

WARRIORS OF THE RAINBOW BRIDGE

The History of Martial Arts in Hawaii

By Adam James, Founder of Rainbow Warrior Martial Arts



Great martial art styles have developed all over the world, and great martial artists come from everywhere. However, Hawaii has held a unique and special role in developing innovative and elite martial arts. In the early years of martial arts exploration and expansion world wide, the arts and the people were separated, and the Islands of Hawaii were essential for the connections, development and advancement of the arts. Furthermore, the culture of martial arts training in Hawaii was exceptionally effective in integrating techniques and skills while challenging limitations in training and development.

Hawaii has a history of Warriors and King Kamehameha was one of the great military minds of history and united the Hawaiian Islands. The ancient Hawaiian martial art kapu Kuailua also known as Lua had existed for centuries and martial culture was already deeply entrenched with the people of Hawaii.

As the sugarcane and pineapple plantations and the shipping industry developed in the early years of agricultural growth in Hawaii, people from China, Japan, the Philippines and other areas of the world came to Hawaii to work on the plantations and the docks. These people brought with them their national cultures, which included a wide variety of martial arts.

Life in Hawaii during the 19th and early 20th centuries often led to integration - the sharing of information and techniques. There was also naturally ethnic pride and efforts to promote the martial arts styles of the various individual groups.

One particular group that had a strong foothold in Hawaii because of early elite instructors who visited and settled there was Okinawan Karate.



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First it's important to note that Karate had existed in Okinawa for centuries, but was always practiced secretly and privately. In the early 1900s for the very first time, Karate was openly demonstrated in Okinawa. Soon after Pioneers like Gichin Funakoshi went to Japan in 1917 and again in 1922 and taught and demonstrated the martial art, which subsequently grew in Japan and across the world.

In 1927, Kensu Yabu did a Karate demonstration at the Nuuanu YMCA in Honolulu and another on Kauai. Then in 1933, two Okinawan teachers opened a Karate school in Honolulu, which was one of the first outside of Okinawa or Japan.

Next, Chojun Miyagi, the Founder of Goju-Ryu and one of the most famous Karate instructors came to Hawaii in 1934 and he stayed and taught for almost two years.

In 1939, Henry Okazaki founded the American Jujitsu Institute which eventually became Danzan Ryu Jujitsu and developed amazing martial artists like Wally Jay, the founder of Small Circle Jujitsu as well as Toru Tanaka, John Cahill and Willy Cahill.

Kung Fu also flourished in Hawaii and the Chinese martial arts had a major influence on the entire Hawaii martial arts landscape. For decades in Hawaii, Kung Fu was taught privately with family and close friends, but also at private schools within the Chinese community.

First, the Shang-wu Kwan was established in 1923 and later changed the name to the Jeng Moo Tai Yuk Oui in 1935. Jeng Moo is a prominent association throughout China and originally created in Shanghai. The Hawaii Jeng Moo Association thrived in Honolulu Chinatown during the 1900s and exists to this day.

Also, the Gee Yung Physical Culture Association was established in 1941 by Lum Dai Yong, who was Sifu in Shaolin Kung Fu specializing in Fut Ka Kuen, a Daoist priest and a Sun Kung/Healer. Lum Sifu was invited to Hawaii by the Jeng Moo in 1935, and then stayed and opened Gee Yung. He also served as the personal bodyguard of Sun Yat-Sen, who had attended Iolani School and Oahu College - Punahou School in Honolulu.



Another significant contributor to martial arts in Hawaii was James Mitose of Kosho-Ryu Kempo, who opened his school in 1942. Mitose would go on to teach William KS Chow, who in turn trained Ed Parker as well as Adriano Emperado, the co-founder of Kajukenbo. All of these men had an enormous impact on martial arts in Hawaii and around the world.

Professor Chow had trained extensively in Kung Fu before working with Mitose, and he was a pioneer of mixing martial arts styles and systems. He was also a tenacious fighter and demonstrated the effectiveness of the martial arts from Hawaii.

In the late 1940s, five elite Hawaii martial artists from various different backgrounds including Adriano Emperado came together to create a martial art system that would cover all the ranges and be especially effective for street self defense. Initially called “the Black Belt Society” the group would eventually call the system Kajukenbo and it is considered one of the world’s first mixed martial arts system. The original founders included Emperado (Kenpo), Joseph Holck (Judo), Peter Young Yil Choo (Tang Soo Do/Moo Duk Kwan/Karate), Frank Ordenez (Jujitsu) and Clarence Chang (Sil Lum Kung Fu).

The martial arts were exploding in Hawaii because of the close proximity and integrated communities. In the meantime, the mainland USA was increasingly seeking martial arts training. It’s important to note that around this time, Robert Trias opened the first commercial karate school in 1946 on the mainland USA in Phoenix, Arizona. and more schools from a wide variety of styles and instructors would open soon after, many with roots in Hawaii.

Along with Kempo, Kajukenbo and Kung Fu, the traditional Japanese styles of Karate and Judo continued to grow and flourish in Hawaii with numerous schools opening to the public starting in the 1950s.

In addition, Koichi Tohei of Aikido came to Hawaii in 1953 and opened the first Aikido Dojo outside of Japan. Then in 1961, Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido also came to Hawaii to visit the Dojo, teach and demonstrate the art of Aikido.

Chozu Kotaka, winner of the 1962 All Japan Karate Championship visited Hawaii in 1965 and then chose to stay in Honolulu and opened the International Karate Federation (IKF). Many experts consider the IKF one of the best karate organizations in the world due to the development of many national and international champions.

Over the years, Hawaii produced amazing martial artists who traveled the world and had enormous influence in the martial arts development everywhere.

