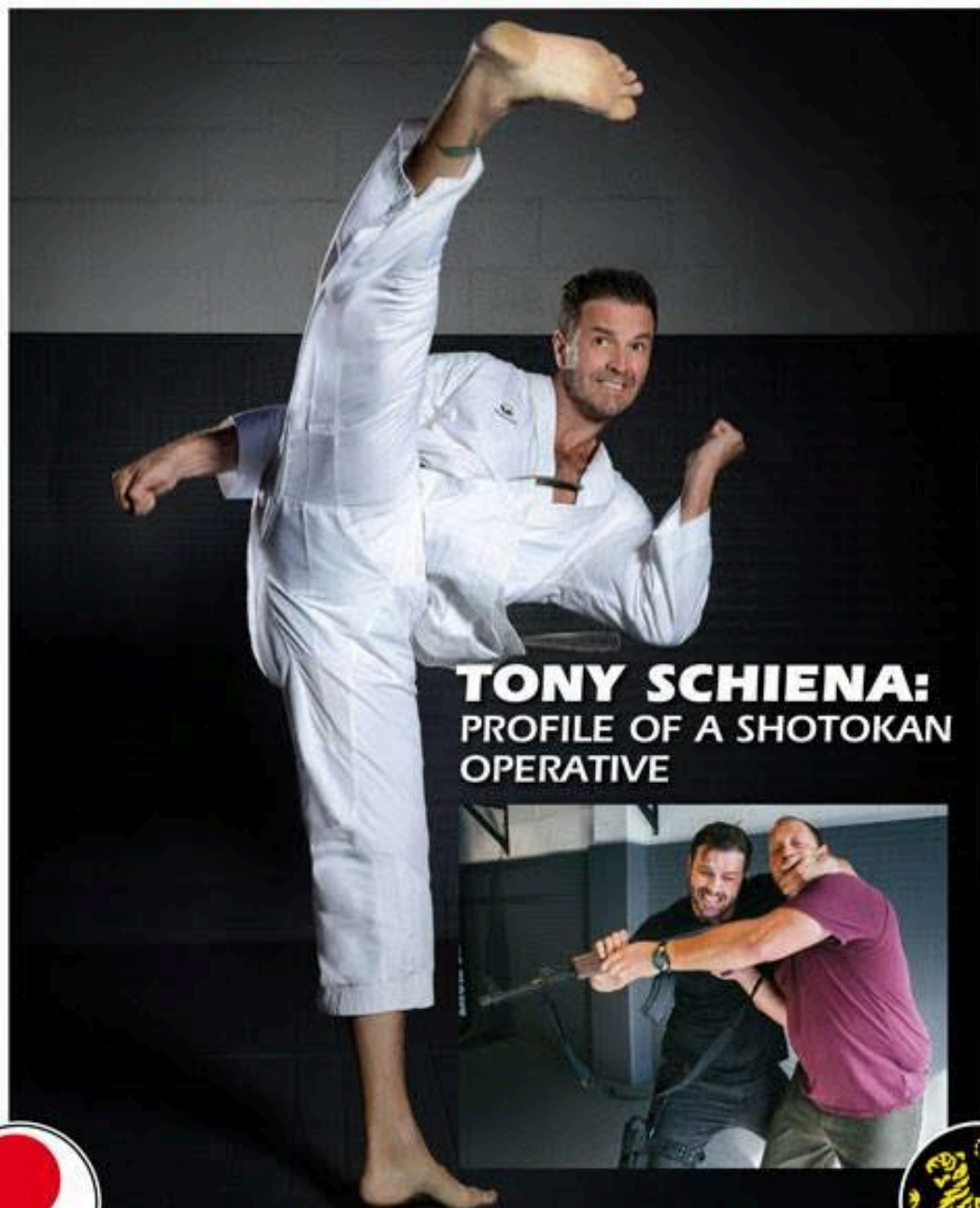


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TONY SCHIENA:
PROFILE OF A SHOTOKAN
OPERATIVE



THE MAGAZINE FOR ALL SHOTOKAN KARATEKA



TONY SCHIENA: PROFILE OF A SHOTOKAN OPERATIVE.

