

The Men of Kalis Ilustrisimo

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The late Grandmaster Antonio ‘Tatang’ Ilustrisimo is the man responsible for turning Kalis Ilustrisimo into what it is today. The name ‘Tatang’ is a Filipino term of respect and endearment meaning father or mister. Tatang was not only respected but also admired and feared due to his prowess in the Filipino Martial arts.

His formal instruction began at just seven years old. Taught the family style by his father, Master Isidro Ilustrisimo, and uncle, Master Melicio Ilustrisimo, young Antonio grew in spirit and confidence. By the age of nine a ‘calling’ to America saw him alone in a small outrigger canoe searching for the object of his heart’s desire in the seas surrounding the Philippine archipelago. The brave young Tatang’s tales of adventure are another story, suffice to say that he wound up in Mindanao, in the southern region of the Philippines. Here he was adopted by a Hadji in Jolo and was raised a Moslem until the age of 17.

Returning briefly to his birthplace, Sta. Fe on Bantayan Island in the province of Cebu, he became a ‘capataz’ (headman) for ‘tapaseros’ (sugar cane cutter) on Negros Island. On a return to Mindanao in Zamboanga, a local master swordsman, Pedro Cortes, instructed him in a style similar to that of his family’s.

In World War II and with the Japanese invasion of the Philippines, Tatang was a soldier fighting with the Sierra Madre guerrillas where he was involved in many close quarter battles with the Japanese. He was also responsible for the execution of Filipino spies working for the Japanese. At the war’s end Tatang travelled the world, working as a seaman and roaming the Philippines in between. Refining his skills in numerous street encounters, the Philippine tradition of ‘death matches’ and live blade ring fighting was never far away. Tatang has been credited with surviving more mortal combat fights than perhaps any other modern day eskrimador.

And so, with a combination of his formal instruction and “skills supplied by the spirits of dedication, desire, adventure and experience”, the man became the style. Kalis Ilustrisimo is a style that encompasses techniques of staff, sword, stick, knife, chain

and bandana as well as empty hands in any combination. It is a style that contains intelligent strategies and principles that allow efficient adaptation to any circumstance, any situation and to ensure triumph in the face of adversity. It is not just the execution of techniques that an Ilustrisimo practitioner adapts, but more importantly the mindset behind them; this is the core principle of Kalis Ilustrisimo.

To the untrained eye, Kalis Ilustrisimo looks to be more or less the same as any other martial arts system from the Philippines and for the most part, it is.

What makes it outstanding in application is the directness and subtlety of technique, the ingenuity of its strategies and principles and the ease with which they can be employed. A couple of examples of the 'icing' on the Ilustrisimo cake are the strategy of Praksion and Enganyo. Praksion, meaning fraction or part of a whole, supplies a platform for the Ilustrisimo man to time his attacks to upset his opponent's rhythm with stop hits or off beat counters. Enganyo means to enchant and enables said adept the ability to control the fight using deceptive measures, i.e., baiting and false techniques.

Master Antonio 'Tony' Diego was appointed as successor to the Kalis Ilustrisimo system by Tatang and as such has the honour and privilege of being the rightful heir to the Ilustrisimo system. Currently residing in Manila, Master Diego continues to preserve and disseminate Tatang's treasures. Master Diego is currently the head of the Manila based school (Kalis Ilustrisimo Orehinal – Repiticion Group) where he is meticulously training his protégé Tommy Dy Tang. Romeo Macapagal (one of the most knowledgeable historians on Grand Master Ilustrisimo's life and whose specialty of the machete is consummate) is assisting Master Diego to preserve the original teachings of the Great Master.

Eskrimador Raymond Floro began his martial arts journey at nine years old. With a keen interest in anything that would enhance his skill in the arts of his homeland, Ray was a NSW State champion foil fencer by the mid '70s. He studied Balintawak arnis until the early '80s. Soon after he was introduced to Tony Diego, Edgar Sulite, Rey Galang and Christopher Ricketts. With the help of Tony, Edgar and Romeo Macapagal, Ray was introduced to Tatang and the Kalis Ilustrisimo system.

