

Interview with Sgt. Jeff Guthrey, US Special Forces Liaison to ROK Special Warfare Command
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Throughout its 30-year existence, the United States Army Special Forces Detachment-Korea has trained alongside Republic of Korea Special Forces units since the latter's inception in the early 1960s. This relationship is maintained under a military alliance between the United States and Korea that extends back to the end of the Second World War, when the vacuum created by the defeated Japanese occupation forces gave way to the Korean peninsula being divided into two nations with disparate political ideologies and goals as to how to proceed with reunification.

The alliance was forged in the fire of the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, and has endured the entire Cold War period and the multiple threats and armed incursions visited upon the Republic of Korea by its communist neighbor to the north. In addition to mutually maintaining a close watch over North Korean movements along the Demilitarized Zone that has divided the two countries for five decades, Korean combat units fought side by side with US forces in Vietnam in the late 1960s, and in the current War Against Terrorism the Republic of Korea has deployed units to the Middle East as part of the US-led "Coalition of the Willing."

The United States Army Special Forces, better known to the outside world as the "Green Berets," came into being during the Cold War, and were originally trained to conduct missions "behind the lines" in European countries had Soviet forces attempted to subjugate the European continent. Throughout the Cold War decades and into the ongoing War against Terrorism Special Forces have made great contributions in several military operations and have expanded their mission capability to include unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency operations, foreign internal defense, civil affairs operations, and psychological operations. Special Forces train with allied military forces in countries across the globe, and in addition to extensive technical and physical training, Special Forces personnel receive special training in various languages and in cross-cultural communication.

The primary mission of the United States Army Special Forces Detachment-Korea (SFDK) is to provide assistance in all facets of the Korean Special Forces mission, working as both advisors and liaisons in equipment modernization programs, combined airborne operations, combined arms operations, and tactics.

Training missions are extensive and frequent, for although in modern times the Cold War has been relegated to a chapter in history textbooks for most of the world, in Korea the possibility of a military incursion by a hostile communist country is validated on a daily basis by hostile invective and threats emanating from North Korea itself. Lacking the military support they once enjoyed from the Soviet Union and China, North Korea has been forced to utilize their own military assets to obtain intelligence on the Republic of Korea (ROK). As late as 1996, local civilians detected a team of North Korean Special Reconnaissance personnel carrying out operations in the ROK, and within days ROK Special Forces tracked them down and eliminated them in several fierce firefights.

It is in this environment that we first introduced SFDK-sponsored martial arts seminars to the Korean Special Forces under the guidance of detachment member Kevin Underwood in 1999. At that time we analyzed the fighting capability of the average Korean Special Forces soldier and made several observations. Not surprisingly they are in excellent cardiovascular condition, and frequent training with weights gives them muscle strength far surpassing that of the average Korean soldier. Constant road marches also provide them with superior physical and mental endurance.

As for actual fighting capability, every member of the Korean Special Forces holds a black belt in taekwondo. A few also hold a belt in hapkido or kung fu, some have had some boxing instruction, and there is the odd guy or two out there with some training in judo. They also train in a Korean military combative system called "Tukkong Musul," but the main focus in Korean Special Forces is unmistakably taekwondo. Koreans take great national pride in taekwondo, and for good reason. The art is ubiquitous throughout Korea and enjoys a high degree of popularity in several countries around the world.

There is hardly a Korean anywhere that has not had some form of training in Taekwondo. However,

the negative aspect of taekwondo's popularity is that it has created a cultural phenomenon in Korea where taekwondo is virtually synonymous with martial arts itself. One can hardly travel down a kilometer-long stretch of road in any city in Korea and not see a taekwondo or hapkido gym, but it is nearly impossible to find a gym offering training in a non-Korean fighting art. Instructors in arts such as Filipino Martial Arts, Muay Thai, Brazilian jujitsu and judo are usually foreigners who rent time in a taekwondo gym. Their students are usually primarily foreigners as well, and merely finding an instructor in any of these arts in Korea is a major challenge.

Because of their expertise in taekwondo the Koreans had a superb kicking game and superior flexibility, but many lacked punching power and practically none of them had any grappling skills or expertise with bladed weapons or sticks. Additionally, the overall attitude toward martial arts was that of a "sport" mentality because of the numerous taekwondo tournaments held at the Korean Special Warfare Center. It was our goal, therefore, to introduce to the Korean Special Forces a diverse range of fighting styles and techniques in an effort to allow them to "think outside the box" of Taekwondo and make them more effective fighters.

