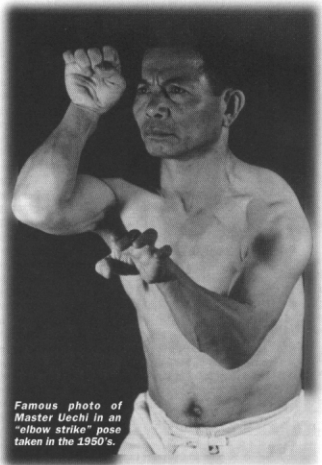


One of the translations for "Pwan-gai-noon", the original, Chinese name for Uechi-ryu, is "half hard - half soft". Unfortunately, the general public is only aware of the "half hard" part of the style. The public would rather read about the more "extreme" examples of Uechi-ryu, than about the gentle, softer aspects of the subject, and for the most part is satisfied with this simplistic view of the art.

As a young man, studying Uechi-ryu on Okinawa in the mid fifties, I too was more eager to stress the harder side of the art in my personal training than spend time exploring the "other side". Since I was responsible for introducing Uechi-ryu to the outside world, the public's initial understanding of this unusual art, was through the eyes of a 20 year old ex-GI, hell bent on perpetuating the image of the martial arts as a "killer" art! Ironically, because of a promise made to my teachers, I wrote the first book on karate by an American, and in "The Way of



Famous photo of Master Uechi in an "elbow strike" pose taken in the 1950's.

Karate", stressed the "soft", "yielding" side of Uechi-ryu as taught to me by Ryuko Tomoyose. I believed, in spite of my own practice, that Uechi-ryu was a lot more than a set of physical self defense movements. Even though during this period I was more into the "physical" part of the style, deep inside I retained the philosophy, spirit and personal example, taught and lived by my teacher.

I was not alone in introducing Asia's martial arts to an unsuspecting world. All of the popular martial arts were initially introduced to the general public by ex-service men who were fortunate enough to have discovered karate while serving their country overseas. Most did not speak the language of their instructors and most instructors could not communicate the subtleties of the art through the language of their students. What resulted was a number of first generation karate system-shells being introduced to a willing and eager Western world.

The American GIs learned

# Uechi-ryu Karate: "Half Hard - Half Soft"

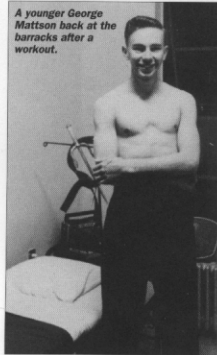


Main street in the city of Futenma in 1957.

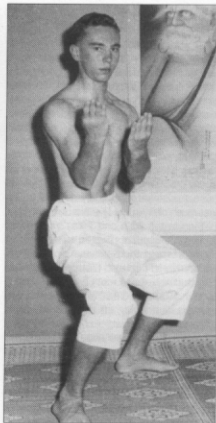
Kata but preferred to spar. They practiced exercises and drills, but favored pounding the makiwara! They learned the ABC's of the art, but specialized in the spectacular consequences of their hard work. And the public wanted what the GIs offered. At least those who initially studied this "first generation" karate. The phenomenon resulting from this introduction of the martial arts was a sort of reverse osmosis. . . normal people filtered through the system while less-than-desirable people stayed, attracted by the hard, rigid and martial discipline. It was the best and worse of times. Lots of interest, but from a public relations standpoint, the art suffered.

Ironically, the art prevailed by doing what it promised. . . helping people emotionally while strengthening their bodies! Lots of troubled students became physically proficient teachers. With time, these

A younger George Mattson back at the barracks after a workout.



Typical "grass thatched" roof construction of many Okinawan homes during the 1950s.



"Seisan" kata, "ready" jump-back position.

instructors evolved into dedicated and credible role models. As I look back at the history of the martial arts outside of Asia, there appears to be a paradigm at work that makes the whole process orderly and timely.