By Richard Amos. Photo's By Trevor Masid.

The meatpacking district in Manhattan retains very little to indicate its origins. There are indeed cobblestone streets, trucks loaded with carcasses of beef and men in blood-stained white overalls, hustling to and fro. The scene is overlooked by the remnants of an elevated railway line that once transported cargo up and down the various docks on the Hudson River. However, that railway line is now defunct and called the High-Line and, like the neighbourhood beneath, it has been transformed into an attractive playground for hip and trendy moneyed artists and tourists-in-the-know, out for a stroll. Getting a table at Pastic in the shadow of the High-Line for brunch on a Sunday requires not just persistence but an ability to ignore the A-list celebrities and models who crowd around the bar blocking the way to your table. It is within this clamorous scene that I sit, somewhat self-consciously, waiting for my buddy Tony to join me for one of our regular catch-up meals. I sit anonymously and watch everyone engrossed in their conversations, seemingly oblivious to the bustle around them. Then Tony walks in. I think he's a decent enough looking 6-foot plus guy with stubble, wearing black jeans, black t-shirt and a black jacket but he appears to be something else, something more, to the other diners. Forks pause near open mouths, trains of thought are lost, heads turn and some of the ladies are clearly drooling. Tony appears to look at none of them and simply smirks as he heads over to me. I find out later that he's already, via some esoteric telepathy, conveyed the times later that day when he'll be available to the better looking of the female admirers. Think of someone you know who has charisma and a rough charm, multiply the effect 100-fold and you might have Tony.

It was September of 2000 in New York City when I first met Tony Schiena. I was fresh off the boat from Paris and he was fresh off the boat from....well, I'm not sure where. In fact, as I write this, I barely know where Tony lives now, and we've been great friends for 16 years.

One thing I do know though - Tony is deceptively adept at Shotokan karate. You might find that hard to believe at first glance. He just doesn't come across as a devotee of an art form such as ours, especially if you met him today as he looks every inch a movie star and moves constantly in a world of government mercenaries and frontline combat. It takes one by surprise to find that he has



Tony Schiena has practiced Shotokan everyday for over 30 years.

practiced Shotokan everyday for over 30 years. And the everyday for Tony is not the everyday of a normal person.

When we met I was staying with John Mullin in Staten Island and Tony was staying as a guest in the apartment of a film producer not far away. Tony was to be the next Steven Seagal and the producer (who had virtually invented Seagal incidentally) was waiting for the right project to launch Tony's career. I'd take the ferry most days over to Manhattan in order to hunt for a dojo in which to teach the couple of private students I had at that time. One of my well-heeled guys was a member at the New York Athletic Club on Central Park South, so I'd borrow their judo dojo and teach a few classes there. But I was desperate to get out of Staten Island properly, to live and work in the heart of the city. You could say Tony and I were at a loose end. We trained together in Mullin's Staten Island dojo and whenever possible we'd drive over in his borrowed convertible Mercedes (what else?) and cruise around looking for likely neighbourhoods that would suit me. We shared a lot of time on the dojo floor as I had the key from John and, after training, we talked non-stop about our plans. Me, to open a perfect dojo in the impossibly expensive Manhattan, and him to conquer Hollywood with his good looks and his Shotokan karate.

Since his late teens having grown up in one of the tough suburbs of Johannesburg, Tony, in addition to his karate training,

had also been involved in security work of some form or another. He gathered all those experiences and, while sucking the marrow out of life, steered himself through not just a myriad of entrepreneurial endeavours, but the revolving doors of both Hollywood and international defence contracting. However, Tony says it's his consistent Shotokan practice that has instilled in him a core set of defining principles despite all the distractions.

