

The History of Modern Army Combatives

In 1995 the Commander of the 2nd Ranger Battalion LTC Stan McCrystal ordered a reinvigoration of martial arts training. It didn't take long for serious problems with the existing program to surface. There was the feeling among the men that the techniques would not work and that it was a waste of valuable training time.

A committee was formed, headed by SSG Matt Larsen, to develop a program that was more effective. The first step was to examine successful programs from around the world. What was found is that most of them had one thing in common, one underlying reason that the program was successful. Countries with an indigenous national program, Korean Tae-Kwon Do, Japanese Judo, Muay Thai in Thailand, would have much easier time developing an effective combatives program. One exception to this rule is Russia. They are one of the few who take an essentially untrained population, and yet have good success in training their soldiers.

The Russian system of SOMBO was developed specifically for the Military. SOMBO combines the techniques of Judo and Greco-Roman Wrestling as its foundation. The feeling was that the success of SOMBO was linked in its similarity to wrestling, making its basic components easier to learn, and less dependent on size and strength. Another, feature of SOMBO is that it has a competitive component that serves to spur on further training. However, it also has some distinct problems, not the least of which was that the competitive form has, in the opinion of some, changed the techniques that were emphasized. None the less the Ranger committee tentatively decided that the new system would be based on grappling.

Realizing that there were not enough SOMBO instructors available the Rangers began looking for a similar system as a base for their program. Head coach J. Robinson, of the University of Minnesota wrestling program, himself a former Vietnam Era Ranger came out to evaluate the emerging program and gave some valuable advise. Finally, after looking at many different systems, the Rangers sent several men to train at the Gracie Jiu-Jitsu Academy in Torrance California.

The Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu as taught at the Gracie Academy fit almost every aspect of the Military's needs perfectly. It was easy to learn, had a competitive form, and was proven effective within the arena of hand-to-hand fighting. It did however have some problems. One aspect of Jiu-Jitsu was principally designed for one on one arena fighting, and the other, sportive Jiu-Jitsu, had great potential to change the art into something not oriented toward fighting.

With actual combat experience as a guide, the Rangers designed a system with Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu as the technical base that was oriented to the needs of the Army. A systematic approach to training emerged, which detailed the techniques that would be taught, and in what order. Rangers would start with the basics of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu ground fighting, and progress into the throws and takedowns of Judo and Wrestling, and the strikes of Boxing and Muay Thai. All of this could combine with marksmanship and weapons training into a totally integrated system of Close Quarters Combat. Henceforth, yielding Rangers who could transition smoothly between ranges of combat, with or without weapons, individually or as a group.

As the Rangers who were trained in this new system spread throughout the Army, the system spread with them. COL Michael Ferriter who had learned of the system while commanding the 3rd Ranger Battalion later commanded the 11th Infantry Regiment and successfully Integrated it into the POIs of Officer Candidate School, the Infantry Officer Basic Course, and the Infantry Captains Career Course. He, with the help of now SFC Matt Larsen laid the foundation for the Army's train the trainer program.

The program continues to grow. As of January 2002, with the publishing of the new FM3-25.150, it has become official Army doctrine.