

# The story begins back in 1967 in Vietnam

By Hung Tri Nguyen

---

My name is Hung Tri Nguyen, I was born in Da Lat South Vietnam in 1955 to a Vietnamese mother and a French Father. What follows is an insight to my evolving relationship with Taekwon-do over the last forty years.

The story begins back in 1967 in Vietnam.

I was twelve years old and because of my Eurasian heritage a constant target for bully's both in and out of school. As my family became aware of my being bullied they tried talking to the school principal, but to no avail. The school was unable to offer a solution.

At the time my uncle was a third Dan instructor of Taekwon-do (TKD). He along with a fellow officer Mr Van Binh was part of the first group of South Vietnamese Army (SVA) officers to be trained by Grand Master Nam Tae Hi, a Korean military instructor.

I had often asked my uncle to teach me TKD but he believed that due to my hot temper it would not be wise to do so.

After a particularly savage beating he changed his mind. However, due to his commitments as an officer in the South Vietnamese Army my uncle could not train me himself. He enrolled me in Mr Van Binh's school of TKD. Mr Van Binh is currently a Grand Master in Houston Texas.

The training was twice a week for one and a half hour sessions, as part of the training I was also instructed in the basics of Aikido. The classes were large consisting of more than one hundred male students of mixed age and ability at any one time. The oldest students would be no more than seventeen years old as they would be in the army after that age.

The fees for these classes were reasonable but not affordable for the average household of the time.

Training took place in a large impressive building in the Xa Lo suburb of Saigon city.

The Judo and Aikido classes were held on floor mats whilst the TKD classes had a bare concrete floor. Surrounding the main training area were heavy punch bags and wooden poles wrapped in rope or straw mat for students to condition their hands and feet.

Grading only took place every six months so I could only advance twice a year. I trained for 18 months and attained the grade at Green belt. As it happens the TKD did improve my defensive ability but the bullies figured out quickly that greater numbers ensured their success.

My TKD training ceased as I became heavily committed to other sporting activities: swimming and high board diving. Indeed I was selected to train in both swimming and high board diving to represent my country at the 1972 Olympic Games. Due to the civil war at the time I unfortunately

did not get the opportunity to fulfill this role as I was drafted into the army in 1972 at the age of 17.

When I joined the army I received twelve weeks basic training with the regular forces before I enlisted with 8th Battalion Rangers.

Five months active duty with the Rangers followed. I then volunteered for the Special Force attached to the Rangers and was transferred to the Intel Verification Unit. As part of Special Force training I was required to enroll in an intensive six month combat TKD training program. This program consisted of eight hour days, six days a week brutal training.

The serious of this course was highlighted by my instructor's very first words which I still recall: "This course could save your life – but that will depend very much on how well you train. Listen to my instructions and train well and I will help you in every aspect of the course, fool around and break an arm or leg and your time with Special Forces is over. This training is not an escape from the battlefield it is preparation for it!" Sixty men began the training, 48 finished the course.

The core training had few similarities to my childhood experiences. We were trained to use TKD primarily as a weapon rather than an art. There was no room for finesse.

At the culmination of this training I was awarded a Black belt by the army.

The army black belt was perhaps equivalent to the brown belt black tip of the day, now called Red belt.

At that time one would first achieve Black belt and then proceed to gain First Dan .Today when you get a Black Belt, you automatically have a First Dan.

TAEKWON-DO had been introduced to Vietnam in the late 1950's by the South Korean Army. According to the biography of Nam Tae Hi (<http://wtaonline.net/namtaehi.htm>), the government of Korea, in 1962 because of the close military relationship of the two countries, decided to extend aid to South Vietnam. This aid was repayment for help that Vietnam had given during the Korean War. The aid took the form of TKD training. South Vietnam was the first place outside of Korea that TKD was taught.

The South Korean military offered TKD training to the South Vietnamese Army to help improve self discipline within the troops. TKD continued to be used as part of the military training throughout the civil war (Viet Nam War). During that time is also increased in popularity with civilians and I understand that it remains a popular civilian martial arts.

TAEKWON-DO became very popular in South Vietnam partly due to cultural reasons .There already existed other forms of Martial arts, Karate, Judo, Aikido, and VietNameese "VoVinam"etc. Perhaps TAEKWON-DO was the first martial art to be introduced by a friendly nation as opposed to one colonizing Vietnam.