His story starts as a typical karate story might do for anyone in Sth Africa growing up in the 70's and 80's. It was perhaps a little rougher than most places and also a little more Japanese in some respects. This was largely due to the influence of pioneers such as Stan Schmidt who took their Tokyo karate experiences and kept them "as is" for his students at home. Sth Africa of course didn't open up to the ideas of the rest of the civilised world until well into the 90's. Prior to that, as a country denied sports on the world stage, they totally did their own thing. And their own thing was the karate of the JKA of the mid-60's when Stan sensei first brought back what they were teaching in the brutal instructors classes of Nakayama sensei. And there was no other influence to water it down. No competitions outside the country to make comparisons with or to introduce anything other than the sort of "forge your body like a sword" cliched ethos that existed for them. It was a country shut off from everyone else's karate except what was taught in the JKA instructors class in Tokyo. That's why in so many Shotokan organisations today you have more Sth African 6th, 7th and 8th dans represented than any other country. In the 80's we might have had Andy Sherry in England, but Sth Africa had Stan Schmidt, Norman Robinson, Nigel Jackson, Eddie Dorey, Malcolm Dorfman, the Geyer brothers... the list goes on.

Tony's father, brother and sister were training seriously in this old school environment before Tony was even born. He grew up watching the family diligently pursuing their training and getting their black belts. And he saw how it built their characters too.

Tony talks of the dojo-kun and its influence, then and now. "Yeah, for me the dojo-kun represents all that excited my imagination as a kid. I'd watch the classes and hear them yell out at the end "character!"; "sincerity!"; "effort!"; "etiquette!"; "self control!" and I took it all totally literally, especially the bit about

effort."

Tony's dad was more than happy to fuel the young lad's enthusiasms. "No one in my family noticed I was skipping school but when I was 10 my dad made a big deal about setting up the garden with a kick-bag and a makiwara for me." It seems the Sth Africans were not too concerned with soft growing bones!

When I visited Sth Africa myself in the early 90's there was a frontiersman approach that appeared to have little time for the gentle niceties of the 21st Century. I'm guessing the 80's in Sth Africa were a bit like the 50's elsewhere. Tony's siblings were more than 10 years older than him and his sister, Maria, was on the National Team. Both she and Tony's big brother had been black belts since he could remember and the whole family let the kid do as much karate as he wanted.

"The worst thing was that at 6 years old I couldn't actually start Shotokan with my big brother and sister. My dad had had a fight with his teacher William Venter and banned me from going to Venter's Shotokan dojo. I trained instead like a maniac in Tenshinkan karate, which was founded by a Funakoshi disciple and was a mix of old and new. A bit like Shotokan but influenced by aikido and other styles. Very few people were practicing Tenshinkan in Sth Africa. I raced up the ranks to brown belt but 4 years later swallowed my pride to start from scratch as a white belt again. This time, finally, with Venter and the JKA."

Tony reminisces, "Venter was a bull of a guy with the most beautiful little dojo. I've gotta dig out of photo for you, it was sooo nice. The training was kinda harsh though and took into account no consideration of age or size. We all got pounded and I didn't know any different."

A few years later Marco Fanicchi, one of Malcolm Dorfman's proteges, was to mentor Tony all the way to the National team. Marco set about instilling into Tony broader values and a more sophisticated form of Shotokan. Those values that,



Tony says, "I couldn't actually start Shotokan, so I trained instead in Tenshinkan karate."

although reaping rewards in the traditional karate world, Tony thinks are also key influences on the rest of his life.

We chat about those values and what they meant: "I was teaching kids for a while in the 90's in a place called Richard's Bay and I saw the influence that disciplined training had on these kids who had nothing else to guide them. I was one of those kids 15 years before, and I was amazed to see the effect I'd begun to have on them. I realised I'd been moulded in exactly the same way by my own seniors."

Karate was disseminated in quite a unique way in Sth Africa. And being on the National Karate Team was akin to being in the National Rugby or National Cricket Team. I was there in 1993 for the JKA World Championships near the end of the apartheid era and it was evident that representing the country was like being in the Olympics or being a Springbok. The national karate circuit was run like a Formula One Grand Prix season with local events qualifying those who placed highly to regional events which finally lead to the Nationals.

