

THE LAUGHING POLICEMAN

BY SHAUN SKEDGWELL 2ND DAN

AFTER MUCH UMMING AND ARGHING ABOUT WHAT TO WRITE FOR MY THIRD DAN ESSAY, A COUPLE OF PEOPLE SUGGESTED THAT I SHOULD PEN SOMETHING RELATING TO THE BENEFITS OF TAEKWON DO AND MY PROFESSION AS A POLICE OFFICER.

First a little bit about myself before I discovered Taekwon Do. I grew up in a rural, North Island, farming community. I had always wanted to pursue a martial art, but none were available where I lived, so initially I had to settle for rugby as a sport.

At the age of 16 I left school and joined the Army, with the expectation that somewhere along the line I would be shown some unarmed fighting techniques. Unfortunately this was not to be the case. The best we were shown were a couple of impromptu unarmed combat sessions with a couple of ex-SAS troopers, called Sam and Nelly (who we later nicknamed Sneaky Sam and Nasty Nelly for obvious reasons).

We were also given a couple of sessions of impromptu bayonet training. This involved running up a steep muddy track, with your bayonet attached to the end of your rifle, impaling unarmed sacks of sand. The sacks were strategically stationed on either side of the track. Of course being the army you had to scream at the top of your voice when you encountered any formidable sack. By the time you reached the top of the hill you were out of breath and crawling on all fours. (The army knows how to spoil anything that could potentially be fun).

After eight and a half years in the Army I'd seen the world and had enough. I decided to leave and do the next best thing... join the Police. I immediately started looking for a martial art to become involved in while I waited for my call up for Police College. I wanted to go to Tauranga (my wife Trudie's home town) and there was a two and a half year waiting list.

I was still living in Palmerston North at the time and went to a local Hapkido Club. Hapkido is a Korean Martial art, which employs foot and hand techniques similar to Taekwon Do, but also uses pressure points, throws and practical self-defence techniques. I really enjoyed it, doing 4 months and grading to yellow belt. I soon learnt how to break fall properly as it was taught and practiced regularly at every training session.

Trudie and I eventually moved to Tauranga. Unfortunately there were no Hapkido Clubs, so I visited a number of various martial arts looking for a suitable substitute.

I was looking for something I could put into practise for when I eventually got into the Police. I had just about tried them all; Judo, Aikido, Ninjitsu. Although good in certain aspects none of them really got me excited. For some of the arts I tried, their syllabus seemed either too unstructured or unclear. Others didn't seem to challenge me physically enough and I would finish a class without hardly breaking a sweat.

I can still remember the first night I attended a Taekwon Do class. I didn't actually participate and sat on the side watching. This was Mr Rimmer's class at Tauranga Girls College. Oddly enough there was a WTF Class taking place at the same time in the adjoining hall. I remember switching and watching both classes that evening. However the decision was easy in the end, Mr Rimmer cracking his dobok with his kicks had me sold.



I started Taekwon Do in 1999 and trained for a year before being called up for Police College in 2000. The benefits of 12 months training were apparent at my first 'open hand technique session'. The basic stances I had already learnt made handcuffing, pepper spraying and baton work much easier to master. The basic wrist locks were also easier to decipher. I was often called out to the front of the class by the instructors to help demonstrate various skills for the rest of my section.

Although I came from a military background, the stances learnt in TKD are also beneficial when operating firearms. The walking stance is ideal when aiming and firing short or long weapons. The sitting and diagonal stances are very similar to the stances taught when operating a pistol.

After 4 months of training at the college I graduated and was posted to Tauranga to be unleashed on the unsuspecting public. Now I was going to get to put some of what I had learnt to the test.

My biggest concern with TKD had been the application of kicks and punches in a Policing environment. Members of the public (and the court) would probably take a pretty dim view of me resolving a situation with a flying reverse turning kick to the head. We are taught open hand and closed hand strikes, but kicking just isn't in any Police manual. A lot of what we do on the street is witnessed and judged by members of the public – who can then form their own opinions. These same members of the public may then be called upon to be witnesses in court, or interviewed by the media. Our actions need to be seen as reasonable and justified according to individual situation. (Unfortunately the bad stuff we do always seems to make it into the news - the good stuff we do doesn't seem to sell as many papers.)

Although I have never had to employ any kicking techniques on anyone while on the street, it is comforting to know that they are there as a possible last resort should the situation really turn to custard.

