



Black
BELT

Dec. 78

Vol. 16

#12

He was the originator of isshinryu karate, teaching a Marine who would later become the senior American in his style

The Four Purposes of Karate

by Wayne Cowan

The number of black belts in the United States who can claim to have studied under a grandmaster, soke, are few, at best. One man who can claim this distinction may be found in his school in the southwest Georgia city of Albany: Harold Mitchum, the senior American in isshinryu karate. If you've never heard of him, don't feel bad. He is a low-profile gentleman heard of by few people outside of isshinryu karate.

Teaching his art in a two-story building in a nondescript portion of Albany, just outside the downtown district, Mitchum is a retired career Marine trying to teach in the way he learned while on Okinawa 20 years ago with the originator of isshinryu, the late Tatsuo Shimabuku.

Sitting in the front office of his

Residing in Albany, Georgia, Wayne Cowan is a free-lance writer who specializes in articles for emergency medical services.

school, talking with an easy Southern drawl, Mitchum recounted the history of his art as well as his own beginning in the style:

"Master Shimabuku studied goju and two different forms of shorinryu karate for thirty-two years. During freesparring sessions, he noticed that almost none of the practitioners used the twisting punch taught in those styles. It was an unnatural movement.

"Studying further, he noticed other areas he thought could be improved upon. The result was isshinryu karate. Master Shimabuku gave the birth date of isshinryu as January 15, 1956. He remained the active head of the isshinryu style until his death on May 30, 1975."

Mitchum's own story began in his native South Carolina, about nine miles from Augusta, Georgia, when he left the Deep South at the age of 19 to join the Marine Corps in 1953. The following year, he was stationed in

Korea and began training in goju karate. But a quick transfer left him without an instructor.

By 1958, Mitchum was again stationed in the Far East, this time on Okinawa, near the village of Agena. Because there was no advertising done by dojos, they were often difficult to locate. After some searching, Mitchum found Shimabuku, was accepted and began training in isshinryu.

"The school in Agena was roofless," Mitchum said. "I trained seven days a week whenever I could. If it rained, there was no training that day. Training went on the year 'round. It was very hot in the summer and awfully cold in the winter."

Senior students were assigned to teach newer students because Shimabuku seldom taught beginners. A heavy emphasis was placed on the basics and kata, with self-motivation and self-discipline prerequisites to advanced instruction. Even advanced students had

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to take the initiative in seeking more instruction from their master. All promotions were decided subjectively by Shimabuku, who based them primarily upon kata proficiency.

"Master Shimabuku recognized only three ranks—white, green and black belts," said Mitchum.

In 1959, Mitchum left Okinawa with his black belt. He eventually returned to Okinawa for two more tours of duty, taking an Okinawan wife and studying with Shimabuku for a total of seven-and-one-half years. Mitchum left Okinawa for the last time in 1964.

Quick to point out that Shimabuku was a teacher and a practitioner, not a businessman, Mitchum recalled his own days on Okinawa:

"Master Shimabuku preferred sleeping on the floor of his school to staying in his comfortable house in the country. He constantly practiced hitting the edge of his hand on a small block of wood until it developed an indentation from years of striking 1,000 times a day. He used this same block of wood as a pillow, not to exhibit his strength or deprivation, but simply because it was his way."

As a career Marine, Mitchum found opening a karate school was almost out of the question because of the suddenness that transfers come about. Mitchum, however, while he was in the Marines, tried one school with another Shimabuku black belt.

"That was back in 1965," he said. "Jim Advincula and I opened a school

in Carlsbad, California. We had about thirty, thirty-five students and were going strong. Well, shortly after we opened, I was transferred to the East Coast, Camp Lejeune, for specialized training. By the time I returned to California, Jim had been transferred also and our school closed.

"After that I decided I would never open another school while I was in the service. It just wasn't fair to the students to depend upon an instructor who might be transferred before the next class."

Mitchum retired from the service while he was stationed at the Marine Corps Supply Base, Atlantic, near Albany, Georgia. He decided to stay in the Albany area with his wife and three sons. It was 1973 and another school was not in his plans, but by 1974 he had changed his mind. He opened Mitchum and Associates Isshin-ryu Karate School in July.

After several moves to larger buildings, Mitchum moved into a soon-to-be-condemned building between an auto trim shop and a small restaurant. With the addition of locker rooms, mats and an office, the building became a functioning school. (Mitchum's dojo is the oldest operating school in the Albany area—that is how new martial arts instruction is to this region.) The second phase of renovating the building included converting the second floor into a small practice room, a lounge for the students and sleeping quarters for out-of-town visitors.





Mitchum's school reflects his own early training on Okinawa. Emphasis is placed on the four main purposes of issheinryu—strengthening of the mind and body, instilling self-confidence, instilling self-discipline and as a means of self-defense that should never be abused.

No student under eight years of age enters training, and all beginners are closely drilled in basics. There is no rushing into freesparring. Promotions are strictly controlled, and there are no "junior black belts." For adults, it takes a minimum of three years to reach black belt, and in four years of operation, Mitchum has promoted five students to this level.

Emphasizing there are no secrets to karate other than hard work, Mitchum said that when one sweats during a workout, it means one is working toward improvement.

"And if you're sore in the morning, you're really making progress," he said. "You've got to hurt and sweat to become really good at anything, and karate is no exception."

Though issheinryu may not be the most popular style of karate, it is more widespread than many people believe. One reason for this, Mitchum said, is that most of the high-ranking instructors were promoted by Master Shimabuku and are basically low-profile people. A lot of advertising is the exception rather than the rule.

Many practitioners of issheinryu do not embroil themselves in the politics that seems to go hand-in-hand with karate. This does not mean that issheinryu instructors are politically unmotivated, but they are careful about which organizations they support.

Mitchum has been involved in the political arena of karate since his early days on Okinawa when Master Shimabuku appointed him president of the American Okinawan Karate Association in 1961. But because of growing political factionism, commercial abuse of the art and a deviance from tradition, Mitchum and several other Shimabuku black belts formed the United Issheinryu Karate Association in September 1975. The goals of the association are to provide standardized instruction, create a universally accepted promotion system and provide clinics to all issheinryu students.

If you should come to the Albany area looking for Harold Mitchum's school, be prepared to do some searching. It is a low-profile place, and that's the way he wants it.



Harold Mitchum, a former Marine and now the senior American in issheinryu karate (above), instructs two new students on their blocking and punching counters; (left) two junior belts spar under careful supervision, and (right) students practice basics.

