table. Yoshio Shimabuku (now eighth dan OKF) handed me the certificate and said "Grabow, this is high." This was at least a decade before inflated promotions, promotions for money, promotions for business, *ad nauseam*. The promotion certificate was issued by the OKF, of which Masa was chairman.

Masa was not backwards about criticizing me. If I did something wrong, I was corrected quickly. One afternoon I was attempting to perform Sanseiru. Somehow I became distracted and kept getting stuck halfway through a 180-degree turn. Masa, of course, did not miss this. "You know better than that; get your mind here." Another time, while practicing the flying kick

in Pechurin, I let my body relax in mid-air. I landed like a ton of bricks.

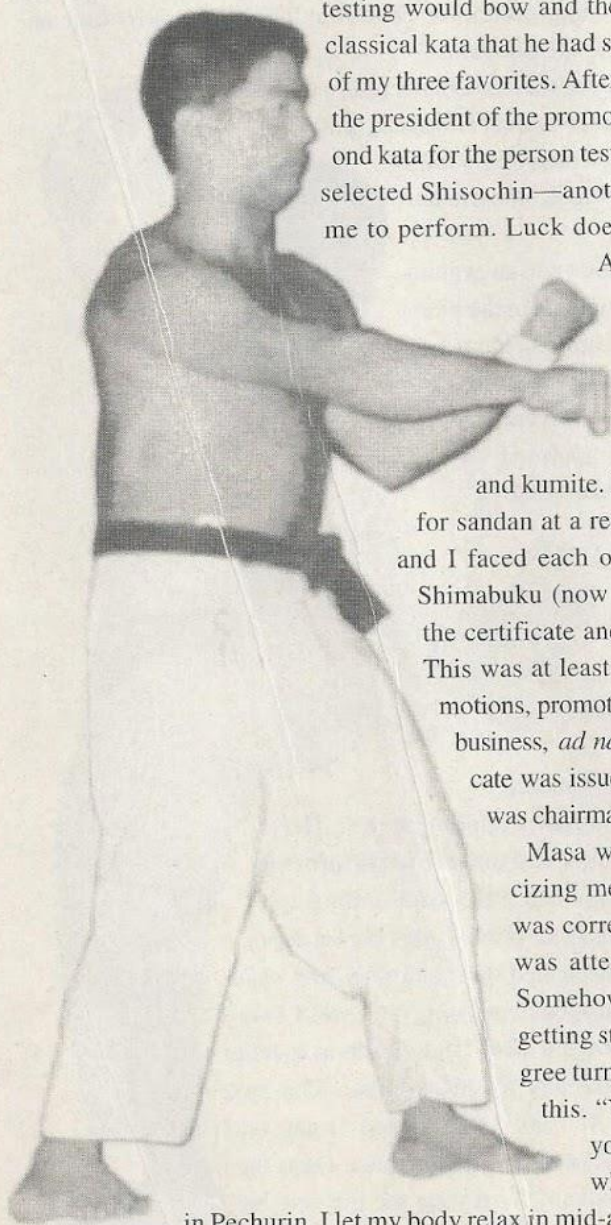
Masa didn't miss that either. "You must land lightly; do not land heavily, you will not have any control of your body."

Masa had many ways of testing a person. Early one evening I found him in his den casually tossing a bag of small stones that weighed about five pounds from one hand to the other. Always on the alert for new training methods, I asked about this. Masa replied by throwing the bag at my face! A test of alertness! Karate techniques are not of much use if we are caught unawares. The bag of stones was used for developing a strong grip.

It was about this time that I witnessed an example of Masa's great strength. We were in an Okinawan nightclub in Nakanomachi. Masa favored whiskey; I was partial to Japanese beer. We heard some noise from the street, but ignored it. Presently, a hostess asked Masa to come to the door. Outside, a large four-door American car had its right front wheel caught in the gutter, which was about a foot deep and a foot wide. By lifting and rocking the front of the car sideways, Masa, by virtue of his strength, removed the car's wheel from the gutter. I wished I'd had a camera!

Masa again showed himself to be the ultimate karate teacher. We discussed kakushi waza, *suzuki waza*, kata kaisai, and the ultimate secret of karate: Train often. Masa seemed to be bursting with *hojo undo* (supplementary exercises). One evening a new Okinawan student took exception to my mandate of blocking with a closed hand. Masa was standing nearby and said in English: "Punch him!" I punched. Action is often better than words; the student then started blocking with closed hands.