Prior to coming to Korea, most of the US soldiers at SFDK have been fortunate enough to train in the martial arts program conducted by our parent unit, the First Special Forces Group. This program gives soldiers the choice of training in JKD techniques under the tutelage of Kelly Worden, or in BJJ under Marcello Alonso, of the Carlson Gracie group. We were therefore, in addition to providing training to the Koreans, focused on maintaining the martial arts proficiency our own people had brought with them from the US.

Between 1999 and 2002 we hosted annual seminars with guest instructors David Gould, Christopher Ricketts, and Kevin Underwood. Mr. Gould had studied under the late Edgar Sulite and in 1999 and 2000 introduced techniques from the Lameco Eskrima system as well as basic grappling techniques. Mr. Ricketts taught the Kalis Ilustrisimo system of Filipino Martial Arts in 2001 as handed down by Antonio "Tatang" Ilustrisimo. Kevin Underwood, a former Special Forces soldier, had studied JKD techniques extensively under Kelly Worden in the US, and in 2002 taught Worden's knife and stick fighting system as well as basic grappling techniques. After four years of annual seminars we had trained well over one hundred Korean Special forces soldiers in basic FMA, JKD, and grappling techniques.

By 2003 a shift in perception towards martial arts in Korea was beginning to occur, precipitated by Korea hosting its own version of Ultimate Fighting-type competitions beginning early in the year. The competitors represented nearly every fighting style imaginable. In these matches it became obvious, as it had become in the US and Japan, that expertise in one fighting art was not enough to make it to the finals.

Competitors with a background in grappling made an impressive showing, particularly those with additional standup skills in boxing, muaythai, or taekwondo. These competitions began to open some eyes in the local martial arts community as to the difference between sparring with pads in a Taekwondo sport tournament with a set of stringently fixed rules, and fighting without protection in a venue where almost anything is allowed.

Our goals for the September 2003 seminar were to provide training for our own people that mirrored the First Special Forces Group training program under which they had trained, while capitalizing on the recent revelations in the local martial arts community toward no-rules fighting. We decided on a six-day training period with three days devoted to grappling, and three days to a FMA or JKD standup style. We also decided to limit participation to a maximum 12 soldiers, as past seminar experiences had shown that the 30+ participants we usually hosted detracted from the overall quality of training because it is difficult with a group that size to devote attention to individual development of technique, and it is impossible to simultaneously and effectively coach more than two groups of two engaged in stick or knife sparring.

Our choice for a grappling instructor was not a difficult one. Henry Jung is a Korean-American submission grappling instructor who studied Brazilian jiu-jitsu with Carlson Gracie Junior in Chicago and with Takamasa Watanabe in Tokyo, and is a longtime friend of the Special Forces crew in Korea. Henry grew up in the hapkido gym his father operates in Chicago, giving him an exposure to that art from an early age.

Henry had won the first Mixed Martial Arts championship in Korea, and had made it to the semi-finals in the second, much larger competition. Ironically, he lost in the semi-finals to a former Korean Special Forces soldier following a nasty kick to the head. That kick, in another twist of irony, had broken his opponent's foot. Henry has been privately training Special Forces Detachment members in submission grappling as a friend for several years, and had actively participated in the 2001 and 2002 seminars. Henry also speaks English and Korean fluently, making him the obvious instructor of choice for 2003.

For the standup portion of the seminar we were undecided for several months. We were looking for a new FMA/JKD instructor in long/short bladed and blunt weapons fighting. A couple of us had had the good fortune in the past to train with Master Christopher Ricketts and Master Tony Diego in Manila on several occasions in the FMA art of Kalis Ilustrisimo, and we liked the style and its effectiveness in the military application of hand-to-hand combat, and had continued to conduct weekly sparring sessions using the Kalis Ilustrisimo style.

In June Henry Jung forwarded to me an email with an attached video he had discovered on an internet web site showing a Kalis Ilustrisimo instructor from Australia knife sparring with a student. Upon viewing the video I was both surprised and impressed. My first observation was of the fact that this was a FMA instructor quite willing to don a helmet and spar with his students, an unfortunately uncommon phenomenon in FMA. I next noted the instructor's unusual fighting stance with knife being held at hip level with an overhand grip. What really impressed above all else was the way in which this instructor was consistently able to deliver lightning-quick thrusts from the hip directly into the student's face before the student could react with a block.

I initially suspected that the person the instructor was sparring was perhaps a beginner, but after viewing the clip several times and observing the student's stance and footwork it certainly did appear that the student had done a bit of sparring himself as well. The instructor's name was Raymond Floro from Sydney, and over the next couple of days I decided to contact him within a week or two. However, the next day when Henry sent me yet another video every bit as impressive as the first of this instructor stick sparring with the same student, I was sending Raymond Floro an invitation that night.

