

Close Quarter



Martial Arts

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Meditation Through Soldiering

For those of you who do not know me, my name is Sensei Noël J. Hubert. I am an instructor in both Canadian Jiu-Jitsu and Chito- Ryu Karate. I run two schools under my club, Close Quarter Martial Arts (CQMA), in Brandon and Oak Lake Manitoba. I am also a Canadian soldier, stationed with the 2nd Princess Patricia Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI) Battalion, at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Shilo MB. I have been asked to describe how the Martial Arts helped me before, during, and after my tour to Afghanistan.

I started what we refer to as “work-up” training in June ’07. It was demanding to say the least but I was focused on what had to be done. There were times I thought about what I may have to do and I tried to come to terms with those feelings before deployment. All soldiers have their own way of dealing with pre-deployment nerves and I am no different. I reverted back to my training in the Martial Arts, specifically the mental side, the meditation aspect. I remembered how Sensei Walther back in the 8-Wing Trenton ON. Snow Tigers Martial Arts Club taught us to calm our breathing and empty our minds to forget the distractions of the day. I’m not sure if I realized it then but we were practicing meditation. This was common in the Dojo after a grueling work out; exercises, basics, and Kata. Sensei always said, “The harder you punch the softer you become”, something I would not fully understand until much later.

Aside from the grueling military training schedule I had the opportunity to spend some free time in Trenton visiting family and friends. I spent a good part of my trip talking to Sensei Walther, meditating and training with Kata. Kata helped me with moving meditation, exploding into the movement then relaxing. These two concepts helped me calm my inner anxieties. My worries about failing to perform, being alone, being in unfamiliar and often unfriendly areas, and dying, were less pronounced. Sensei Walther would say, “Think like the Samurai do; if you think about losing or saving your life you will surely lose it, but if you accept what will be then you will surely live”. Good advice, but it was a challenge to accept and put into practice. I started to adopt that way of thinking before I deployed, and believe it or not I felt more at peace with myself and with my job. The true test, of course, would be if I could carry this message throughout my deployment.

Once I had arrived in Afghanistan my mental training continued. I continued to train and meditate whenever possible, focusing on trying to see the positive in a negative environment. It was strange how you could achieve a peaceful state of mind in a war zone or in chaos. The Samurai found beauty in war and in death they took the Zen

philosophy and approach to life and death which was the approach I adopted and continue to live by today.

When there was time to send emails to my Martial Arts family I would and I would talk briefly of how the Martial Arts was allowing me to cope with enormous stress and dealing with the loss of friends. Most could not relate, but tried to offer words of support. There was, however, one soldier, also a student of Sensei Walther's, who understood better than anyone. He had been to Afghanistan before and offered some good advice: "Take it one day at a time, don't rush into battle, and don't sacrifice who you are by bringing emotional burdens with you and take none back from Afghanistan when you leave." The message, in essence, was to let things go! Don't carry it with you. I took his advice and carried on.

Life in Afghanistan took on a whole new meaning. We were living in an environment that was trying to kill us everyday. When it came time to take two weeks off out of the warzone I chose to return home to Canada. I wanted to meet up with my Martial Arts family. Sensei Walther and two other Sensei's, who have been there for me since I started in the Martial Arts and whom I consider my older brothers, saw some changes in me that were not positive. They understood and helped me to see these negative changes for myself through the Martial Arts. My realization happened during a grueling Ni Dan Jiu-Jitsu test that I had scheduled before deploying to Afghanistan. Near the end of the test I was performing the simplest of Katas (27 Movements) when something happened to me. I cannot sufficiently explain the feeling here but something clicked that made me realize how angry I was and also allowed me to regain my centre and be more at peace.

I returned once again to Afghanistan to finish my tour of duty with a fresh perspective and a calm alertness. There were more chaotic events that happened this time around, but I was able to handle them thanks to the training in the Martial Arts that I had received through the years.

Upon the completion of my tour to Afghanistan we had the opportunity to decompress in the Mediterranean. I returned to my Martial Arts training. I spent many hours training on the beach and in the ocean. As the tide hit my legs I would practice stances and basics. Later at night, I would do the same beach training and when I was finished I would sit on the rock face over looking the Mediterranean Sea. I practiced a lot of meditation from that spot.

Once back in Canada I made another trip home again to see family and friends. I took the opportunity to train as always. Sensei gave me another piece of advice: "Share your knowledge of the Martial Art with others. Take the negative experiences from overseas and transform them into something positive like training students in the importance of Martial Arts. Open your own school." On my drive back from Ontario I thought a lot about this conversation. I came to the conclusion that he was right and subsequently came up with my club's name CQMA – Close Quarter Martial Arts.

In the Snow Tigers Martial Arts Club we pride ourselves on the Sho Dan Ho test (6 hour exam). It has been a measuring tape that I have used since 1998 and will continue to use for the rest of my life. I have discovered that the true test is not in the Dojo or in the battle field, but the true test of character comes deep within each and everyone of us. We train in a war art; yes people use it for sport and exercise, but let's not forget the true foundation and nature of the Arts. You put into your art form what you get out of it. If

you train like you fight and don't give up on life you will surely survive. This is why meditation, the practice of basics, and Kata are so very vital in Martial Arts otherwise you are no better than a street fighter. Which bring me back to Sensei Walther's comment: "The harder you punch the softer you become". Once I realized that anything could happen whether I worried or not, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. I came to terms with the fact that I might not return. I also got control of my fears and anger. I adopted a healthy fear which kept me alive and my awareness alert, as opposed to a negative fear living in constant state of worry.

Thank you,



N.J. Hubert