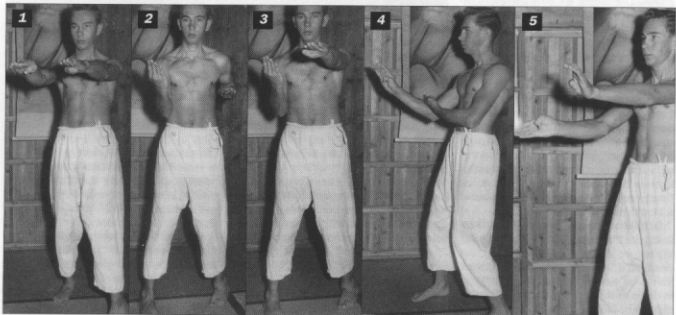
The original teachers introduced a complete physical art to their eager protégés. Yes, we performed Kata but did not understand their import. Yes, A complete fighting system, but lacking any polish or depth. To compensate for this deficiency, the foreign teachers borrowed freely from newer, nontraditional martial arts, filling in the blanks of their

understanding with more obvious techniques being introduced from Japan and Korea. During the 60s and 70s, it was difficult to distinguish between the various forms of Western karate.

Once the "word" got out to the Western world about the mystical/mysterious Island fighters, the demand for "instant" karate forced the Okinawans to reevaluate their art. Classes that formerly were attended by a few Okinawan students were inundated

with shopping GI's, eager to find the "ultimate" fighting system. Although some schools remained closed to foreigners, many opened their doors to the new "invaders", altering their teaching methods and in many cases actually changing their styles, to accommodate the foreigners.

Problems that the new "foreign"



George mattson demonstrates some of the classical movements of the Uechi-Ryu kata Sanchin. 1) Double Thrust position 2) Left arm ready position 3) Left arm extended position 4) Left arm "Wauke" (circle block) ready position 5) Fully focused extended double "push", using "Bushken" (heel of palm and thumb strike)

## Uechi-ryu Karate: "Half Hard - Half Soft"

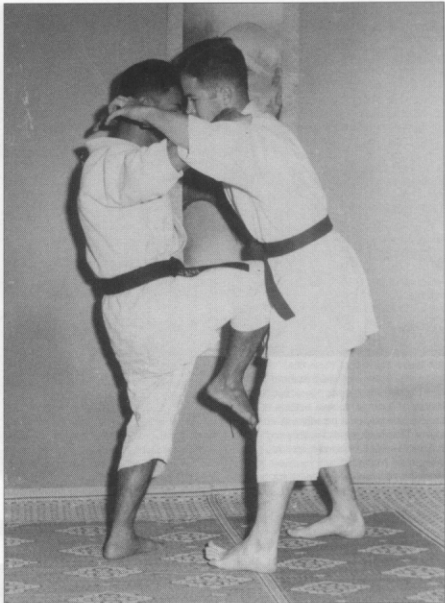
teachers found in their home countries in the late 50s and 60s, were now being experienced on Okinawa. Casual, Chinese-type training methods, acceptable for a few students, rapidly were displaced with newly adopted Japanese-type of class, with their emphasis on class drills, exercises and sparring, which was better suited to large classes with different ranked participants. In the process of assimilation, many of the more traditional and rigidly defined styles lost much of what made them unique.

Then in the 80's and 90's 3rd and 4th generation students began searching for their roots and the traditional system from which their current training evolved. Unfortunately, these roots no longer existed in the 1930's - 1950's state. The old masters were dying off or were no longer influencing their younger charges. Priorities changed both on Okinawa and outside of Okinawa. Ironically, the "Gajin" were, in many cases, more intent on preserving and discovering their roots than their instructors!

With the proliferation of "eclectic" styles outside of Okinawa and the breakdown of traditional "ryuhas" within the Island, it is difficult to carry on an intelligent conversation about what is "traditional" or "legitimate" anymore. This doesn't stop us from speculating and looking. More research is being performed about the history of the martial arts today than ever. And because the martial arts are more of a "physical" art than "written", reliable sources are rapidly disappearing.

