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# Tae Kwon Do, Breaking, and the Vietnam War

by Master Terry Wisniewski

I recently had the honor of assisting Senior Grandmaster Lu, president of the newly established CH ITF Taekwondo Federation, in a series of seminars in Vietnam, Malaysia, and China. I then traveled to the Philippines and conducted my own seminar.

During my travels with SGM Lu, I was privileged to hear, see, and learn an incredible amount, and not just how to perform Tae Kwon Do techniques. I was taught the protocol, etiquette, and history of Tae Kwon Do from someone who was there during its development.

At one point we were talking about breaking; how important it was in the past and what a significant role it played in the development of Tae Kwon Do, its growth, and the development of its instructors.

SGM Lu explained the importance of breaking by telling me the following true story.

Imagine the year is 1969 and you are living in war-torn Vietnam. You are studying a new martial art that is proving to be very effective in allowing you to protect yourself and your family. But it was more than simply a system of training the mind and body in a war zone. It was also a way to improve your position in life.

Two times a year there was a massive testing of all Tae Kwon Do practitioners in South Vietnam, both civilian and military. The military included any country that was currently involved in the Vietnam "conflict": the United States, Canada, Korea, Philippines and, of course, South Vietnam. Approximately 1,000 examinees gathered to examine for their Black Belt or higher. Of these, only 150 would pass. Examiners roamed the field with clipboards checking off potential successful candidates.

Patterns, step sparring, and full contact sparring (without protective equipment), were part of the exam. Injuries were a common occurrence, often some being serious.

After the preliminaries, the final event was breaking. One technique per degree level: Knife-hand, Reverse Knife-hand, Back fist, and Punch. Each breaking technique was associated with its level and announced to the examinees who ran to the materials truck to grab the number of bricks or tiles required for their technique and then back to their spot in line.

Each examinee had only one attempt to break successfully and advance.

It is critical to understand that a successful break, and the advancement that came with pass-



ing, meant much more than another stripe on the belt.

First Degree Black belts were allowed to instruct and earn extra money for their families so that they would not go hungry. Second Degree Black Belts were given bodyguard positions for Generals in the Army. Third Degree Black Belts became Presidential body guards.

If you were in the military, passing also meant you did not have to go to the front. If you were a civilian, you could go out after curfew. That single break could mean freedom and safety.

I can only imagine what was going through their minds when they lined up and prepared to take their one attempt to break their bricks or tiles. Their lives and the lives of their families would change depending on their ability to lock their focus on a single, brutal strike.

One thing I do know is the training and preparation that went into that one attempt to break, and the value those practitioners realized from a successful break, made some of the finest Tae Kwon Do instructors the world ever saw.

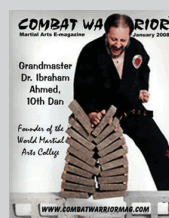
Today, there is not the same pressure to study and train. In some ways, that is a good thing. But in another way, it is sad. Without the pressure to push our limits and prove ourselves, very few people become the best they can be. **TW**

• **Master Terry Wisniewski is a 7th degree Black Belt in ITF Taekwon-Do and founder of Tien Lung Taekwon-Do. He is a full time professional Taekwon-Do instructor with three schools. As a 9-time coach for Team Canada he has trained World Champions in Patterns, Self Defense & Power Breaking.**



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