


Tactical Armament

The Katana and Wakazashi Are Swords Most Relevant in the 21st Century

By Jerry Ahern

PHOTOS BY SHARON AHERN



The Musashi Wakazashi and Musashi Katana are shown here with the Tactical Katana and Tactical Wakazashi. All the classic combat excellence of the traditional Japanese daisho has been retained, but these have been brought fully into the modern age via top-flight materials and construction.

The basic sword, not yet iron or steel, can be found as early as more than three millennia before the birth of Christ. Swords

served as combat weapons well into the middle of the 20th century. Today, this battle tool is coming to the fore once again.

"Reclaiming The Blade" is a 2009 film that addresses the long history of the sword and how, in the modern era, those of us who revere the blade (whether from an academic approach or as a martial arts implement) are bringing the sword back from near obscurity and endeavoring to restore the sword to the place of honor it has held throughout much of human history.

THE SWORD AS AN INSTRUMENT OF BATTLE

The sword is, first and foremost, an instrument of battle, whether in individual combat or massive encounters between large groups of fighters. The modern English word, "sword," comes from the Old English, "sweord," which, in turn, derives from the Norsk word, "sverd," that means "to cut" (and not "to hang on the wall").

But this implement, which survived in war and was, for a time, the gentleman's method of settling matters of honor in Western and Eastern cultures, was nearly done in by the development of personal-sized gunpowder weapons of enhanced reliability.

If you think about it, the logic seems inescapable: Why risk getting close to cut or stab someone who might just cut or stab you, when you could stay back at some distance and send little bits of lead his way?

The sword generally ceased to be an important element of an infantryman's equipment, remaining with the combat officer as a symbol of leadership and as a practical weapon in lieu of a rifle with a fixed bayonet.

At last, in the West, the sword was relegated to pomp, circumstance and ceremony—it was a required accessory for the dress uniform of officers in many military organizations. The sword was always a symbol, as well as a weapon; but in the





Ahern has the katana in his right hand and the wakazashi in his left as he gets the feel for using both blades simultaneously. The different blade lengths can clearly be seen.

end, it was a symbol, instead of a weapon. Most such swords were not even sharpened and were often made from components selected for looks and convenient maintenance, rather than fighting quality.

RELEGATED TO MOVIE COMBAT

In China in the 1930s, Chinese and Japanese swordsmen went blade to blade, dadao to katana, at the Great Wall. A little later in the mid-20th century, Dutch troopers and sailors used swords in combat in support of Dutch colonial interests, rather than bayonets mounted on modern rifles.

By and large, however, the sword—whatever its style or origin—only saw combat on the movie screen. There were great sword-fighting films throughout the early and mid-20th century. Movie legends such as Errol Flynn, Basil Rathbone, Tyrone Power, Cornel Wilde, Douglas Fairbanks (Senior and Junior), Stewart Granger and others elevated the “sword fight to the death,” whatever the noble reason, to high



For comparison, the beautifully traditional Musashi Katana and Musashi Wakazashi, both from CAS Hanwei, are shown here.



The tip of the scabbard is drilled through to serve as a drain hole.

drama and sometimes, comedy (witness Danny Kaye fighting Basil Rathbone in “The Court Jester” or Tony Curtis dueling Ross Martin in “The Great Race”). Big-screen sword combat was riveting and exciting.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t real. Real sword fighting to the death consisted of brawling with sharp objects. I never recall seeing a big-screen sword fight where the good guy punched the bad guy with the hilt of his sword or took “unfair advantage,” as the bad guys did.

RETURN TO REALITY

Gradually, even sword-fighting movies became rather scarce. When sword use did return (to the screen and to reality), there were several reasons. The screen, big and small, fed the reality.

The majority of Western swords had become flimsy, overly decorated things, and a fighting-quality European sword was hard to come by. Eastern swords were often gaudy junk.



Paracord is wound around part of the scabbard in lieu of the more traditional sageo.

Hank Reinhardt, the founder of Museum Replicas, was a lifelong student of edged weapons and a true expert in their use; he believed in the sword, pushed for its return and demanded quality worthy of combat.

ENTER THE MANUFACTURERS OF REAL SWORDS

Custom makers began producing more swords. Museum Replicas and CAS (now CAS-Hanwei) began offering a wide range of fighting-quality swords made overseas, where labor costs were lower. Now, the sword-making tradition could be re-established.

Paul Chen, at Hanwei in China, and the Windlass brothers, at Windlass Steelcrafts in India, were producing hand-forged battle-quality swords that, in most cases, surpassed the materials and heat-treating quality of the antique originals.