If one stays on Okinawa long enough and earns the people's respect, other things will occasionally show themselves. I often arrived at the Shobukan somewhat early. On one of these evenings Masa asked, "Grabow, do you travel by Kamara Street?" Kamara Street is very dark at night. It is lined with tombs, many of them quite old; the fruit





bats can often be heard calling in the tree-tops, and occasionally a snake can be seen basking in the moonlight. Many Okinawans believe Kamara Street is haunted. Women shy away from it and many Okinawan men are reluctant to travel on it at night. Knowing that this was the basis of Masa's question, I replied in Japanese, "The ghosts are my friends." I did this with a straight face; ghosts are a very real part of Okinawan life, and to laugh would have been disrespectful. Masa seemed to accept this. This conversation provided an opportunity for a question that I had been wanting to ask for quite some time: "Do Okinawans train with karate in front of their ancestral tombs?" Masa replied, "Yes, I have trained in front of my family's tomb. We hope the spirits of our ancestors will come out of the tomb, enter our bodies [through the mouth] and make us stronger." The ubiquitous Okinawan tombs often have courtyards approximately six yards square, and would be conducive to karate training. This is probably the most direct relationship between religion and traditional Okinawan karate—ancestor worship is an important facet of the Okinawan religion.

I returned to the United States, and in the spring of 1975, while stationed in Hawaii, the USMC again issued me travel orders to Okinawa. By April, 1975 I was once again at the Shobukan. Masa was pleased, but not surprised. It had been five years since I had departed from Okinawa in 1970. This was my fifth stay at the Shobukan.

Compliments come in different ways. On the second evening at the Shobukan, Masa, for some reason, was not there. I was training with Pechurin in the rear of the training area, and several Okinawan men were watching. One said in Japanese, "He's an American, a black belt, and he's training with Pechurin. Who is he?" One of the other Okinawans said, "That's Grabow." An American with a black belt was not unusual on Okinawa at that time; but, it was unusual for an

American to be training with Pechurin. Many Okinawans never learn it.

I reviewed the kata and kumite. After a month, Masa watched me perform the eight classical Go-ju ryu kata; again the students suspended their activities to watch. Once more I was the assistant instructor at the Shobukan.

During this particular stay, Masa and I got into some deep discussions about karate. We had known each other for 14 years and we both had the physical ability, technical knowledge and experience to delve into karate's heart and soul. There is no easy or short way to learn karate. It may take a person several years to get his body in proper physical shape. Techniques are of no use without the physical skill to perform them, and physical skill can be achieved only by long training; without it, theory is useless. A person should not be in a hurry when learning karate or kobujutsu; skill in either is measured in years or decades.

Masa often spoke of the jealousy between schools and teachers in the same karate style. The teachers were very protective of their techniques. If a stranger entered the dojo, the teacher would make certain that no "secret techniques" were being taught. The teachers did not share techniques. Nothing was given to them; even good friends often did not share knowledge.

During this stay at the Shobukan, I learned the bojutsu kata Choun-no-kon. Masa also taught me nunchaku techniques. "There are no classical kata with the nunchaku; only techniques," he said. "Nunchaku do not lend themselves to blocking techniques; you must dodge away from the attack and then strike."

I also learned more about kakushi waza or hidden techniques. A favorite way of hiding techniques is to make them look like something other than what they really are, as in Shisochin. Another way is to do the technique backwards, as in Seisan and Pechurin. A third method of hiding techniques is to leave out an important movement, as in Sanseiru.

In June, 1975 Masa reminded me that

I had been a sandan for five years and was somewhat overdue for promotion. In 1975 the Go-ju ryu branch of the OKF held its promotion tests in the Shobukan. Mr. Meitoku Yagi, tenth dan OKF, was the president of the promotion board. Again, the test was simple. Each of us performed a classical kata of our choice: I selected Kururunfa; we then performed Sanchin as a group and then performed kumite. When Masa presented me with the certificate for yondan he said: "You are the first American to be promoted to yondan in Go-ju ryu by the Okinawa Karate Federation." The significance of this promotion did not dawn on me until many years later. The certificate was signed by Kanei Uechi tenth dan, chairman of the OKF.