Raymond was actually scheduled to teach several seminars in the states during the September 25-27 period that we requested, but was gracious enough to modify his seminar schedule to accommodate us. Over the next few months I exchanged several emails with Raymond, working out the logistics of his stay in Korea, and discovered that in addition to being entirely devoted to martial arts, he a really nice guy with a straightforward, "no bullshit" Aussie attitude that we Americans really appreciate. He had studied Kalis Ilustrisimo in Manila under Ilustrisimo himself, as well as having trained with Kalis Tony Diego, Romeo Macapagal, and Christopher Ricketts.

The seminar kicked off on September 22 with the initial three days devoted to Henry Jung's submission grappling instruction. When the Korean Special Forces arrived I was delighted to see that the Korean commanders had honored our request to send some of their best fighters from the Special Forces brigades and anti-terrorist battalion. I saw the cauliflower ears on one guy and I knew we had some real players. Henry got right to work the morning of the first day teaching take downs from the clinch position and various neck locks, followed by an afternoon of basic grappling positions, with light sparring focusing on how to keep an opponent on his back from the mount and side control position. Not only did everyone catch on quickly, they were also extremely game to spar. In spite of Henry's directive to spar at 70% power because the remaining two six-hour days were going to be sparring-intensive, these guys went at each other full throttle all day long.

The second day Henry covered several arm and shoulder locks, and various reversals and escapes from the guard position. In between teaching points Henry had the soldiers continually pair up and spar, then change opponents and spar again. Of course, throughout the day, everyone wanted a shot at sparring Henry, virtually jumping over one another to get to him when it came time to switch sparring partners. Because of the lowered number of participants, everyone got to spend more time under Henry's 100-kilo frame than they cared to. Incidentally, the guy with the cauliflower ears turned out to have 10 years of Greco-Roman wrestling experience under his belt, and with the added submission skills he was quickly becoming a monster on the mat.

I met Raymond Floro on the evening of the second day, and to no surprise he turned out to be just as amiable in person as he was on the phone and email. After checking Raymond into the hotel in Seoul, we went out for a nice Korean dinner with Henry and got to know each other. I'm not sure which Raymond liked more, the Korean food or Henry, but in any case we all hit off very well and looked forward to the rest of the seminar.

The last day of Henry's portion of the seminar he covered foot locks in the morning, and followed up in the afternoon with a review of everything he had taught over the three-day period. Throughout the last day of grappling training there was plenty of sparring time, and I was nothing short of amazed at how quickly the Koreans were able to apply in sparring all of the techniques they had learned in the previous 72 hours. Many of them could even hold their own against some of the Americans who came into the seminar with previous Brazilian Jiu-jitsu experience. All participants sparred during the last hour of grappling training with the same intensity they had on the first day. At the conclusion of the first half of the seminar I could not have been happier with the quality of instruction and the enthusiasm of the participating soldiers.

That night I had my first encounter with Raymond Floro's unique brand of Kalis Ilustrisimo. We went to the US military gym in Seoul and Raymond immediately had me don a helmet for some knife sparring with him. I mentioned previously my surprise at seeing Raymond sparring with a student, and as it turns out (again a very pleasant surprise). Raymond incorporates a great deal of sparring into his instructional methodology. Raymond subscribes to the "less talk more show" approach to teaching. Instead of spending a lot of time verbally validating his system of weapons fighting, Raymond just has everyone suit up and spar him one by one. This allows all involved to experience his techniques from the receiver perspective, which removes any potential skepticism from the very beginning. After 10 minutes of knife sparring Raymond had made a believer out of me.

If anyone prior had told me it was possible to strike an opponents face with a knife held at the waist I would not have believed them. Even after the move on the video clip I was still not completely convinced. I had received a fair share of Kalis Ilustrisimo instruction, and had a lot of sparring time under my belt, and while I won't be pushing Dan Inosanto out a job any time soon, I feel that I am no pushover when it comes to sparring. And yet, here was this guy repeatedly bouncing the sparring knife off the front grill of my helmet with a loud bang each time with neck-snapping force, followed by an uncontrollable laugh from Henry standing on the sidelines. We changed from knives to sticks, and although I did a little better with a stick, there was never any doubt who was in charge of the game.

After the sparring, Raymond began training me for the next four hours in his unique system. Raymond is a former Australian fencing champion, and has developed a combination of Kalis Ilustrisimo and fencing techniques into a formidable fighting style. He introduced me to the strike techniques and footwork incrementally by first showing the technique and discussing its practical applications, followed by repeatedly practicing the technique, and finally sparring with it. The teaching flows step-by-step in a very logical progression. I was as impressed with the instructional methodology as I was with the simplicity and effectiveness of the system itself. The members of our small sparring group in Seoul have always preferred to improve our technique through lots of sparring as opposed to repetitive form training and drills, and in Raymond Floro we found exactly the instructor we had hoped for.