So when Tony talks about the peaks of his Shotokan story you feel the cultural

emotion of him evolving from being a team-member of the small town of Springs, to then getting his colours in his province of Eastern Transvaal, to finally achieving entry to the Nationals. And it didn't get bigger than that because there was nowhere else in the world to go for Sth Africans.

In the Nationals in 1992 Tony suddenly emerged alongside contemporaries such as Shane Dorfman. Shane had been the young star for sometime and was definitely the man to beat. Tony was much less known and much less experienced but he had a similar style about his karate, was the same build and age as Shane.

"Even though I was a brown belt and Shane was a nidan I reckoned I was almost certainly hungrier and had struggled more to get where I was," Tony says. They met in the semi-finals after Tony had stormed through 8 earlier rounds, winning them all 3-0. "So, I come out to face Shane and I felt unbeatable. I'd been getting ippons all day and then I started nailing Shane. At one point I was 3-1 up! Then, I don't know if it was fatigue catching up or Shane stepping up a gear, or the refs, or my lack of experience or what, but things started falling apart. We were clashing really hard throughout and Shane gets this tiny nick near his ear, which could've come from anywhere. Well, they made a big deal out of it and they gave me a warning and Shane an ippon. I then got smashed full force in the mouth by him and I watched on, with my lips tightly shut, while Shane was awarded the winning point. We bow, I open my mouth and all this blood splattered out, on the floor, on my gi...it was embarrassing man! The coach of the Eastern Transvaal Provincial Team went nuts because it should have been a disqualification. But I thought oh well, what can you do?"

The type of episode is one we might all have experienced but it's not quite the full story. Tony's character unavoidably steered him towards a different future from someone like Shane who got his influence from his father Malcolm, one of the pillars of the Sth African JKA. Tony, on the other hand, had always been strongly influenced by the hard guys at his dojo and at 17 or 18 wanted to be like them. He was already getting known by security at nightclubs.

"I was pretty boisterous and, sorry to say, I'd get in the occasional fight. The bouncers didn't take kindly to me fending them off with my karate and more than once they kicked the s#t out of me. Next day, I'd get questioned on my fat lips and black eye by my senpai at the dojo, then they'd go to the nightclub and dish out the same, or worse, to the bouncers. It got to the point where clubs were closing for the weekend for fear of the karate thugs coming over for fights!"

With influences like these Tony had a decidedly un-Shane Dorfman preparation



Early Shotokan training in South Africa, Tony's sister, father and brother.

SKM SHOTOKAN KARATE MAGAZINE

for the Nationals that year in '92. "Everyone on the team headed to the stadium in Bloemfontein by bus and slept in the same hotel and ate together like pros. Me? Well, I went partying with my senpai and we got a little carried away. There was a lot of booze...a classic crazy night. Fights were breaking out here and there just like a Wild West movie and I think it was 4am when we got in. At 7am I was shaken awake and told we had to sprint to the stadium." Makes you wonder what Tony might have done on a full night's sleep.

Fast forward to 1993. A 19-year old Tony is now in the National team and is entered for the World Championships of the JKA jointly hosted by Norman Robinson and Malcolm Dorfman in Johannesburg. Tony recalls: "This was going to be a big deal. I was still a brown belt so I had to borrow a black belt just to compete. We also had the first unified Sth African team - in any sport, not just karate. I mean...apartheid wasn't yet over, blacks and whites till then did not mix officially, so there was tremendous coverage and anticipation from the media. I was pumped

