

Sonny Umpad

He has avoided Black Belt, Inside Kung-Fu, and others for years

Sonny Umpad is probably unknown to most martial artist even though we are talking about a living legend. A man of few words, reserved, and very humble. He avoids the media, doesn't give interviews, and is happiest when he gets to train and develop new techniques in solitude. Umpad has few, if any, superiors in the world when it comes to the Filipino martial arts. His incredible speed is already legendary and so is his inventiveness - an inventiveness that resulted in *corto cadena*; a deadly variant of the Filipino martial arts.

Meet for the first time ever the legendary Sonny Umpad in a candid interview.

Sonny Umpad - the name and his reputation has haunted and enticed me for years but all research has given the same result: Sonny doesn't give interviews and very few has been lucky enough to train with him.

The first time I managed to get any information about the man behind the legend - and see him in action, even if it was only on video - was in Seattle several years ago. Our mutual friend Jesse Glover met Sonny during a seminar that Glover did at Wally Jay's school and the two immediately became friends. Jesse put in a videotape and I was almost shocked from what I saw - Sonny demonstrated several classical, and modified, Filipino stick and knife techniques with an amazing clinical perfection and at an incredible speed.

I don't think I have ever seen anything like it.

I had never thought any human could move that fast. Sonny's feet seemed to hover above the floor and his hands moved out from the body with the power of a highly tuned reaper, and so fast that it was impossible with the naked eye to see what was happening. For an opponent it must be like facing a ghost. It was even more exciting to see it in person a few years later. I still couldn't see his movements, only feel the gust of wind. Bruce Lee was famous for his so-called "non-telegraphing" movements - the ability to deliver a strike or a technique without the eyes or body revealing the attack or its intended target - and if there were ever any doubt that the people describing Lee's incredible quickness were speaking the truth, this doubt is now definitely gone. Though, I can't imagine anyone that can move faster than Sonny Umpad!

I first met Sonny in San Francisco in 1997. Jesse Glover introduced me during a dinner in Chinatown and we talked a little, but nothing turned out from it. We met again one year later in Los Angeles. Jesse was there, and so was Sonny's good friend, student, and training partner Gary Cagaanan who was one of Bruce Lee's students in Oakland in the 1960s. Together with Sid Campbell they also wrote the book "Balisong - The Lethal Art of Filipino Knife Fighting" (Paladin Press, 1996).

The interview took place at Holiday Inn in Torrance a few miles south of Los Angeles. Late one evening, after having loaded up on ice-cold coke from a vending machine in the corridor, we settle down in his room. He is strangely enough a chain smoker and he apologizes for the smoke before he opens the window. The night is cool and a cool wind makes the smoke drift out of the room in this late hour.

Sonny answers my questions thoughtfully and concisely in the beginning, but he opens up more as the interview progresses. The interview becomes a journey into an incredible life. Time flies and it's after 5 in the morning when I return to my room.

It was during a visit to your home in the San Francisco Bay area that Jesse (Glover) talked you into giving your first seminar and this was only a few years ago?

- Yes, he came down before he was doing a seminar to see how I was doing. We ended up talking to 4 in the morning. He convinced me to go with him and teach, but I said that I didn't know how to do it. "I have never given a seminar before." "That's no problem," replied Jesse. "Just show the students in the same way as you showed me, there is no difference."

We talked earlier about how hard it is to teach someone how to defend against a knife attack...

- It's very hard, especially since you can't use a real knife. The drills will therefore not be really realistic. There is also another problem. I wouldn't recommend anyone to even try to go for the "knife hand" - a person who really knows how to use a knife is almost impossible to disarm or defend against. You simply won't have the time, especially when he delivers at least 5-7 attacks in a single movement. That's how quick it is. A knife expert is lucky if he can disarm an opponent like that and only sustain 3 cuts. It's impossible to walk away completely unharmed from a knife attack if the opponent knows what he is doing.

Can you tell something about your background? Do you remember the first time you experienced the Filipino martial arts for real?

- I was just a little boy when I one day saw an older escrimador defeated a considerably younger, faster and stronger opponent in a fight in the jungle. It made a very strong impression on me.

