

THE ART AND THE WAY

By Robert Hunt

Ten thousand resolute samurai stood quietly in the morning mist like a legion of phantom warriors, jaws clenched, hearts pounding with the anticipation of imminent battle. In front of them, perched on his horse like an avenging angel, sat Tokugawa Ieyasu, the future Shogun of Japan. Across the battlefield of Sekigahara the vast combined Satsuma forces waited, equally intent that a victory celebration would end their day. The clash that followed would be wild and bloody and by evening Tokugawa and his descendants would come to rule Japan in a dynasty that would endure for three hundred years to the beginning of modern times.

When such intense ambitions collide the path of history explodes, and echoes reverberate throughout the ages, nudging the random lines of human evolution in countless new directions. The beaten Satsuma turned their humiliation at defeat into rage and, with Tokugawa's blessing, vented it on the tiny island of Okinawa and the other peaceful Ryu Kyu islands to the south. They took control of the government, abolished all weapons and held the population in brutal subjugation for three hundred years. So it was that, as a result of this blip on the screen of world history, the art of karate was born.

Peiching's heart pounded against the inside of his chest as he ran. The sandy beach shifted underneath each panicked stride and dragged at his feet as he scrambled away from the soft shoreline towards the rocks and solid ground. He would be more exposed there, but he would be able to run easier on the hard packed earth. If he continued along this beach the sand would continually impede his pace and he could see that he would be trapped, anyway, where the rocks jutted into the sea.

He dragged a dirty sleeve across his brow and glanced over his shoulder at his pursuers. It must be fear that made him breathe so hard and sweat so much, he thought. He had been preparing himself for this kind of attack for twenty years. He had practiced fighting, he had contemplated death, but the idea of the end of his life was never so vivid as now that he actually faced it.

He reached the hard packed sand on the other side of the rocks and stopped to look back. The four Satsuma had stayed in the woods and not tried the beach. Now they were gaining on him. He had been born a short walk from here. He should have known better than to run where he had, that the soft sand would only slow him down. He knew that the lack of clear judgment was an indication that he was letting his fear blind his thoughts, but he couldn't control it and didn't know what to do.

The morning around him was bright and sunny, a pleasant day. The breeze drifted steadily across the blue Sea of Japan. More likely than not clouds would build and an oppressive humidity would settle in before nightfall. It usually did this time of year. Long ago he had left this island, searching for answers whose questions he did not yet know even now. He was surprised at how much he had forgotten about the place. He had played on this very beach as a boy. It should have afforded him an edge, but he couldn't clear his head enough to take advantage of it. The fear of the death that was closing in on him consumed every thought.

He looked across the sand and weeds at the row of palm trees his attackers had followed. Further up the shore, close to the village, the roots of the tall palms touched the ocean water. But here they were set back across a field of rocks and scrub oaks, leaving the path open behind him and affording his pursuers easy view of his movement.

Fifty steps ahead the ground rose slightly away from the shoreline and a row of boulders looked as if it would provide some barrier to his pursuers' vision. From there he might make the woods on the other side before they cut him off. If he made it into the trees alive he could work his way back to the village through their cover. There were people who would remember him or the Peiching family and help him, even though he had been gone so long. Some may even be relatives.

A common battle for survival on a tiny island with few natural resources made relationships tight. He could not imagine someone siding with the Japanese against him, but, then, much had changed in the twenty years he was gone.

The men closing in on him forced Peiching's decision and he took off toward the rocks.

He plunged across the short, rocky field, and sprang over a creek that spilled into the ocean. A few yards ahead stood the larger rocks and then a few more strides would take him into the woods. Escape seemed possible, but his breath still came in gasps and his stomach hurt from the fear that filled it.

Peiching dropped back to the beach to round the rocky point, then cut in towards the woods using the line of rocks for cover as he had planned. This time he ran on solid packed sand. His bare feet splashed through the tips of the waves that lapped the beach. He rounded the turn in the shoreline and ran in a crouch behind the rocks to camouflage his race to the woods. He popped his head up above the boulders, spotted his pursuers and stopped to suck breath into his lungs. Peiching felt his heart pounding harder in his chest and the echo of it in the carotid artery at the side of his neck. He cursed his position. What was he doing here with no weapons?

He sucked one more deep breath into his chest, gritted his teeth, then broke away from his shelter and bolted across the open stretch toward the trees. He did not look back. Maybe death would be easier to accept if he ignored it. Maybe it wouldn't come. He might make it, might slip into the woods and disappear. The instinct for survival drove him on. He forced his legs faster until his quadriceps burned, and then he pushed even more. A few yards from the safety of the trees, however, his dash came to a halt.

Two of the four samurai had broken away, anticipating his move. They angled in front of him now toward the exact spot where he would have entered the woods. His heart pounded harder. His stomach tightened. He tasted bile in the back of his throat as he watched them run, holding the hilts of their swords steady, carrying their heads level to maintain clear focus on their prey - on him.

They each bore two swords, a katana, a long one, and a wakazashi, a short one, thrust through their sashes, denoting their station as samurai. They would use the long sword first and the short one as back up. Possibly they would draw both and use one to deflect and the other to attack. Either way his chances were slim.

Peiching needed a weapon. His empty hands, as strong as they were, would be no match for the razor edged blades of the Japanese samurai. They would cut him down like a stalk of rice.

He flashed a look to the rear at the other two closing rapidly. He had no idea what to do now. He knew how to fight; he had fought before, although never against someone who was actually trying to take his life. He had fought on the hardwood floor of the school in China, where his opponents were other students and not intent on separating his head from his body. He had even fought occasionally in street battles, but they had been little more than noisy tests of spirit between the few schools on the Fuchow waterfront.

The battle facing him now was no such farce. These men intended to kill him, to divide his body with one swift, powerful stroke of a three-foot blade and leave it lying on the beach for the black crows to clean up. He smiled to himself for a second in spite of the situation. If he had known they were going to take such offense, he would not have spit on them.

He watched their approach. The smile faded and terror seized his mind again. As he scanned the area wildly for a place to turn, he felt helpless, exposed, and falling ever further into the deadly grip of panic. He took a deep breath, hoping to summon some vestige of the training he had endured for so many years. Nothing came. He despaired at his complete lack of wit. From the deepest reaches of his soul he wanted only to flee.

He breathed more slowly, sucking the air deep into his center, his "*dan tien*", the home of his spirit, a few inches below his navel. The teacher, Pai Ho Chuan, had prompted him to perform this exercise hundreds, possibly thousands of times before and it had served to calm him then. He noticed that it cleared his mind slightly even now. He looked around. There was nowhere else to run.