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The Man Who Lived The True “Kendo”

On April 12th, 2012, 7:20pm, a man arrived at Narita Airport. Ronald Bennett. Former President of the Australian Kendo Renmei, aged 78.

A month earlier, I received an email from Ron. He said he wanted to see Mount Fuji and Yabusame (Japanese horse archery). Ron and I go back over 40 years and I wanted to help him, but he had twice fallen to heart attack, had a pacemaker in his body, was in no condition to practice kendo, and relied on his wheelchair to move about. It takes at least 10 hours on a direct flight from Sydney to Narita. This would be an extremely difficult journey for him. Perhaps even life threatening. I wanted to convince him to reconsider.

I replied to his email. “It’s too risky”, I said. “I understand you want to come, but I am totally against the idea”. But he replied, insisting he *had* to come to Japan. A friend of his, who was a doctor, will also come, and there was no need for any concern; he did not give up, not matter what I said. As if an invisible force was pressing on the back of this man, he was unusually adamant this time. Eventually I had to give in. Coincidentally, it was the time of spring festivities at the Kamakura Hachimangu Shrine, so I went to reserve a seat to watch Yabusame, reserved a hotel in Shichirigahama where you can view Mount Fuji, and made other preparations to welcome my guest coming from far away.

I’d like to pause here to write a little bit about Mr Bennett and kendo. Whilst Mr Bennett first learned about kendo about 50 years ago in 1961 or 62, it was in late 1965 that he actually started practicing, when he met Mr Tokuji Okura (a graduate of the former Tokyo Commerce University), who at the time was the Managing Director of Mitsubishi Corporation Australia. Mr Bennett and Mr Rex Lawley, who became the first AKR president, came to Mr Okura and asked him to teach them kendo, but Mr Okura told them to leave shinai training for later, handed them Musashi’s “The Book of Five Rings” and told them to read it first. Mr Okura did not teach them kendo for

long and eventually passed that responsibility to Mr Yoshida, the first principal of the Japanese School, but ever since then, Mr Bennett devoted himself to kendo, almost religiously.

In April 1974, the first European Kendo Championships was held, with the presence of a member of the British Royal Family. As soon as Mr Bennett heard of this, he cancelled all work, flew himself to Europe, and managed to force his way to participate as a competitor. The tournament was a European tournament, and no one from Oceania had any right to participate; he indeed “crashed” his way in. He ended up losing to a strong French player, but the incident instantly brought Australian kendo to the attention of Europeans. In any case, his level of devotion to kendo was extraordinary. It seemed as if he was in search of something; something more than winning or losing shiai.

There was another episode. It was in year 2000, at the 11th WKC in Santa Clara. He had applied to grade for 6 dan, but on the day he suddenly decided to pull out. His reason; he was not fully satisfied with his own kendo kata. He would feel bad if he was to cause any problems for his partner. When I saw his kata, I thought it was satisfactory. I told him to let the judges do the judging and take the examination, but he still adamantly refused. In his heart, there must have been the samurai warrior’s sense of “beauty”. Today, the rules have changed and it is permitted to re-try the kata, but soon there were shameless acts by some who, after passing jitsugi, would not attempt kata and go home. When I found about this, I lamented that Japanese kendo had fallen so low. Afterwards, the rule changed again to disqualify anyone who didn’t attempt kata, but it was still shameful that such rules had to be implemented at all.

Compared to this, Mr Bennett himself must have pursued the true meaning of the “heart of Bushi”, to the very end.

I would like to believe that the samurai warrior’s mindset and spirit, which Mr Okura taught, remains in Australia today.

Getting back to the story, Mr Bennett arrived in Japan with his doctor without incident. However, besides Yabusame and Mt Fuji, there was

another reason for his visit. That was for his book, “The Progress of Kendo, Iaido and Jodo in Australia”, which he spent 5 years writing. His objective was to pass a copy of his book to each Japanese person that had helped him in the past. By this time, Tokuji Okura had already passed away and, unfortunately, we couldn’t locate his family, but there were still many others in Tokyo who came to the reunion party with Mr Bennett.

- Akira Yoshida Sensei, first principal of Sydney Japanese International School
- Masami Shoji Sensei, former teacher of Sydney Japanese International School (in the years that Yoshida sensei was the principal)
- Kunio Shizawa Sensei, former Nippon Taiku Daigaku kendo instructor, with his wife and daughter
- Makoto Yagisawa Sensei, current Nippon Taiku Daigaku kendo instructor, with his wife
- Akira Tajima Sensei, Tokyo Metropolitan Tsubasa Sogo High School

It was only a week’s stay, but he was able to see Yabusame, visit the ancient city of Kamakura, had an interview with Kendo Japan, met many kendo friends, and departed Narita on Saturday 21st April. At the departure gate, as if to say he accomplished everything, he firmly shook my hand with a smile on his face, and that was to be our last farewell. Sixteen days later, on Monday 7th May, he quietly passed away.

But I must write what happened afterwards. A few months later, Mr Bennett’s doctor returned to Japan and told me that Mr Bennett had asked him to scatter his ashes somewhere in view of Mt Fuji. The doctor asked me where he can find such a place. I was aware of various laws on burying bones and I knew how difficult it was to do this, but I had absolutely no idea about scattering ashes. But whilst we were investigating this and that, the doctor went to Mt Koya by himself and scattered the ashes there, saying, “I found an old samurai’s grave there. Ron (as he was known) would be so happy to lay at the side of a samurai”.

The rest of the ashes, he scattered in a famous old temple in Tokyo.

Apparently, from what I heard, Mr Bennett does not have a grave in Australia.

Finally, I'd like to end my writing with Mr Bennett's final words.

"If I never learnt of kendo from Japan, my life would have ended just being a simple lumberjack in the bush."

The kendo that Mr Bennett pursued was not of kenjutsu, but of the true "Way of the Sword".

End