Many Okinawans are now interested in discovering their roots as well. The Japanese and Koreans are more comfortable with their martial arts as adapted from "root" systems. They tend to nationalize their martial arts, eliminating the "ryu" in favor of associations which take credit for standardizing and enhancing the style. A letter I received from the then General Manager of the Japan Karate Association in 1960 reflects this attitude quite clearly. In response to my question pertaining to Japanese karate and its relationship to systems found on Okinawa, Mr. Masatomo Takagi, said "We studied Okinawan karate, but found that it lacked of theory."

Okinawans and non Asians continue their search for the "purest" forms and "original" styles as though the best can be discovered from the earliest rather than from what has evolved from the earliest. Perhaps this preoccupation with origin, stems from our inability to put the art/sport/discipline found in the martial arts, into perspective. The Chinese fighting arts are foreign to our culture and we lack



**"Bunkai" (technical applications/analysis of a kata movement) Tomoyose sensei demonstrates the correct application of Seisan "crane" block and knee counterattack.**

confidence in our ability to interpret, elaborate or improve on the original, even though in most other arts and sports, change and assimilation are encouraged!

In their quest for the "original" Uechi-ryu, people often ask me about my experiences on Okinawa during the 50s when few people ever heard of the word "karate". "...what did the kata look like?, did you spar?" Even things like "...what kind of uniform did you wear?" seems important on their quest for "purity", "traditional" and "the best."

People get nervous and twitchy when I laugh and explain that in 1957 I attended the first meeting of the Uechi-ryu Karate Association in Naha where all the younger teachers asked their elders the same questions! "... If Kanbun didn't wear a gi, why should we? How did Kanbun

perform the 'Wauke'?" The questions then were slightly different, but basically the same as today.

Last year I created a new set of sparring rules to be used in the Uechi-ryu Karate Championships. At the same time I decided to make the generally accepted headgear, hand and foot pads mandatory. At a meeting prior to the tournament, one of the seniors exclaimed in horror. . . "We can't use this equipment. . . it's not 'traditional!'" I patiently tried to explain that I created one of the first set of rules used in American tournaments back in the 60s. At that time we didn't have equipment, so we didn't use it. Further, on Okinawa, they experimented with chest protection and various hand pads since 1960. Which tradition are we violating?

It might be fun and of interest to some, if



*Here, Tomoyose sensei's arm is being grabbed by a GI who also plans to punch sensei. Although the other photographs of this sequence have been lost, Tomoyose sensei nicely finishes off his opponent by grasping the GI's wrist, then performing a Sanchin circular block effectively taking the GI to the floor into an arm bar.*

the "old-timers" of karate discussed the "old-times" and how training methods, technique, form, etc. have changed over the years. Those of us, in a position to reminisce, might shed some light on much of the confusion and misconceptions about the "traditional" systems we now practice.

We tend to make giants out of the Grandmaster of the past, when in fact, they were just like the rest of us. Mas Oyama's Bull (the one he decked in the 60s) gets bigger every year! The stones broken by Chojun Miyagi get harder and larger with every telling of the story. Choki Motobu, a rather average looking person, has been described in books as "... a giant of 7' - 4" with hands and feet like monstrous hams!

My introduction to Uechi-ryu is not much different than the experiences of other GIs. I was somewhat more fortunate, in that I was the focus of an experiment at the Uechi homedojō (SOKE Shubukan). Mr. Ryuko Tomoyose, who at the time was a senior student of Master Kanei Uechi and who happened to work for the U.S. Government, asked and received permission to teach me Uechi-ryu in its entirety and not the "abridged" and "popular" version being passed on to the occasional serviceman who wandered into the Uechi home dojo. Master Uechi was extremely curious about the "experiment"

and asked that I be brought over to the homedojō every Saturday, to participate in his afternoon class.

