

Legends:

Honour at Rendaijino

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As soon as he arrived in Kyoto, Musashi visited the Yoshioka family residence. There, without the slightest hesitation, he challenged Genzaemon, the head of the family, to a fencing match. The Yoshioka were a family renowned for swordsmanship. Musashi might be confident of his swordsmanship but to the Yoshioka, he was nothing but a country bumpkin. The Yoshioka family were surprised at the challenge. Although Genzaemon, the head of the family, had the prerogative to refuse, he accepted on the spot. The time and place for the match were fixed: at five the following morning at Rendaijino, a field in a suburb of Kyoto.

At dawn the following morning, the field was shining with dew. Accompanied by several disciples, Genzaemon approached the field. He waited. Two hours passed without Musashi's appearing. Genzaemon ordered his disciples to go see if Musashi might still be at his inn.

When they returned, they reported: "Musashi was still sleeping. He was so impertinent that he said, 'I have overslept but I will come soon. Please give my regards to your master.'" Infuriated at this turn of events, Genzaemon shouted, "He made a solemn promise to come here at the fixed time. Overslept? How ridiculous! I will destroy him soundly!" Genzaemon had no alternative but to wait for Musashi. He waited and waited. He grew more and more impatient. Another two hours passed. Now the sun was nearing its zenith as was Genzaemon's rage.

It was at this moment that Musashi at last appeared, sauntering across the field. Genzaemon shouted, "I have been impatient for your appearance!" Without disguising his rage, Genzaemon opened his attack. In sharp contrast, Musashi look cool and composed. Attacking and parrying, once, twice, thrice, they crossed swords. Suddenly, Musashi launched his offensive but Genzaemon failed to parry this fierce and bold stroke. Collapsing to the ground, he remained motionless. The match ended in glorious triumph for Musashi. Carried home, Genzaemon later regained consciousness but his right arm was broken in many places.

Immediately after the match, Genzaemon's brother Denshichiro challenged Musashi in order to retrieve the honor and renown of the Yoshioka. Revenging his brother was a life or death affair for Denshichiro.

The time and place for the duel were decided. On the day of the duel, Denshichiro appeared at the field of honor with a sword more than five shaku (five feet) long. The feeling of revenge was short-lived. Despite a solemn promise to be on time, Musashi was once again late, acting as though he were indifferent to time. As soon as the duel began, Musashi's lethargy was transformed to lightning. He lunged at his opponent. In a split second, Musashi struck his death blow, sending Denshichiro to an early grave.

These two duels had one thing in common: Musashi had been late for both of them. By disturbing his opponents' composure in coming late, he could take full advantage of them. Musashi had won sweet victories but were such tactics unfair? Musashi's tactics would be considered unacceptable by the Japanese in general no matter how excellent his fencing ability was. This aspect of Musashi's character has therefore become the subject of discussion whenever he is mentioned. Although the exploits of Musashi are famous, because of this blemish the kodan-shi, raconteurs of historical narratives, have always placed him below the acme of Japanese swordsmanship and tempered their praise of him.

This excerpt from: Sugawara, Makoto (1988). *Lives of Master Swordsmen* (pp.39-41), The East Publications, Tokyo, Japan.

Author's post-script:

Honour.

According to most dictionaries, it is defined as high regard, high respect, or esteem. As a verb, it means to "fulfill (an obligation) or keep (an agreement)" as in this example of popular usage: "Make sure the franchisees honor the terms of the contract". In usage in military societies, it has the meaning of dignity. It is one of the cornerstones of Bushido, the warrior's code in Japan, and the concept of chivalry in the Western military tradition.

So the question regarding Musashi's conduct has always been: were his tactics fair and honourable, according to the traditions set out for taryu-jjai (duels)? A good question indeed.

In terms of duels in the European tradition:

A duel is an arranged engagement in combat between two individuals, with matched weapons in accordance with agreed-upon rules. The duel was based on a code of honour. Duels were fought not so much to kill the opponent as to gain "satisfaction", that is, to restore one's honour by demonstrating a willingness to risk one's life for it.