The practice of karate sometimes has hidden rewards. It was during November, 1975 that the Shobukan and Katsuyoshi Kanei's Jinbukan were scheduled to demonstrate karate in Moromi (part of Koza City) as part of an Okinawan cultural event. It was a "hurry up and wait" demonstration. Originally I was scheduled to show Choun-no-kon, but someone in Kanei's dojo was showing it. I ended up showing Seipai. A lot can be learned by observing. During this karate demonstration I noticed that several of the Okinawan black belts were constantly pushing forward in order to be seen. I felt this demonstration was a waste of time. I could have accomplished much more back at the Shobukan. Yet after the demonstration was over and we were leaving, a middle-aged Okinawan man, accompanied by his family, approached me and said in English, "Thank you." A compliment made the evening worthwhile.

Masa said such titles as *sensei* and *shihan* were "pretentious." He did not refer to himself as *sensei* and did not want anyone else to. During the several years that I lived on Okinawa, I witnessed several people, usually Americans, calling teachers or black belts "*sensei*." In almost every case, the Okinawans reacted with laughter or anger. Such titles can be in-



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terpreted as humorous, insulting, or sarcastic. As might be expected, some Okinawans made the most of the situation: "If this dumb foreigner wants to worship me, why not make the most of it?"

I rarely took any Americans to the Shobukan. Most were not interested in karate. Also, many years before I had lost my patience with their never-ending rudeness. Of those few whom I did introduce to Masa and the Shobukan, none really achieved anything meaningful. Some might say that I am overly critical of Americans; not so, I am merely telling what I saw and experienced. During this tour of

Okinawa, Masa told me that many young Okinawans "have no stamina."

Masa had a young family in 1975-1976, so we did not socialize as much as we previously had. There was a small store behind the Shobukan, and outside the store was a large flat rock. Often after classes I would buy a large bottle of Japanese beer and drink it while sitting on the rock. I was in the shadows; I had privacy; after the arduous workout at the Shobukan the beer was welcome in more ways than one. This provided me with opportunities to reflect, to mentally review the evening's class. I enjoyed the loneliness. In truth, any in-depth study of karate will be a lonely endeavor; friends may encourage, the teacher will point the way, but ultimately the student must overcome all obstacles by himself.

### Goodbyes

Before I left Okinawa in May, 1976, Masa wrote a history of my study of karate and kobujutsu. In it he detailed my promotions and their dates, and wrote several in-depth comments about my study and ability with Okinawan kobujutsu. It is a closely guarded document!

I spent four more years in the USMC. Then in 1980, I found myself *persona non grata* and decided to search for a more challenging and rewarding career. Masa and I had exchanged letters and photos in 1979. In 1981 I began college and graduated in May, 1987 with a Master of Arts degree in English and teacher certification for New York, Virginia, and Alabama. During all this time in college I continued to study and teach karate and kobujutsu. 1988 found me teaching English in a public school, and in 1990 I began teaching English for the New York State Department of Corrections.

Through all of this I was planning a trip back to the Shobukan. I waited too long.

In October, 1993 I learned that Masa had died. A great sadness overcame me; an empty feeling was with me constantly. The man who had done the most for me, who had shown me the most kindness, was gone. His departure left a hole in my life.

I arrived on Okinawa in April, 1994. The first evening I went to the Shobukan and was greeted by Kiyoshi, Masa's younger brother. Several people remembered me; I did not remember several of them. Masa's wife was pleased at my return. She said, "Mr. Miyagi will take you to Masa's tomb." I appreciated this; most Okinawans are quite reticent about their departed relatives.

I trained at the Shobukan several times during this two-week stay on Okinawa—several times by myself. Alone, I subconsciously expected to hear Masa's voice or see him appear in a doorway. I had to constantly remind myself that Masa was gone. Yaejima was still a sleepy little village—surrounded by tall, modern buildings. The old Shobukan is still there, now a residence. The old stone bridge at Yaejima has been replaced with a modern metal monstrosity. I walked along Kamara Street; it has changed a bit. When two little girls in front of the Shobukan called me *Ojisan* (grandfather), I knew that I must have changed a bit also. Even though I was visiting Okinawa with five other karate students, a feeling of loneliness pervaded everything. I was living in the past; the present held no interest for me. Many things on Okinawa have changed, due mainly to being caught up in the Japanese economic rat-race.

Over the years 1961 to 1976 I trained with Masa for a total of five and one-half years—probably longer than any other American. I was very fortunate to have trained with him at the apex of his career.

I am planning to return to Okinawa and the Shobukan in 1996. I have been a yondan for 20 years. If I have a fit of egomania I might inquire about promotions. I think Masa would say I was a bit overdue. ㊦

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Glen Grabow is a free-lance writer based in Jamestown, New York.