My original introduction to Tomoyose Sensei, was "burned" into my memory forever. Tommy's home was very primitive by American standards. The roof was covered by a straw-like material and the interior consisted of four rooms. The "living" room, where most of the family's activities were centered, was situated on the side where the view overlooked the garden. In a small corner of the property was a strange looking post wrapped with grass rope.

In the center of this 6 "tatami" room, (9' X 12'), was a low table. The room was otherwise empty, except for a beautiful scroll painting of Dharuma hung on one wall. Facing the painting was a vase containing a simple flower arrangement. On the night I visited Tommy's home for the first time, Andy, (a fellow GI who actually set up the meeting) and I were early. Mrs. Tomoyose invited us in. Andy explained the custom of taking one's shoes off at the entrance way and how to select one of the pair of (guest) slippers to wear while inside the home. I looked around rather tentatively, at the fragile looking interior. The three rooms I could see were divided with sliding "Shoji" screens. We were taken into the main room of the house and asked to sit at the table. No sooner had we made ourselves comfortable, when Mrs. Tomoyose returned with a serving tray, containing tea and cookies. Filling our cups, she returned to whatever she was doing in back of the house. Occasionally she would slide the screen open and kneeling, would bow, then float into the room to refill our cups. Through a slight crack in the opening of the screens I was able to catch a glimpse of Mrs. Tomoyose preparing food in an outdoor patio-type area.

Around five-thirty in the evening, Tommy appeared. In the hundreds of classes I was to take with him in the next 15 months, I

will remember this scene being repeated on a nightly basis. I was always early and drinking tea when he came home from work, smiling broadly while laughingly apologizing for being late and making me wait. On this first evening, he rushed into the room, shaking my hand vigorously after Andy introduced me, inviting us to share a simple meal with him.

No sooner had we accepted when his wife began the ceremony of serving dinner, although she did not join us at any time. (Nor did she ever join us at any other time).

Following dinner and casual conversation involving the military and politics involving the military and Okinawans, Tommy asked if I would like to see a demonstration of Uechi-ryu. He seemed particularly happy at my answer and said he would be right back. I was expecting Tommy to take us to a gym or outside area to demonstrate, but Andy explained that this and the adjoining room was the "dojo" or training space. Andy removed the "shoji" screen divider that separated the main room and what I later learned was the sleeping quarters. We then moved the table to the far side of the second room and stood it on edge. This 12 Tatami space was to be known to me as the "Tomoyose dojo".

A few minutes elapsed when Tommy's smiling face reappeared. This time he had transformed himself into a Karate teacher, dressed in a light, loosely-fitted white cotton undergarment. He wasn't wearing any top. He began by explaining how Uechi-ryu karate came from China and was introduced to Japan and Okinawa by Kanbun Uechi, the father of his teacher Kanei. He went on to explain what a Kata was and how important they were to learning Uechi-ryu. I was anxious to actually see something, but Tommy drew out the suspense by recounting a story, told to him by Kanbun, about how the Kata Sanchin, which he was about to perform, was able to strengthen the body of Chinese during the Boxer Rebellion, enabling them to stop bullets from penetrating their muscles. I smiled and he clarified the point by saying that the Chinese army bullets were not charged with heavy loads of gunpowder, but enough to kill an average person. He further explained how the Chinese soldiers became frightened at this "superhuman" feat until one frustrated soldier on horseback, chased a rebel until the "boxer" tired and could not retain his "Sanchin" strength. The soldier's bullet was able to do its job and the "boxers" lost their superhuman image.

Finally, Tommy stood and performed a few warm-up exercises, bowed to us and went into his Sanchin kata. I became transfixed at Tommy's transformation. From a smiling, genial, humble man, into this

## Uechi-ryu Karate: "Half Hard - Half Soft"

tiger-man. . . eyes glaring, body appearing like armor. Punctuating the lightning like moves were strange and hypnotic "hissing". . . snake like and deadly. Finally completing his moves, he returned to Tommy, the mere mortal, who bowed quietly and sat down.