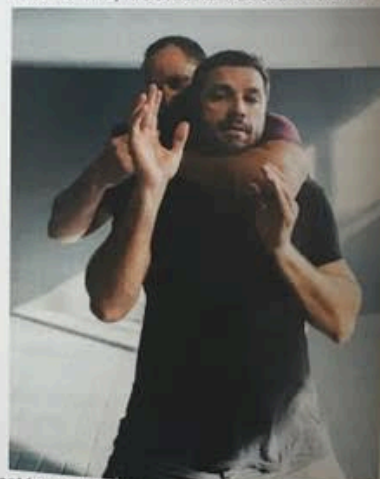
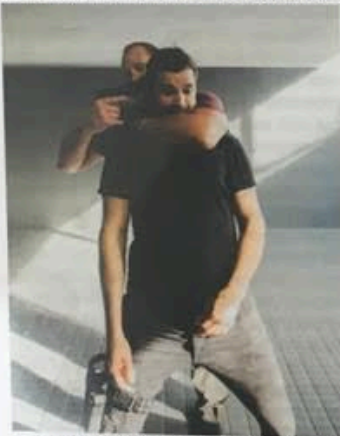
up but man, 5 days before the tournament I was training flat out with the bruisers as usual and one of them smacked me so hard in the mouth I needed 8 stitches. I couldn't fight properly and I couldn't kiai. It was a horrible disappointment."

"At the same time I was getting involved more deeply with security work in and around Jo'burg. And things were changing in the country on a massive scale. I was too young to know what I was doing but got wrapped up in the upheaval between left and right wing groups, I mean, seriously, there could have been a full-blown civil war!"

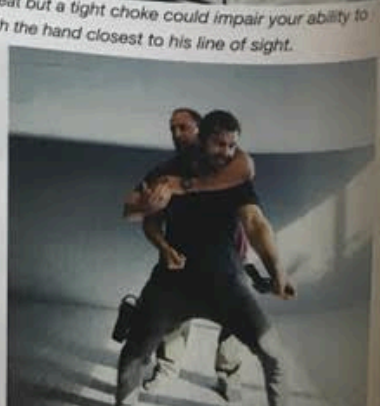
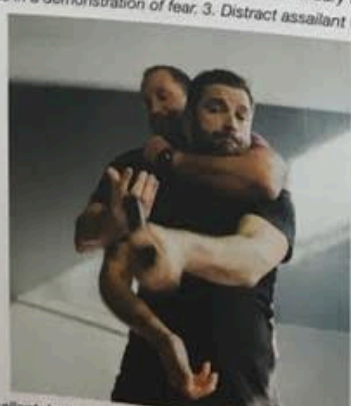
So, not to be too blunt about it, but after that did you become like a hired gun? I ask. "Well, not exactly but I guess that's what people think when they think mercenary, which is just a convenient word. Listen man, I was able to exit a complex and terrible situation without any blood on my hands to enter the private sector so I wouldn't be directed by any government or any superior officer which makes it in fact much easier to make moral choices."

"The onus is on me now, whether we

take an assignment or not. I give you an example, I was on ISIS front lines and collected the evidence to expose the fact that ISIS was using WMD's (chemical weapons) against the Kurds. By making it public, I lost all prospects of business with the Iraqi's but I could still meet their higher-ups in London at the same time. There are governments and rulers I refused to work with in Africa because of their human rights abuses - I have an organisation in London that has fought human trafficking for over a decade, my partner/fellow trustee, is the Commander of Intelligence of Scotland Yard, I brought him on board when he was head of human trafficking. My partner in NYC is former director of operations of the CIA. What I'm trying to say is we're not gun-toting cowboys. We are PMC's that are held accountable for our actions. I absolutely won't do anything to jeopardise my integrity. Without my karate upbringing I doubt very much I'd have the moral barometer I have today. My training was Japanese in every sense and "character and integrity" was ingrained in me. To me, traditional karate fosters the



1. Drop your chin immediately, preventing a choke. In this case a potential choke is the secondary threat but a tight choke could impair your ability to respond effectively. 2. Raise your hands in a demonstration of fear. 3. Distract assailant with the hand closest to his line of sight.



5. No matter how strong the grip of the assailant...

principles necessary to develop virtue in children and adults alike."