I was born and raised and started practicing Escrima in a small town by the name of Bogu in the Philippines. When I was 11-12 years old we moved to Cebu City, which was and is a very hard city. There I continued to practice and research Escrima, but I didn't belong to any particular school or group. I lived on the streets and fought, sometimes for my life. Life was very hard. I practiced and learned a lot from my friends and from my best friend's grandfather.

Escrima can usually be traced far back in most families' in the Philippines ...

- I didn't even know it in the beginning but when I started researching I discovered that my grandfather was said to be one of the most feared in the Bogu area. I never met him and my father never told me anything about him. I never even knew what his name was. In my family we would never talk about anyone who practiced Escrima. I hope that I one day will get to know more about my grandfather, about who he was and what he did...

It's usually impossible to get an Escrimador of the old school to tell what his style called or get him to teach you...

- It's true. It's not what someone talks about. It was only when one sparred together that one would get some type of instruction. Today you would probably call it a "duel." At that time, you would never hold back, all strikes were intended to hit, and people were occasionally knocked out. A class was like real combat. All the instruction was more or less secret, especially in Bogu. You kept your style within the family and it was almost impossible for an outsider to gain entrance to the inner circle. Every family was very secretive about their style. It was, after all, a matter of their survival.

I assume that there were many challenges and street fights when you grew up?

- We were like most kids there. I clashed and we fought. It didn't take very much to escalate a conflict. One time I was challenged by a kid my age and after I defeated him his older brother suddenly showed up and wanted to take his place. I was barely able to hold my stick by then so I had to run with the whole gang after me.

When you first started learning Escrima you started out learning the sticks and did not get to the knife until after a long time....

- Yes, a knife fight is almost always a matter of life and death. There are instances where it can be enough to show what you can do with a knife - knife manipulations - to get an opponent to back down. To make him see that you master the art of the knife. This has happened to me many times and the opponent has backed down.

Sonny got the opportunity, during the years in Cebu City, to sharpen his techniques under master of Doce Pares and Balintawak. The knife arts have been developed over the course of 400 years in the Philippines and many techniques have been closely guarded family secrets for almost as long - a tradition that went from generation to generation. It's really only in the later years that Filipino Escrimadores that have immigrated to the USA have begun sharing these ancient traditions.

You have over the years been further developing your knowledge of Escrima, Kali, and Arnis and created something you call "corto cadena." Can you explain what this entails?

- A knife fighter isn't considered complete without a sound philosophical base. The Balisong knife carries a long tradition that is based on that it carries the triangular forces - a force that is also called gunans. A Filipino martial artist is convinced that these triangular forces influence the practitioner's mental, physical, and spiritual actions with the knife. In short, the use of a blade, a balisong blade, is comparable to a religious act. These three forces,

according to an ancient Vedic philosophy, manifest the source of creativity, movements, and action - all of which are symbols of the sacred qualities that are embodied in the art of studying, practicing, and applying the just balisong knife.

There is a group of knife fighters called the Visayan. They are exceptionally skilled but still relatively anonymous because their early spiritual training taught respect and humility towards the art and the knowledge to extinguish (an opponent's) life. This is a humility that many mistake as weakness. But that is a deadly illusion and those who have made this mistake have met their maker too fast and too early.

The knife is not introduced to late in the training ...

- Not until the person is considered to fully master the stick techniques will he be allowed to learn the knife. Longer sticks and swords have a longer range and more power than a small weapon like the knife. The old Visayan masters feel that a weapon like a knife with its short range is not sufficiently effective if the student has not been properly trained. The Visayan style is unique and is very different from other Filipino stick and knife styles. This is mainly because the style is much more adaptable to the individual.

Corto cadena is the fifth and last step in the Visayan knife curriculum. Just a few, carefully selected individuals get access to these techniques. Corto cadena means something like "short, on the inside, chain, or an unbroken series of movements" (corto) and "movements" (cadena). In short, it is usually considered to be a system that prefers "in-close combat." The system is different from other similar knife styles. It is not until the hands, arms, body and weapon have become "one" and the person is fully synchronized that one is "finished" - maximal speed makes all the techniques flow together into a single quick movement, which is impossible for the opponent to follow with the naked eye. The techniques follow each other in a long chain and it doesn't matter whether the practitioner makes contact with the opponent - the chain remains unbroken.