The next day Raymond began teaching his system to the assembled participants in the same way he had started with me the previous evening. He had everyone quickly spar him one at a time with the same neck-popping results, which made for some very attentive listeners after the sparring was finished and he explained the basic concepts behind his system. I had to fulfill the headache-inducing duty of interpreter, a job that fortunately was easier than usual because Raymond's teaching method is centered on showing more movement and action than words.

Raymond covered the basic knife-on-knife fighting stance, non-telegraphing stationary strikes, avoidance defensive techniques, and footwork the first day. Training was interspersed with sparring throughout the day. That morning I had requested that all participants continue to train with the same enthusiasm they had thus far, a request that proved unnecessary, as it was obvious from the sound of cracking helmets that nobody was taking it easy on their partners.

The next day Raymond covered the remainder of his knife fighting system, teaching advanced

footwork in the attack, feints, blocks and counter strikes, and empty hand versus knife. The sparring picked up in terms of frequency and intensity on this day. What I could not believe had I not saw it with my own eyes was how everyone effectively applied the strikes, blocks, and footwork they had recently learned in their sparring.

Usually it takes people, even Special Forces people, at least a few cracks at sparring before they relax enough to think while they spar, and stop the adrenaline-induced habits of telegraphing and wild, haphazard strikes. These guys had the sparring figured out on the first day. While prior martial experience obviously explained this to some degree, I am convinced that finishing the introduction of each successive technique by applying the technique in sparring against a resisting partner throughout the training progression, as Raymond does, facilitates much more rapidly the ability to later remember and use the techniques for real.

On September 27th, the last day of the seminar, Raymond spent the morning covering machete and stick fighting techniques. The system for longer weapons such as sticks or swords is again a synthesis of Kalis Ilustrisimo and fencing, and like many FMA styles, many of the stick/sword strikes and blocks are similar to those with a knife, allowing learners to quickly familiarize with this second weapon type after learning the techniques of the first.

Raymond also taught a couple of stick disarms that actually work! We had a lively round of stick sparring before lunchtime, and the soldiers were again able to display the same technical comprehension proficiency with the stick that they had with the knife - calculated strikes and blocks and coordinated footwork that far surpassed the expected level for neophytes to stick sparring.

One of the Koreans had a speedy strike that was always accompanied by a Bruce Lee yell that had everyone rolling on the floor with laughter every time he did it. The afternoon was spent reviewing all Raymond had taught over the last three days, followed by, of course, more knife and stick sparring. Midway through our sparring the commanding general of the US Army Special Operations Command, on the Korea leg of his tour of US special operations units in the pacific region, paid the gym a visit. After meeting Henry and Raymond, he and his entourage stuck around for half an hour to watch the sparring, which included a violent two-on-two knife match with Raymond putting some incredibly ugly but entertaining hits on people.

At the end of the day we had a small, informal closing ceremony where we presented the participants with training certificates, and the Koreans gave Henry and Raymond shirts with the Korean Special Forces logo emblazoned on the front. The rest of the weekend with Henry and Raymond was spent having dinner and a drink with the Korean soldiers, and later soaking up some Seoul nightlife at the mandatory US Special Forces Saturday night party downtown. On Sunday Raymond went over all of the concepts and techniques of his system with me once more, and on Monday we bid a friendly farewell to each other at the Incheon airport.

Putting together martial arts seminars, as anyone who has ever hosted one can attest, entails staying on top of an endless list of details and orchestrating a sequence of events that begin long before the seminar itself. What makes it all worth it in the end is the successful transfer of knowledge and skills and the new friendships made. In 2003 we had plenty of both. The instructors taught superior fighting styles through effective teaching methods, and the participants displayed a sincerity to learn from beginning to end, actively and responsively applying the new techniques in a sparring environment. There was always a palpable positive vibe present in the gym, and with everyone involved possessing a good sense of humor, there were plenty of laughs every day.

We leave it up to the Korean participants as to how they will implement their new knowledge into their respective unit martial arts training programs. We give them annual access to new skills, but they alone decide what to do with them when they leave. Our door is always open to all friends who want to train and spar. In a few months we will begin to look for a place on our training calendar to put the 2004 seminar, but for now we are neck-deep in other military training and exercises and the 2003 seminar is becoming a memory. It is too early to predict what lies ahead for the SFDK martial arts program in 2004, but in September 2003 I could not have asked for a better week of training, or a better group of people with whom to train.