"Not only can I make my own choices in the private sector but people working for governments can get lured in too deep, then they spend the rest of their lives looking over their shoulder. Remember I knew people like Berezovsky and Litvinenko and look what happened to them buddy! From polonium 210 to being stuffed in a bag or hung from your bedroom ceiling?! Geez, I don't want to deal with that let me tell you! Apartheid was over in '94, we had a new government and I saw the chance to slip away. I had to leave behind my Sth African karate world too and started traveling across Europe. My mom is Dutch and my dad is Italian, but I ended up in London and then on to New York."

And that's where Tony and I met. It wasn't long before John Mullin and I formed the WTKO into a group that was big enough to justify an international tournament. I invited Abe sensei in 2001 and we had competitors from the U.S. and Europe in pretty good numbers. Change

was in the air since the Asai-JKA split and people were more openly exploring a post-JKA hegemony for the first time.

Tony was keen to do well. Both Mullin and I were training and teaching him and his acting career was stalled for the time being. "Yeah, I was just waiting for Jules (his producer) to get a script and a production team together and had nothing to do but train and party and meet people. Things were about to happen with a movie deal when I went to pick up Jules at a cafe in Little Italy. What I didn't know was that he was about to get arrested and jailed along with 16 members of the Gambino crime family. I stepped back from Hollywood after that as you can imagine! Fortunately I was also building relationships with other, different types in, not just the entertainment industry, but also government and intelligence. I was about to get very busy."

Tony is a master networker. He'll go away for the weekend and typically come back saying things like: "The Bahamas was great man, those guys from Guns n' Roses are crazy!" or "I sat next to Jack

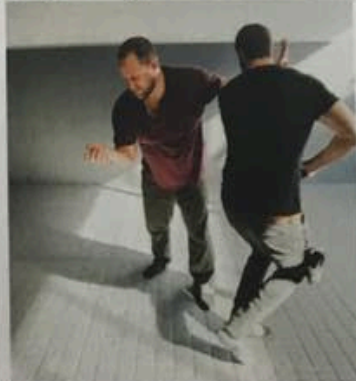
(Nicholson) all the way from Vegas on his private jet...we didn't stop laughing for 3 hours!" Another time he might casually mention over coffee with me: "I've gotta leave in 15 minutes because the former head of the FBI is waiting for me at the Plaza." Stuff like that. Pretty cool.

Amidst all this we had our first big WTKO International tournament. Tony not only impressed Abe sensei enough to get awarded a solid sandan but he also won the tournament outright against stiff opposition. At one point almost knocking someone out cold, but with such a clean, perfectly timed kizami-zuki that Abe sensei insisted on ippon instead of hansoku.

So, why haven't we heard about Tony? Well, he never pursued the idea of teaching and his tournament career was put paid to in an accident. "I was back home in Sth Africa to spend time with my sister who was suffering horribly from cancer. I ran out of money so auditioned for a commercial and they mentioned a stunt, jumping off a balcony. Could I do it? they asked. In those days I said yes to everything but I'd not had experience



4. Then use the hand that's not in assailant's line of sight. Just like the end of heian sandan, hook round to grab the barrel of the weapon and push it towards the assailant. If, in the process, a round is discharged, the assailant will shoot himself. A discharge will cause the weapon to rack in your hand and the loud noise may lead one to think they have been shot. Stay focused, keep your stance strong and hold onto the weapon and continue the disarm. When grabbing the barrel, you may actually hit the assailant in the face in the process of pushing it. In training situations, care should be taken not to hit your training partner with the training weapon.



6. Break assailant's grip and maneuver body away from assailant, tap/rack weapon to ensure it's fire-ready.



Tony Schiena (right) Sandan grading under Abe sensei (2nd from left at the table).

jumping 15ft onto cardboard boxes. Those boxes did virtually nothing to break my fall and I shattered both ankles. One's a bummer, but both? I was totally out of action for 6 months. Even now doing everything that Shotokan has to offer is impossible. So I do my own training, combining techniques I learned from my buddies in the Krav-Haganah and Thai-boxing community with the essential kime of Shotokan. That combination makes for super effective real-world combat."

