FIGHTER-SOLDIER

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW!

MMA star TIM KENNEDY talks about his life in the military and his involvement with the Special Operations Combatives Program.

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In the July 2011 issue of Black Belt, Tim Kennedy discussed his MMA training methods and fight strategies. In this interview, Kennedy, who now has a pro record of 14-3 and was named Black Belt’s 2011 MMA Fighter of the Year, delves into the military side of his warrior existence.

—Editor
Could you tell our readers how you wound up in the military?
I was in San Luis Obispo, California, finishing my undergrad work and about to start grad school, when 9/11 happened. Watching those buildings fall made me look in an existential way at my life. I thought, Man, I’m not doing anything with my life! I’m just a fighter, more worried about partying—just a complete waste of air. I went down to the recruiter’s office, not knowing the difference between a Navy SEAL and a Green Beret. I just knew I wanted to be on the front line, at the tip of the spear, so I knocked on a few different doors, one of which belonged to the Army recruiter. I said I wanted to be an Airborne Special Forces Ranger. He just smiled, as though he was thinking, I’ve got something for you.

I enlisted in 2003 and finished basic training in 2004, then went to airborne school. From there, I attended the Special Operations Preparation Course. After that, I went to Special Forces Assessment and Selection and got selected to become an 18B (special-operations weapons sergeant) and go to the Special Forces Qualification Course. That took about 10 months.

What did you do after graduation?
I went to the 7th Special Forces Group, and from there I was assigned to an elite counterterrorism unit and deployed to Iraq. After I came back, I attended Ranger School, where I was an honor grad. Then I went to a few different sniper schools, including the Special Operations Target Interdiction Course and Special Forces Sniper School. Once I graduated, I was put on a HALO (High-Altitude, Low-Opening) sniper team. I did that until 2009, when I went to Afghanistan and on other deployments. There, I was the primary combatives instructor for the 7th Special Forces Group. Now I’m assigned to the 19th Special Forces Group, a National Guard unit in Texas.

What curriculum did you teach to the Special Forces?
At first, we used the Modern Army Combatives Program. Toward the end, we started using—and now we use primarily—SOCP, which stands for Special Operations Combatives Program. It builds on the fundamentals we expect everyone who’s coming into the Special Forces to know: level two of MACP. Then we put the guys in a kit and make sure that they’re deadly, that they know how to grapple, how to box, how to wrestle.

What role does hand-to-hand combat play in the mission of the Special Forces?
It gives guys the opportunity to make space so they can get to their tools: their gun, their knife, their cuffs and so on.

Does that mean you assume that an M4 carbine, a handgun and a fixed-blade knife are always part of the equation?
Absolutely. During the hundreds of combat missions I went on, I never saw a guy who didn’t have at least a long gun, a pistol and a knife. Some guys, like me, carried a few guns. I knew I was going to be in a gunfight and in it for a long time, so I had five guns on me, a few different knives and two backpacks full of pre-loaded magazines. That’s typical in the Special Forces because they know what they’re getting into.

TIM KENNEDY (LEFT) IS ABOUT TO BE AMBUSHED

by an assailant (1). The man grabs hold of Kennedy (2), who immediately raises his left leg (3) and executes a foot stomp (4). He transitions into a rear head butt (5), which enables him to create enough space to turn and face the attacker (6). While holding the man, Kennedy drives a knee thrust into his torso (7), then sweeps the nearest leg (8). When the opponent is down, Kennedy strikes him while staying on his feet for maximum mobility (9).
How did SOCP develop?
Greg Thompson and Matt Larsen saw a deficiency at the higher level of CQB (close-quarters battle). You can’t shoot a double-leg takedown and get on top of a guy when you’re in a small room because his buddy will come up behind you and smash you in the head. You can’t close the space and kneel a guy you’ve pinned in the corner because his buddies will swarm you.

You have to have a heads-up, prepared-for-anything martial art that’s fast, dynamic and dangerous. You have to be able to do damage and then get back to the important stuff. Recognizing that, Greg Thompson developed SOCP. Now every Special Forces member trains in it.

So SOCP builds on the skills soldiers have learned in level two of MACP?
Yes. MACP is very necessary. All soldiers need to know the basics of jiu-jitsu, boxing and wrestling before they can get into anything else. By the time they get to a Special Forces unit and start learning SOCP, they’re very proficient in Modern Army Combatives.

Did you learn both systems in the Army?
Yes. I’m a three-time Modern Army Combatives champion—the only one—and I’m a certified instructor of SOCP.

What are some of the specifics of SOCP? Is there anything new with respect to skills, or is it all about the way you apply the skills taught in MACP?
If you want to teach a guy wrestling and boxing with the goal of turning him into an MMA fighter, you need to teach the in-between stuff. That’s much of what SOCP is. Part of it is about how to make space. It seems like it’s such an easy thing—you just push off on your opponent—but it’s not that easy. There are a lot of little things like smashing someone’s foot, kicking him in the balls, head-buttting him, hitting a pressure point or doing a wrist lock. That kind of in-between stuff can help you get to your knife or pistol.

Can you give an example of how it’s implemented?
If a guy comes from behind and grabs you, back in the 1940s and ’50s they might have tried a hip throw. Now we’d head-butt the guy, smash his foot, make space and shoot behind him.

Does military protocol require that all SOCP training be conducted while you’re in full gear?
Not all the training but the majority of it. You should train how you fight. You should not be in a gi training how to be a Special Forces operator. There are things you can learn in a gi, and you can get a great workout and practice finessing certain portions of [techniques], but you should train how you fight.

How important is fitness in combatives training?
So important. If you’re not in shape, you can’t train. I can’t bring a guy into a shoot house and expect him to learn anything if he’s bent over at the waist, trying to get air.

Is that ever an issue with Special Forces guys?
No. There can be a bad apple in every bunch, but 99 out of 100 guys are in peak physical shape. They’re ready to learn and ready to deploy. They’re always in combat shape. Combat shape is different from any other kind of shape. The closest thing to it is MMA. It’s a fast-twitch, explosive type of shape. They can throw on a rucksack and walk for miles—and then in an instant slam into a guy and tear his arm off. >>
TIM KENNEDY (LEFT) FACES A potential attacker (1). When the man makes his move, Kennedy grabs his shoulder (2) and hits him in the face with a palm strike (3). He immediately cocks his right arm (4) and sends another palm strike into his face (5) before finishing with a downward elbow to the nose (6).
Q: As a fighter, how do you approach cardio training?
A: I can be brutal and primal with my endurance training. I like fast-twitch training done over a long period. It's more important to be focused on what your goal is and not on random muscle movement designed to create an overall package. I believe you should train specifically for an endeavor to develop ability in it.

Q: So fighting is the best training for fighting?
A: Yes, but there are movements that complement fighting. Some weightlifting exercises complement fighting. Flipping a tire makes you pretty good at shooting a double-leg and picking the guy up, and clean-and-jerks make you more powerful at the body-lock suplay.

Q: Do you engage in any type of exercise that might be considered cross-training?
A: I swim one day a week, and I run one day a week. There are running days in my strength-and-conditioning program, where at the end of every resistance-training session I spend 10, 20 or 30 minutes working on fast-twitch endurance using burpees, box jumps, deadlifts or 400-meter sprints.