Unfortunately the outcome of the civil war forced my family and me to leave the country. We were happily able to resettle in New Zealand where we had family. When I arrived in 1975, I was

keen to keep up my training, but was unable to locate any classes. The only classes available were Kung fu and Karate classes.

In 1979 I relocated to Singapore. There was a large school of TKD but I was unable to resume my training. A very busy work schedule required me to spend a large amount of time at sea as I was working as a diver for a salvage company.

Throughout the ensuing years I wanted to get back to TKD because my uncle had impressed his philosophy on me. He believed that TKD was not primarily about fighting. He stated that “as the one hand goes forward to strike the other comes back as a form of self control. The control is to recognize TAEKWON-DO as an art form and whilst it could be used to fight it is also about self discipline and being a force of good for others”. This philosophy has stayed with me to this day.

As things turned out it would be twenty five years before I was to have my next TKD experience. In this time there had obviously been many significant changes in my life.

In Singapore I met my wife and we returned to New Zealand to raise our family. As the father of two young children I was determined that they did not have to endure the same torment I had in my childhood.

When my son turned five years old, my wife and I located a TAEKWON-DO class in our area. My son refused to take part unless his older sister also took part, and she refused to take part unless I did and so my relationship with TAEKWON-DO began again. I came back to TKD as a not-so-fit 40-something-year-old. The patterns were the same but the body was different.

As a family we began taking lessons in Rhee TAEKWON-DO under Instructor Trevor Harbrow. My children both progressed to Brown belt –black tip. After eleven months I had achieved Black belt status and my passion for TKD was truly reignited. I was committed to the training not just for my children but once again for my own self-care.

At this time I began to teach classes on a regular basis. As an instructor with Rhee TKD it was very difficult to progress beyond first Dan.

In 2003 our regional instructor Trevor Harbrow suggested we move to ITFNZ to further advance our own training. Following an exhaustive time of debate approximately three hundred students and instructors made the decision to move over to ITFNZ. I continued to teach my classes under the new format without interruption.

After adjusting to and training in the new format of TAEKWON-DO taught by ITF for almost two years I gained my second Dan under ITF regulations.

Teaching has given me a completely new appreciation of the art of TKD. My dedication is informed by my military instructor's commitment to me. I work with each student asking for their full attention so they too can benefit from this art of physical and mental discipline. I have also learned over the years that it is important for the children to set their own goals, to have a dream or vision of what they would like to achieve. I encourage my students to find out about people successful in their areas of interest to widen their understanding of the challenges they may face

and to build up their own confidence and self esteem. I also keep things “real”. We don’t necessarily achieve all our goals 100% of the time. If we miss the target we don’t let it stop us or get us down. It’s important to acknowledge the success of having tried and then re-evaluate the situation, reset the goals and resume the training. Drawing on my business training: “Quitters never win and winners never quit.”

I receive immense satisfaction seeing children enjoying and benefiting from the training. There can be no greater return from the investment of my time. The parents of students often comment on the positive influence the training has on their children.

TKD continues to drive me to advance my own skills and qualifications. In this martial art there is an understanding that we are all always learning. The structure of ITF ensures that knowledge is always being shared. Instructors while recognized as having achieved various levels know that they must continue to train, study, learn. This perspective of the instructor as both teacher and student enhances a balanced model for life.

As a mature student of TKD I have had to recognize my limits. As a teacher it is important that I am honest with my students to develop good rapport and to challenge them so that they can be the best that they can be. My limits are not their limits. Each person is encouraged to achieve the maximum of their own potential. TKD is a life enhancing process. The more I achieve the more I can give to others and the more I receive.

In summary, my first involvement with TKD had been a way to defend myself against the constant bullying that I was subjected to in my youth. This strategy was not particularly successful but the seed of the principles of TKD had been sown.

The next time TKD came into my life was during the civil war in Vietnam. This was a basic and brutal form of TKD. It was designed to keep me alive in a dangerous environment and it succeeded!

Twenty five years later, a survivor not only of war but of cancer I was looking to instill in my son the same self-discipline which I myself at a young age had found in the TKD principles.

It is a testimony to the art of TKD that decades later in a different country its wisdom and truth have remained constant. My life experiences have left me with a “never give-up” approach to challenges. TKD has not only given me a fantastic outlet for this determination it has helped me to channel my energy into something productive and positive. I am passionate to pass on the knowledge and benefits of TKD to others. I thank you for taking the time to read my TKD story so far.