Source: [The Duel \(Wikipedia\)](#)

The key concepts here are: "in accordance with agreed-upon rules" and "based on a code of honour".

Some will argue that the ends justify the means. He won, so his tactics are fine. As they say, the winner writes the history books. In some cases, yes. In Musashi's case, evidently no. He may be famous for being undefeated in 60 or so duels but is he admired? For his accomplishment, the statistical feat of surviving 60 or more duels, yes. It is not disputed; the facts speak for themselves. It is an astounding accomplishment. For his chivalrous conduct however? Evidently, no.

Here is something to think about. One writer talked about one of WWI's greatest fighter aces, Baron Manfred von Richthofen, the famous Red Baron:

“Much of von Richthofen's reputation as a gentleman combatant stems from his famous decision to abandon a dogfight with a British pilot when he saw that his opponent's gun had jammed. Rather than finishing the Briton off, he forced him to land and then disembarked from his own aircraft and shook hands with him.”

So even in WWI, at least among some of the officer corps, there were still rules in war, a warrior's code of ethics. Chivalry, like Bushido in Japan, still governed the way the elite warriors fought. You did not hate the enemy. There was respect for the opponent. He fought for his country, you fought for yours.

In von Richthofen's own words, he describes one of his adversaries:

“Now I am within thirty yards of him. He must fall. The gun pours out its stream of lead. Then it jams. Then it reopens fire. That jam almost saved his life. One bullet goes home. He is struck through the back of the head. His plane jumps and crashes down. It strikes the ground just as I swoop over. His machine gun rammed itself into the earth, and now it decorates the entrance over my door. He was a brave man, a sportsman, and a fighter.”

He says his adversary was a brave man, a sportsman, a fighter. Von Richthofen respected his adversary. In another excerpt from his book*, he says:

I felt some human pity for my opponent and had resolved not to cause him to fall down but merely to compel him to land. I did so particularly because I had the impression that my opponent was wounded for he did not fire a single shot.

When I had got down to an altitude of about fifteen hundred feet engine trouble compelled me to land without making any curves. The result was very comical. My enemy with his burning machine landed smoothly while I, his victor, came down next to him in the barbed wire of our trenches and my machine overturned.

The two Englishmen who were not a little surprised at my collapse, greeted me like sportsmen. As mentioned before, they had not fired a shot and they could not understand why I had landed so clumsily. They were the first two Englishmen whom I had brought down alive. Consequently, it gave me particular pleasure to talk to them. I asked them whether they had previously seen my machine in the air, and one of them replied, "Oh, yes. I know your machine very well. We call it 'Le Petit Rouge'."

* Read the book written by Manfred von Richthofen online: [The Red Fighter Pilot by Manfred von Richthofen](#) (an English translation of the original *Der Rote Kampfflieger*).

So we see in this excerpt that he was willing to let his opponent live either because his gun had jammed or because he was wounded in some way. It would not be sporting or chivalrous to defeat an unarmed opponent or an opponent who was disabled in some way that he could not defend himself adequately.

So what is it about honour that captures the heart?

I think it has to do with upholding principles that we admire and hold in high esteem, principles like fairness, justice, respect for others, holding to your promises, etc... Even in war, fighting on the basis of principles like civilized human beings, not animals. Even if we lose, we can be admired. It is about maintaining dignity, even in the most pressing of circumstances.

Some might argue that just winning at all costs is admirable. Is winning all that is admirable? Winning by unfair means or through deceit or underhandedness, is that admirable? I don't believe so. And neither do many in society, when we hear such aphorisms as: "There is no victory without honor". Here is an example:

Victory without honour . . .

Doug Gillon

Sports writer

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THE latest back-stairs manoeuvring by Ferrari to manipulate the arcane rules of F1 to their advantage and deny Sebastian Vettel a third successive title illustrates the depth to which a once-noble pursuit has sunk in the pursuit of mammon.