Along came Arnold Schwarzenegger and “Conan, the Barbarian,” which featured mesmerizing sword fight choreography. The

THE SWORD IN SPORT

Although European swords often find themselves neglected as martial arts implements in the mainstream in favor of the Japanese katana, recent times have brought about a true resurgence of interest in the combative use of both Eastern and Western swords as sport—beyond the demanding, yet stylized, practice of kendo and European competitive fencing.

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“Highlander” movie and television craze, with its emphasis on the katana, along with films such as “Braveheart” and “Rob Roy,” both of which emphasized European swords, put sword combat back on the screen in force. Even more than any of these, the enormous success of the “Star Wars” films and their “light saber” combat rekindled interest in the sword. And sword-makers were ready.

WORDS STILL IN COMBAT USE

Meanwhile, the Western nations and Eastern allies came to blows with elements of the Middle East—a culture in which the sword was an instrument for meting out punishment and was still used as a battle weapon.

By November 2001, elements of U.S. Special Forces fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan in the aftermath of September 11th were riding and fighting side by side with indigenous horse cavalry; and, in addition to the modern weapons that our guys had at their disposal, a number of them

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The blood groove, or fuller, lightens the blade without weakening it.

were reported by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to be carrying swords.

Wolfowitz revealed this to Bob Schieffer on CBS's "Face The Nation."

"I have with me a dispatch that came from one of our Special Forces guys, who was literally riding horseback with a sword with one of the Northern Alliance ...," he said.

When asked to verify the remark about a sword, he repeated, "With a sword."

The 21st century began with the world's most modern soldiers, the best-equipped warriors in human history, carrying swords into battle.

A SWORD FOR TODAY

As the war on terror goes on, the sword is there. The sword is also a weapon for the savvy civilian, whether a bush pilot, a home defender in an area where guns are illegal or impractical, or a traveler who cannot legally have a firearm at his destination.

Currently, one of the most popular swords in the world is the Tactical Wakazashi, from CAS-Hanwei. The wakazashi, of course, is the smaller of the two swords in the classic Samurai daisho. Ever since the Tactical Wakazashi's introduction, it has constantly gone out of stock to back-ordered status.

As this is written, the first shipment of the bigger of the two swords in the daisho has landed. The Tactical Katana is here.

Either one of these swords by itself is state-of-the-art modern and a fantastic choice for a practical sword. The two together are truly ideal.

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Ahern practices a two-handed cutting motion with the Tactical Katana.

The Tactical Wakazashi and the Tactical Katana are identical, except for their blades, overall length and weight. These are modern. I would have to say—heretical as it may sound—that these are improved versions of their classical counterparts.

Rather than their hilts being pinned to the tangs with a single or double bamboo peg, these full-length, full-width and full-thickness tangs are fitted with handle scales attached in four places. Two of them are hollow in order to receive paracord lashing.

Their handle slabs are checkered Kraton. The steel, nearly ¼ inch thick in the



The long and the short of it: Ahern holds the CAS-Hanwei Tactical Katana and Tactical Wakazashi in their scabbards.

hilt area, is high-carbon 51-60 spring steel. The steel is plasma-coated for corrosion resistance. The guard is not a traditional round tsuba, but is a more Western-like double quillon guard that is drilled through on either side to facilitate lashing.

The Kat has an ideal blade length for a typical katana, 27 1/2 inches, while the handle is 10 1/2 inches and the overall length is 39 1/2 inches.

The Wak is 31 inches overall, with a 20-inch blade. Its handle, at 8 1/2 inches, is longer than those found on a typical traditional wakazashi. This enables the user to get two hands on the Tactical Wak when the situation demands.

Rather than using lacquered wood to form the scabbard, both the Tactical Kat and the Tactical Wak feature weatherproof fiberglass with drain holes at the tip. The scabbards are partially wrapped with traditional paracord, taking the place of the traditional sageo.

STRONG IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Traditionalists may cringe, but these superb fighting tools truly bring the combat



The handle slabs are anchored to the tang in four places.



Ahern experiments with using both blades simultaneously. The swords felt good in the hand and seemed to work in concert quite naturally.

sword into the 21st century. The prepared trooper in combat and the prepared individual, whether male or female, would be well served with either of these CAS-Hanwei tactical blades. Having both (and they each weigh precious little), might prove truly ideal.

"Reclaiming the Blade," as you can see, is right on the money. The sword, most definitely is back, and it has a firm hold on its place of honor. **KI**

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