

Special Forces Training - With Kalis Ilustrisimo's Raymond Floro

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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 1999, this has included SFDK-sponsored martial arts seminars. In 2003, they chose Australian Kalis Ilustrisimo instructor Raymond Floro to teach the skills of stick and knife. Sergeant First Class Jeff Guthrey, US Special Forces Liaison to ROK Special Warfare Command, explains why.

Initially, we analysed the Korean Special Forces soldiers' capabilities and made several observations. Not surprisingly they are in excellent cardiovascular condition, and frequent weight-training makes them far stronger than the average Korean soldier. Constant road marches afford them superior physical and mental endurance. As for fighting capability, every Korean Special Forces soldier holds a Black-belt in Taekwondo. A few also hold a belt in hapkido or kung fu, others have had some boxing or judo instruction. They also train in a Korean military combat system called Tukkong Musul, but the main focus is Taekwondo.

Therefore, while the Koreans had a superb kicking game and superior flexibility, many lacked punching power and very few had grappling skills or expertise with edged weapons or sticks. Additionally, they mostly saw martial arts as sport due to the numerous Taekwondo tournaments held at the Korean Special Warfare Centre. Thus it was our goal to encourage 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 were fortunate enough to train in the martial arts program conducted by our parent unit, the First Special Forces Group. The program gives soldiers the choice of training in Jeet Kune Do with Datu Kelly Worden, or in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu under Marcello Alonso of the Carlson Gracie group. In addition to training the Koreans, we were focused on maintaining the martial arts proficiency our own people had developed in the US.

From 1999 to 2002 we hosted annual seminars, training well over 100 Korean Special Forces soldiers in basic FMA, JKD and grappling techniques. The guest instructors included Guro David Gould, who studied under the late Punong Guro Edgar Sulite, Master Christopher Ricketts, who taught the Kalis Ilustrisimo system handed down by Filipino Grand Master Antonio 'Tatant' Ilustrisimo, and Kevin Underwood, a former Special Forces soldier who studied JKD extensively under Datu Kelly Worden.

Our goal for the September 2003 seminar was to provide training that mirrored the First Special Forces Group training program. We would devote three days to grappling and three days to a Filipino or JKD stand-up style. We also decided to limit participation to 12 soldiers, as past seminars had shown that having 30-plus participants detracted from the quality of training. It is impossible to simultaneously and effectively coach more than two pairs engaged in stick or knife sparring.

In June, our grappling instructor Henry Jung emailed me a video from a web-site, showing an Australian Kalis Ilustrisimo instructor knife-sparring with a student. Upon viewing the video I was surprised and impressed, first by the instructors' willingness to do a helmet and spar with his students (unfortunately uncommon in Filipino arts) and then by his unusual fighting stance, with the knife held at hip level with an overhand grip. But most impressive was the instructor's ability to consistently deliver lightning-quick thrusts from his hip directly into the student's face before the student could react. I initially suspected the instructor's sparring partner was a beginner, but after several viewings it certainly appeared from the student's stance and footwork that he was quite experienced. The instructor was Sydney's Raymond Floro and when Henry sent me another impressive video, showing Raymond stick-sparring with the same student, I sent him an invitation immediately.

Over the next few months I exchanged emails with Raymond and discovered that in addition to being devoted to martial arts, he is a really nice guy with a straightforward Aussie attitude that we Americans really appreciate. He had studied Kalis Ilustrisimo in Manila under the Grand Master Ilustrisimo himself and had trained with Masters Tony Diego, Romeo Macapagal and Christopher Ricketts.

The first three days of our seminar were devoted to Henry Jung's submission grappling instruction. When the soldiers from the Special Forces brigades and anti-

terrorist battalion arrived, I was delighted that the Korean commanders had honoured our request to send some of their best fighters. Seeing the cauliflower ears on one guy, I knew we had some real players.

On Henry's last day of instruction there was plenty of sparring time and I was amazed at how quickly the Koreans were able to apply the techniques they'd 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 BJJ experience, and all sparred during the last hour of grappling with the same intensity they had on the first day.