I was speechless. No one spoke for a few minutes. Finally I blurted out, "Please teach me this strange and wonderful art!"

My first class was the next day. We spent most of that evening discussing technicalities:

1. By what name should I call him? After original introductions, Andy called him "Tommy". I continued to call him Mr. Tomoyose, but after hearing him refer to Master Uechi as "Sensei", I was confused as to how he wanted to be addressed. "Everyone at work calls me 'Tommy' and you may also." was his reply. To this day, when we are alone I continue to call him "Tommy", but in front of others he will always be "Sensei".

2. What would we adopt as a uniform. We visited a local sporting goods store (a sidewalk stall containing a few judo gi and a kendo outfit. Tommy suggested that since we would be doing most of the workout without a top, there was no reason to pay for the heavy judo top. I kind of liked the Kendo top. It had black embroidered stripes crisscrossing the entire top.

3. What was the fee for learning Uechi-ryu? Tommy was characteristically flustered about money talk. At first he said I could repay him for the lessons by helping with his English, but I pressed him regarding a fee. Finally he stated that I could give him whatever I wished. I ended up giving him about \$10 a month, which I tactfully placed in an envelope and placed under the tea pot at the end of a session.

4. How often could I work out? He decided that we would work out every night, including Sundays, for about 2 hours. We generally spent three hours working out and another hour cooling off, drinking tea while he related stories about Karate. I asked him about a shower after class. He laughed and said we could shower "Okinawan" style after class. This consisted of going to back the of the house, near the well, and sponge-off with a small towel. The weather throughout my tour was oppressively hot and humid. One did not workout without the ever present utilitarian towel. It could be wrapped around one's head to keep sweat from pouring into your eyes, used to towel-off after Kata and finally to use as part of the Okinawan "shower" following class.

I soon learned that Andy, like most of the American soldiers I pushed into taking



George mattson's Columbus Avenue dojo in Boston during the 1950's.

lessons, attended classes infrequently. Mostly I attended class alone, receiving private lessons. This meant that I frequently performed all the conditioning drills and sparring with Mr. Tomoyose. I quickly learned how sensitive an instructor he was after my first Saturday visit to Master Uechi's dojo, when I was "honored" to practice with obviously superior students, dressed in "traditional" Okinawan white cotton underclothing without belts to distinguish rank.

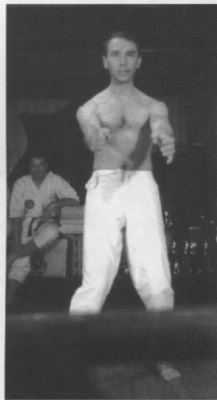
During these Saturday visits, I was often asked to spar with these "students". Needless to say, I drank a prodigious amount of Uechi sensei's home brew medicine for bruises. Years later, on subsequent visits to the island, I recognized many of my earlier sparring partners as the now senior instructors of Uechi-ryu.

Classes at the "Tomoyose Dojo" were casual to the extreme. Since I was the only student on most nights, the sessions were frequently punctuated with "tea breaks". Between Kata, after a particular strenuous conditioning drill and after sparring rounds. There wasn't a formal beginning or end. When I got too tired to perform another move, Tommy would signal his wife who would bring in a fresh pot of tea, then move the table back to its central position in the main room.

What followed was the best part of the class as far as I was concerned. Tommy would sip tea while recalling stories of old Okinawa or China. . . generally to make a point about some part of the evening's training. . . perhaps a special block in Uechi-ryu that Kanbum had used to effectively block a bully's attack while

simultaneously paralyzing the attacker's arm with the power of his block! Special "death" blows, delivered to precise areas of the body at times determined by the cycle of the moon. How Kanbum's teacher, (called Shushabu at this time) instructed a one armed student who was being humiliated and picked on by bullies, how to develop a single technique into a "killing blow! Shushabu selected a young sapling near the training hall and showed the student how to strike the small tree with a blow using the inside of his forearm. The student was to practice this circular strike daily until the tree died. Tommy showed me the move and explained how many Uechi techniques use this devastating and effective strike. Every night after class Tommy shared his knowledge in an attempt to get me to understand the Zen aspect of the karate he just finished teaching me. His main concern was that I might return to America and present his beloved Uechi-ryu in a negative light.