Tony is still on the fringes of the film world and has just written, produced and starred in his own feature film called Darc, an action thriller, which at the time of writing is looking for distribution. But it is his counter-terrorism skills, honed from years of heavy repetition traditional karate practice that keeps him busy.

I ask him what it's like teaching the military. "I have to cut to the chase with them and just make techniques simple and effective but what I teach still largely comes from Shotokan, especially the kime. Sometimes, when you're dealing with SWAT team alpha-males you've gotta show them speed and kime because, no doubt, they're gonna test you. Since I was a kid I was told by sensei Fanicchi that I had a strong punch and that gave me a confidence which has stayed with me. Turns out my punch was developed to the degree that special forces now trust it and sometimes they have to feel it. I've had to crack a couple of heads during counter-terrorism seminars to get them to believe me!" And on how much he still develops his karate. "Training today I'm always using Shotokan kime on the bag and spend a lot of time working on my tokui waza. That is, kizami-zuki, gyaku-zuki and maegeri. Not just because they are so effective but also to by-pass my past injuries." I tell him that I didn't feel my maegeri was any good till my mid-30's when I'd done millions of them.

"Oh definitely! But it's a great technique

to nail the SWAT guys with and maegeri is my go-to technique in a knife fight." "The traditional Shotokan training I did throughout my childhood, slogging it out with adult blackbelts, also builds the kind of mental judgement which is massively important in my world today, which can involve being only a few hundred metres from ISIS front-lines. Who to trust and how to react, constantly observing the ever-changing landscape is not that different to training in an old-fashioned dojo."

"Training in the dojo is like what I now call being in 'condition yellow' in the real world. We are in a state of war and terrorists are among us. We can be thrust in a life threatening situation at any moment. A dojo environment reproduces that. A karate-ka's skills are honed by thousands of repetitions and the improvement of reflexes by kumite. When we are attacked we react instinctively. Karate heightens



"What I teach the military still largely comes from Shotokan, especially the kime."

our senses through the practice of kumite. That intense focus needed to respond to lightning fast attacks, to launch an attack immediately when sensing an opportunity, to intercept attacks etc. I've trained many special forces groups around the world and a fundamental and constant in my teaching is sticking to the basics, just like in the dojo. In an unexpected or sudden attack (perhaps an ambush) panic can set in quickly. Any complicated tactic or response becomes almost impossible to execute. Our response needs to be simple, basic and direct - whether you're responding with gyaku-zuki or kizami-zuki to the throat of the enemy or disarming an AK-47 that's levelled at the back of your head, responses need to be direct and uncomplicated. The more options we have for responding to a specific attack, the longer it will take as your mind will run through various options before your body can react. Reducing the options, speeds everything up. In Shotokan we develop our tokui waza so we can adhere to this principle. The fastest distance from point A to B is a straight line, Shotokan's linear attacks, basic strikes are therefore highly effective. The fundamental principle of self-defence is striking the enemy with as much focused power to a vulnerable area as quickly as possible. In multiple enemy scenarios this is imperative."

Tony is now in demand on news channels for his take on the terrorist bombings in Paris and Brussels and has received ringing endorsements from Colonels in Kabul and former highly decorated SAS operatives. He trains them on how to escape hostage situations and they all comment on how life-saving his techniques are.

As I write this and think about Tony and his career, I'm reminded of two other important karate people in my life who also run security firms and get involved in quasi-governmental mercenary activity. One is my French buddy Thierry, a former French National karate team member and now an insanely successful defence contractor. The other is Yahara sensei, whom you might have heard of. Could their respective Shotokan histories be merely coincidental to their extraordinary success in the private and public security fields?

Tony ponders this thought: "There's a lot of detail going on when I teach these guys, man but, you know, it all comes ultimately from Shotokan - both technique and attitude. In fact, the more I think about the way my mind was trained in the dojo - to instantly accept the circumstances and just to deal with it calmly and without complaining - I believe it's probably one of the most valuable tools to have when hand-cuffed on your knees and facing an automatic weapon."