By 1989, Ray had received countless hours of one-on-one instruction with Tatang and (at that time) his Senior Instructors (Tony Diego and Romeo Macapagal). He was awarded full teaching accreditation by Tatang and Master Diego and was tasked to disseminate the Ilustrisimo system.

Raymond Floro is the most senior Kalis Ilustrisimo representative in Australia today and stays closely connected with his friends and mentors still in the Philippines. Together they maintain the integrity of Kalis Ilustrisimo worldwide.

Also a 3rd degree black belt in the late Edgar Sulite's Lameco Eskrima and a black belt in Sagasa, Filipino kickboxing, Ray's true love is Ilustrisimo. As he says, "Ilustrisimo is complete in itself but it is quick and easy to learn and as such Kalis Ilustrisimo is also the perfect complimentary system." With Ray's teaching preference to be one-on-one or small groups, it is possible to gain an understanding

of the system in about three months or so. Of course mastery then comes according to individual efforts.

As a result of the simple brilliance of Kalis Ilustrisimo and the generous 'no secrets' approach by Floro, many of his students are instructors already running successful schools who have added Ilustrisimo to complement their own arts. Instructors such as Geoff Booth (Hapkido), Andrew Dickinson (Fightclub), Arthur Ligopantis (J.K.D.), John Chow (Taiji and Kalis Ilustrisimo), Wayne Henley (Jui Jitsu), Peter Canon (Kalis/Kickboxing), Peter Kirkwood (Kaizen Ryu) and Warren Walker (Taiji, Kung Fu and Kalis Ilustrisimo); continue to seek instruction from Ray and together they hold many seminars for the benefit of all their students.

Improvised weapons (or weapons of opportunity), play a large part in Ray's Ilustrisimo, once the dynamics and basic principles of the edged, impact of flexible weapons are learnt; it only takes a slight shift in focus to be able to use whatever is at hand, like a Blitz magazine, a tin of soup, a pair of scissors, a 'Club Lock' or a plastic grocery bag to preserve your safety and end a conflict.

With that said, the endless argument over the validity of a weapons based system should be put to rest. Training stick-on-stick or sword-on-sword is a formal study of the system but is not required for actual fighting. For example, an Ilustrisimo man happens to be fortunate if he has instant access to a weapon when attacked. He has the upper hand and can use it to full advantage. If his attacker also has weapon access then his advantage lies in the superiority of his system. There are barehanded techniques that can take care of weapons attacks too by utilising any available weapon. The pros and cons of each situation become all important as strategies used must be able to adapt to ensure a victorious outcome. Learning to recognise the potential of a weapon and its user is a transferable quality, which enables the Kali Ilustrisimo practitioner to deal with a trained fighter, a diseased junkie wielding a syringe or a 150kg roid freak, with a relaxed confidence that only being prepared can give.

I am always asked (remarks Floro) "What is the use of learning a weapon, when I probably won't have one when I'm attacked?" His response is always the same. "It's true, you probably won't have a weapon and to carry one is illegal. But chances are your attacker will have some sort of edge weapon, and chances are there will be more than one of them! This is when you will know the truth about the value of training with weapons."

Another critic would suggest, "I don't need this sort of training, as I am aware of my surroundings and won't find myself in trouble." Again, Floro's classic reply to this is, "You're right, you probably can avoid most encounters but are you going to stand by if you see a woman getting raped, or a person being beaten, or a child in the middle of a kidnap attempt?" If members of the community united and helped people in danger, then maybe there would be less victims.

The Kalis Ilustrisimo system is an evolution of a fighting system designed to work in the streets and jungles of the Philippines, where attacks with knives, razors, machetes and guns are not uncommon. It is unfortunate that the news and current affairs of Australia today is not far from these realities.