It is safe to say that you have developed your own style?

- Yes, I have studied Arnis, Escrima, and Kali since I was a child and have continued to experiment with my own experiences. I didn't even know that I had created a new system until someone pointed it out for me.

Now you are living outside San Francisco. When and why did you move to the United States?

- It was 1969. I was an American citizen since birth because my father was an American and was working in the American Navy. When I turned 18 I was forced to move here otherwise I would have lost my American citizenship. I traveled alone but my brother arrived not long after. My mother was ill and couldn't go and my father died. The martial arts were becoming popular at that time, mainly due to Bruce Lee. But I didn't like going to the movies back home so I didn't even know who he was when I came to San Francisco. My main interest, besides Escrima, was music. I played in a band as a bass player but I was never a professional musician. It was just something that most high school kids did.

When did you begin teaching the Filipino martial arts?

- It took a long time. I never planned to dedicate myself to Escrima fulltime. I got married; we got two children, Brian and Jackie. I started teaching in 1976 and it was entirely in private like now. I really dislike teaching. I don't like standing up and talk in front of people. It's probably what you would call stage fright. Jesse has been helping me getting more used to it over the year. It's different now. Now I feel a certain satisfaction from seeing how people I teach develop and find their own way.

I'm just a guide helping my students on the way. They are individuals and must find their own way. I give them the material and then they teach themselves. But there was a time when I stopped doing the martial arts for a fairly long time.

What happened? What made you to take up Escrima again?

-The turning point was after the divorce with my wife. I felt lost, angry, and frustrated and needed something to get me back on my feet again. I needed something to focus my thoughts and emotions on so I started training again. At that point I had a few students I could throw ideas at, and spar against. I started experimenting and slowly but surely did the pieces fall into place.

I have on several occasions heard from people that have trained with Sonny say that he is impossible to keep up with, even when he is teaching. This because his teaching is part of a long creative process - in short, Sonny

continues to develop new variations of techniques whether he is training at home by himself or teaching students at a seminar. He often doesn't remember how he did a certain technique, parry, or attack because he is acting on pure instinct - Sonny doesn't think about techniques, everything is ingrained in the nervous system and new variations of old techniques comes out automatically almost on reflex. Like a subconscious signal. He reads you immediatly and acts long before you yourself know what you where thinking.

This is what makes Sonny Umpad so unique - and so frightening !

Your experimentation is purely instinctive. Do you always remember how you did certain techniques?

- I didn't in the beginnig but now I can do the same variation of a particuliar technique two or more times in a row if I should suddenly come up with something new. It's a physical reaction and i have the habit, or rather the bad habit of teaching things too fast. Many of my students are complaining and I'm trying to change but isn't easy. I can't really control the process. As soon as I pick up a knife or a stick things start to happen.

Have you done any research into the philosophical aspects of Escrima?

- That is a good question. I have, after all, never studied martial arts in any school so my experiences is mainly based on what I have picked up on the streets. You can say that I have my own philosophy. I have found the answer to many of my questions through my martial arts.

Presently you have a small group of students that come to your house for privat training ...

- That's right and I have found an arrangement that I'm happy with. It feels, from a martial arts point of view, like I have found the answers to many of my questions in private. I don't claim to have the answers to everything but I feel content with the knowledge and experiences that I now possess. I struggled and searched and finally succeeded to get so far that I touched onto "the truth." But I do not aim to reach "the top," I'm happier "down here". There is nothing to aim for if you reach that point. There would be nothing more to search for and I don't want to live like that.

How many students do you have today?

- 8-10. I usually film them so that we can look at the tapes together and study their movements. Sometimes they will get a tape with them home so that they can pratice on their own. It has turned out to be very effective.

You have never really given any interviews before. Why is that?

- There was an article written about me a while ago but I didn't know until one of my students told me. I prefer being anonymous and doing my own thing. I'm always surprised when people talk about me, know who I am, and even come over to say hello. It's always nice when that happens so publicity can be both good and bad.

How much time do you put down on your own training?

- All my time goes into training, except for when I'm teaching my students.