Ed Parker studied under Professor Chow and then attended BYU in Provo Utah. He was inspired by the Arthur Murray dance studio business model and established very successful commercial martial arts schools all across the United States. He also created the world



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famous International Karate Championship tournament in Long Beach, which has had an enormous impact on the martial arts community in totality. Ed worked extensively in the movie industry, and he was instrumental in the discovery of Bruce Lee. A true pioneer and legendary martial artist, Ed Parker was extremely influential in the growth of martial arts in movies and throughout the world.

Bill Ryusaki, who was a Sensei in Shotokan Karate, Judo and Kenpo/Kajukenbo under Mariano Tiwanak of CAH3, came to the mainland and established Ryu-Dojo Hawaiian Kempo. He taught Benny the Jet Urquidez, Cecil Peoples and a number of world champions, and he also worked in the movie industry as a stuntman and martial arts consultant for many decades.

Mike Stone from Maui won the very first International Karate tournament sparring grand championship, and would go on to become one of the worlds greatest karate champions. He worked closely with Ed Parker and became the teacher of Elvis Presley. In the film industry, Mike Stone wrote the script for groundbreaking film Enter the Ninja and he pioneered this enormously successful movie genre.



Al Dacascos an original Kajukenbo student, deepened the connection between Kenpo, Kajukenbo, Escrima/FMA and Kung Fu and he founded Won Hop Kuen Do. Al's son Mark Dacascos has become one of the world's premier actors and martial artists, co-starring in the John Wick 3 with Keanu Reeves.

Kenneth Funakoshi was another early student of Kajukenbo but he was also a relative of Gichin Funakoshi, the legendary founder of Shotokan Karate. Kenneth would go on to establish the Funakoshi Shotokan Karate Association now headquartered in Milpitas, CA with affiliates all over the world.

John Hackleman was born in the New York City area but moved to Hawaii as a child. He trained in Judo, Karate and was a Golden Gloves boxer. John also studied Kempo/Kajukenbo and then created The Pit Hawaiian Kempo, where he coached UFC Champions Chuck Liddell and Glover Teixeira. In 2024, John was named the Director of the new Kajukenbo MMA program.

Gary Lee was born in Hawaii but moved to the mainland as a child. Gary would train with many great karate champions and then became a great champion himself. The Founder of the Sport Karate Museum, Gary is one of the world's greatest historians of martial arts, specializing in the American Sport Karate and the Traditional Karate Pioneers, Legends and Champions of the 20th Century, and he has been instrumental in recording and recognizing many of the greatest martial artist of history.

Solomon Kaihewalu was the first to bring Kapu Kuailua into the wider martial arts community by bringing this unique and special martial art to the mainland and to the entire world. Lua is now





increasingly known as an elite combat martial art system and today Michelle Manu is recognized as one of the world's most knowledgeable and talented instructors.

Mike Dela Vega, a relative of Chojun Miyagi's from Hawaii, trained in the Miyagi family system of Okinawan Kempo Karate, and also an original student of the Kajukenbo school in Palama under Joe Emperado. During the Vietnam War, Dela Vega served as a long range, reconnaissance specialist, and trained Special Forces and Green Berets units in martial arts. After the war in Vietnam, Dela Vega returned to Honolulu and founded Hawaii Shin Kan Okinawan Kempo Karate in 1976 at Kamehameha Park in Kalihi, specializing in special forces/combatives training, positive mental attitude and faith in God.

It's also important to note that the United States military has had an enormous impact on the martial arts styles from Hawaii. With so many military personnel stationed in Hawaii, there has always been a strong interest and influence. The passion, determination, keen intellect, and exceptional physical talent of the US military servicemen and women has helped push the boundaries, and establish the highest level of training and skills development. In addition, the principles of the United States of America, such as liberty and Justice for all and a pursuit of excellence, have been a principal factor for many of the contemporary martial arts styles from Hawaii.

As the modern sport of Mixed Martial Arts developed, grew and expanded, Hawaiian martial artists excelled in MMA with BJ Penn, Max Holloway and others winning championships. Many of them have credited the martial arts culture of Hawaii as a major foundation for their success and they in turn are inspiring a new generation of athletes in Hawaii.

From the humble beginnings on the docks and plantations, the impact of Hawaii on the martial arts has spread to the mainland and across the world thanks to the incredible efforts of these legendary martial artists: Henry Okazaki (Danzan), Lum Dai Yong (Shaolin - Fut Ka Kuen), James Mitose (Kosho-Ryu), William KS Chow (Kara-Ho), Ed Parker (American Kenpo), Wally Jay (Small Circle Jujitsu), Adriano Emperado (Kajukenbo), Mariano Tiwanak (CAH3 Kenpo), Chozu Kotaka (IKF), Bill Ryusaki (Ryu-Dojo Hawaiian Kenpo), Mike Stone (Shonin-Ryu Karate), Al Dacascos (Won Hop Kuen Do), Kenneth Funakoshi (Shotokan), Michael Dela Vega (Okinawan Kempo-Karate), John Hackleman (The Pit Hawaiian Kempo), Gary Lee (Sport Karate Museum), Solomon Kaihewalu (Lua), BJ Penn (MMA/Jujitsu), Michelle Manu (Lua), Max Holloway (MMA) and so many others have all demonstrated to the world the excellence of the martial arts from Hawaii.

The future of martial arts will undoubtedly continue to evolve and the principles of the Hawaii blending will continue to have an influence and an impact. There is a great foundation of martial arts from Hawaii all over the world and more importantly the spirit of the Hawaii martial arts culture will inspire continued growth, development and success. 🐉

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