Ferrari's attempt to deny Vettel title on a technicality typifies so much of what is wrong with modern sport

Unfortunately, much of modern sport merely mirrors our covetous society. Think corrupt, expenses-fiddling MPs, the moral bankruptcy of bankers' bonuses and fat cats' tax havens. Yes, and corrupt newspapers. It's little wonder that the art of sport should imitate life. When some 3000 Brussels bureaucrats take home more than the Prime Minister's £142,000 per annum, against a life-saving UK neurosurgeon's salary of £100,000, and some footballers earn that in less than a week, you know the world has gone mad.

If that categorises me as a fogey, then I'm proud to be one. The medieval notion of chivalry, which despised victory gained without honour, always appealed to the romantic in me. So when I learned Ferrari had explored having Vettel penalised for allegedly overtaking under a yellow flag early in the Brazilian Grand Prix, I shed a tear for temps perdu, then savoured a frisson of nostalgia.

Source: <http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/other-sports/victory-without-honour.19563390>

Victory or defeat, fair and square. Victory or defeat, with dignity.

I watched a good movie recently, called The Red Baron (2008). It is highly fictionalized and romanticized but it is entertaining. In one particular episode, Manfred is chastising his younger brother Lothar about Lothar's conduct in the preceding aerial battle when Lothar shot down a British pilot attempting to land his damaged plane:

Manfred: For Christ's sake, Lothar, you shot the poor bastard to pieces!

Lothar: So now you want to win a war without killing anyone. This is not a polo game. We're not boys anymore; we're grown men fighting a bloody war!

Manfred: I'm quite aware of that. But still, we can fight it with grace.

Remember the story of one of Manfred's exploits?

"Much of von Richthofen's reputation as a gentleman combatant stems from his famous decision to abandon a dogfight with a British pilot when he saw that his opponent's gun had jammed. Rather than finishing the Briton off, he forced him to land and then disembarked from his own aircraft and shook hands with him."

Well, it was adapted in a loose format into one of the scenes in the movie when Manfred forces Captain Roy Brown to land his plane and they have a friendly chat together as they are both stranded with damaged airplanes.

7 Miles South, no-Man's-Land

Brown: Damn gophers. It's pure luck I didn't run over one of those damn holes myself.

Von Richthofen: Thank you for being so tactful, after embarrassing me by landing so safely with shredded fin. I've come to have a look. Sopwith. Brand new, isn't it?

Brown: Was. Captain Brown, Royal Canadian Flying Corps. Notorious Red Baron, I presume?

Von Richthofen: Didn't I shoot you down a year ago?

Brown: Indeed you did. Thanks for pulling me out of that wreck and for saving my life.

Von Richthofen: What now?

Brown: We could try killing each other with our pistols. Killing you would make me famous too.

Von Richthofen: Sorry. I didn't bring mine.

Later...

Von Richthofen: So long then. Good luck.

Brown: Talking about family, sooner or later, this war will be over...

An interesting adaptation of historical facts but in some ways, a little far from the truth. Nevertheless, I think it is clear that it encapsulates the popular view that even in warfare, there needs to be honourable conduct. In the final analysis, it all comes down to that.

I have written about honour before, albeit from a slightly different vantage point. To refresh our memories, my teacher Sugino Yoshio Sensei said in his seminal book written in 1941:

*"BUDO training begins with courtesy and ends with courtesy. So etiquette is especially important. About courtesy, no matter when, or where, it must be always correctly done. During the study of BUDO, courtesy enters into technique. **If you lose it, you become a gangster, strong without brains.** Deeply restrain yourself not to become like this.*

Courtesy is worshipping the gods, respecting people, revealing your heart because, according to this, various virtues grow in you."

Source: [Through the Mists of Time 9](#)

Let me paraphrase what I believe Sugino Sensei is saying in this excerpt. If you lose courtesy (i.e., respect for others), you lose your soul. And if you lose your soul, you will become evil. You may be strong and without a soul, you will come to crave and worship only strength and power. Power corrupts, they say. You may win but you are still evil.

So maybe that saying is correct. Without honor, there really is no victory...

* Watch the movie [The Red Baron](#) (2008) free online: [The Red Baron](#)