Master Uechi's classes were entirely different, yet were quite casual by today's standards. Although Saturday's class was supposed to begin at 1PM, generally only a few students actually showed up on time. Uechi sensei remained at the front of the dojo, and students would go up to him, one at a time and request that he watch their kata. Each student performed three of each Kata that they knew. When a student completed his Kata, Sensei would nod approvingly and occasionally make a correction. Then the student would go to the back of the class and join in with the rest of the group in conditioning, exercises and stretching. When a spot opened for Kata a student would quickly move to the



**A 1965 demonstration. George Mattson performing Seisan.**

front of the dojo, bow and request that Sensei check his kata. I would perform as many Kata as time and "slots" permitted. Once a student completed a Kata I would wait for what I considered to be an acceptable interval, then would jump into the Kata "slot", ask permission to perform a Kata and begin. Often I would lose count as to the number of Kata performed and finally, after about the fourth Saturday, Tommy stated that Uechi sensei asked that I only do three of each Kata per day.

The class was so long that often students would dress, go outside for a smoke or to eat, then return to the dojo for more practice. Towards the end of class, students would pair off and spar. There were generally accepted rules which few followed. Although I never saw anyone being carried out feet first, knock outs and blooded faces were commonplace. All the Okinawan students were eager to spar with the Foreigner. At this time in history, Americans were not liked very much. The few who wandered into the dojo during classes, were generally out partying and would drop in to "show the 'gooks' how to fight!" Whenever I was at the dojo and a GI showed up, I would intercept him to answer questions or to talk him out of challenging anyone, if that was his intent. Tommy explained that if an American came to sensei's dojo to actually practice, they would never get beyond learning a few

punching and kicking drills which would be promptly used to attack the makiwara and heavy bag. Few Americans ever stayed more than a few classes before giving up.

So when I continued to show up on Saturday and was advancing through the Kata like they were, I was given a rare opportunity to be treated as a fellow student. The only exception to this was that they were very careful not to hurt me badly. I suspect that the "word" was circulated that I was "fair game" up to a point! Bruise, OK . . . knockout not OK. I enjoyed the fighting however, and like Kata kept coming back for more until no one else felt like sparring. I knew only one way to train. . . 150%!

Tommy would often meet me at Uechi sensei's dojo and would carry on animated discussions pertaining to my progress, or lack thereof, following my performance of a Kata or other drills. Naturally I was terrified that Master Uechi would declare the "American Experiment" a failure and direct Tommy to close his dojo! After class I would corner Tommy and quiz him about what the master really thought about my progress. Tommy would generally take a long time to respond and would never give a direct answer. "What you lack in talent you make up in enthusiasm" was a common reply, then he would punch me in the shoulder and say that I shouldn't worry so much and

just keep practicing harder!

But there was no way for me to practice harder. I was spending every waking, non working hour practicing Uechi-ryu. In the evening, after Tommy directed me to "go home", I would return to the barracks and practice until sleep overcame me.

Although I can recall many of my original classes as though they happened yesterday, the strongest memory is of my personal transformation in the army. . . from a wiseguy kid, being transferred to a platoon of "last resort", to a soldier who excelled in his job and finally being promoted in record time to staff sergeant and being offered a job with the C.I.D. (A civilian government intelligence department). My Uechi-ryu "experience" had changed me as a person, which upon reflection, was the single most important event in my life and continues to be what influences my teaching and life.

The author is an 8th degree black belt and President of the Uechi-ryu Karate Association: North American Chapter. (NAC) For information regarding Uechi-ryu Karate, call George Mattson at 508-586-3969 or check out the Uechi-ryu Karate Association's On-Line Magazine at <http://www.uechi-ryu.com>

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