Closed wooden doors on the other hand have been a different story. There is nothing more satisfying than going to a search warrant and getting to kick the front door in with a flying front snap kick. To date the score is, flying front snap kicks 3 / locked wooden doors 0 (sometimes I've got to ask myself if I'm really getting paid to do this?)

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Practically I have found that the basic self-defence techniques taught in our syllabus have been more than adequate when dealing with less than co-operative persons under arrest. It's the simple techniques that work the best. If they are practiced until they become instinctive they will produce the best results to subdue someone. Basic wrist locks and blocks are bread and butter on the job. Having said this though it is not uncommon to end up in a pile of arms and legs, on the ground, with two or three other officers trying to handcuff someone. It's just a fact of life that the techniques we practice don't always produce the tidy results we get when rehearsed in a safe, controlled learning environment.

I believe that the new self defence syllabus, especially for black belts grading to 2nd and 3rd Dan is now more realistic. The best test of self-defence skills is when you don't know what the next attack is going to be.

It is a sad reflection on today's society that there are people that go into town drunk, with the express intention of getting into a fight. They will usually pick on some poor unsuspecting person, who is less than a threat and king-hit them when they least expect it. These poor victims end up on the ground and it is not uncommon for the attacker to then 'put the boot in'. I have seen a number of such incidents recorded on street cameras. It can at times make very disturbing viewing and I am often left wondering how we don't have more violence related deaths on our streets. Self-defence on the ground in these situations becomes vital.

It has also become more apparent in recent times that members of the public are becoming increasingly more likely to carry weapons in public, such as knives. Unless the knife is clearly presented before an attack there is no guarantee that you will have time to pull out your pepper spray or baton from their pouches and effectively deploy them. This makes effective self defence skills against an armed attacker even more important.

TKD also gives you a better understanding of safe distances between yourself and a potential violent offender, this is better known as proxemics. Sparring drills give you a better understanding of a person's striking range and how close you can safely stand and talk to someone who is a potential threat.

The best attribute TKD has given me is confidence in myself to deal with most situations. A lot of situations can be resolved with the right attitude and communication skills. I don't openly advertise the fact that I practice a martial art to anyone, why give that advantage away? I have had the odd work colleague point to me and tell an offender "don't try anything, this guys a black belt". After I get over the initial embarrassment of the comment, I then have to be more wary that the offender may now be more motivated to try something.

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Police staff are trained in a number of response levels, ranging from communication skills, open hand techniques, spray, and baton through to the deployment of firearms at the extreme end of the spectrum. All these responses, when used, have to be reasonable in the circumstances. As a Police Officer we can be held criminally liable for any excess force used.

I think that the true test of the benefits of TKD have been the fact that in my nine years as an officer I have only had to deploy pepper spray once on a person (dogs don't count) and never had to deploy my baton on any one.

My worst injury while on the job has been a split lip, requiring two stitches. This was while a colleague and I were trying to arrest a less than co-operative, intoxicated male. I had hold of one arm; unfortunately my off-sider did not have proper hold of the other one. I got to taste the fist attached to the unrestrained swinging arm.

As a member of the ITFNZ Standards and Discipline Committee I have also been able to contribute something back to the organization with my skills as a Police Officer. I was once introduced to a class by a senior black belt as a member of the Standards and Discipline Committee, describing my position on the committee as "our organization's Police".

Since I have been on the committee I have been required to interview ITFNZ members and various people associated to our organization. These interviews have required statement taking in regards to various complaints regarding their discipline and behaviour. I have also had to contribute to final decisions in regards to the outcomes of these complaints.

I have also been asked by Instructors for advice on how to deal with people in our organization in relation to various other matters. Having knowledge of criminal law and interviewing techniques has been very beneficial in planning the best course of action and the likely outcome for a complaint.

Occasionally, due to the nature of my work, it must sometimes take priority over my involvement in TKD. I can generally plan ahead, but there are times when things come up at short notice and I have to make my apologies for my absence at TKD events and club training.

The circle of friends I have in ITFNZ gives me a welcome break from the close-knit team of colleagues at work. The interaction with students, who are well behaved and mannered, is also a nice change from dealing with people all day who can be best described as 'less than nice'.

Going to training at the end of the day and kicking the stuffing out of a pad really does help to release any built up stress. It takes my mind off any work related worries I may have. I come away feeling physically well and good about myself. I have found it to be very therapeutic. I feel fortunate that my sport directly benefits my chosen occupation in a number of ways and that I have been able to give a little back.