That night I had my first encounter with Raymond Floro's unique brand of Kalis Ilustrisimo at the US military gym in Seoul. Raymond, who was just as amiable in person as he was on the phone, immediately had me don a helmet for some knife sparring. It was a pleasant surprise to discover that he incorporates a great deal of sparring into his instructional methodology. Instead of spending time verbally validating his system, Raymond just has everyone suit up and spar with him. This allows all involved to experience his techniques from the receiver's perspective, which immediately removes potential scepticism.

After 10 minutes of knife sparring, Raymond had made me a believer. If anyone had previously told me it was possible to strike an opponent's face with a knife held at the waist, I would not have believed them. Even after the video I wasn't completely convinced. I had received a fair share of Kalis Ilustrisimo instruction and had done a lot of sparring, and while I won't be pushing Dan Inosanto out of a job any time soon, I feel I'm no pushover. Yet here was Raymond repeatedly bouncing the sparring knife off the front grill of my helmet with a loud bang and neck-snapping force, followed by an uncontrollable laugh from Henry standing on the sidelines. We changed from knives to sticks, and although I fared better, there was never any doubt who was in charge.

Raymond then spent four hours training me in his unique system. Raymond, a former Australian fencing champion, has combined Kalis Ilustrisimo and fencing techniques into a formidable fighting style. He introduced me to the strike techniques and footwork incrementally, first showing the technique and discussing its practical applications, then repeatedly practising the technique and finally sparring with it. I was as impressed with his 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'd hope for.

The next day, Raymond began teaching by quickly sparring with everyone, with the same neck-popping results, which made for some very attentive listeners as he explained the basic concepts behind his system. I had to fulfil the headache-inducing duty of interpreter, a job that fortunately was easier than usual as Raymond's teaching method is centred on action rather than words. On the first day, he covered the basic knife-on-knife fighting stance, non-telegraphing stationery strikes, avoidance techniques and footwork, all interspersed with sparring. It was obvious from the sound of cracking helmets that nobody was taking it easy on their partners.



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The next day Raymond covered the remainder of his knife fighting system, teaching advanced footwork for attacks, feints, blocks and counter-strikes, and empty-hand versus knife. As the sparring picked up in terms of frequency and intensity, I was amazed that everyone effectively applied the strikes, blocks, and footwork they had recently learned. Usually it takes people – even Special Forces soldiers – at least a few cracks at sparring before they relax enough to think while they fight and stop the adrenaline-induced habits of telegraphing with wild, haphazard strikes. While prior martial arts experience explained this to some degree, I’m convinced that Raymond’s method of having students apply each techniques in sparring immediately after its introduction greatly increases their ability to later recall the techniques in combat.

On the last day, Raymond spent the morning covering machete and stick 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 familiarise with this second weapon-type after learning the techniques of the first. Raymond also taught some stick disarms that can actually be applied. We had a lively round of stick sparring before lunchtime, and the soldiers were again able to display the same technical comprehension proficiency as they had with the knife. One Korean’s speedy strike was always accompanied by a Bruce Lee yell that had everyone laughing.



After Raymond reviewed what he'd taught over the three days, it was time for more knife and stick sparring. Meanwhile, the commanding general of the US Army Special Operations Command, on a tour of the US Special Operations units in the Pacific region, paid us a visit. After meeting Henry and Raymond, he and his entourage watched the sparring, which included a violent two-on-two knife match, with Raymond putting some incredibly ugly but entertaining hits on people.

At an informal closing ceremony we presented the participants with certificates and the Koreans gave Henry and Raymond shirts emblazoned with the Korean Special Forces logo. The rest of the weekend with Henry and Raymond was spent dining with the Korean soldiers and soaking up some downtown Seoul night life at the mandatory US Special Forces Saturday night party. On Sunday Raymond and I once more reviewed his system's concepts and techniques, and on Monday bid a friendly farewell to each other at Incheon Airport.

Now, we are neck-deep in other military training and it's too early to predict what lies ahead for the SFDK martial arts program in 2004, but in 2003 we couldn't have asked for a better week of training or a better group of training partners.

