A photograph of Tim Kennedy, a former MMA fighter, in military tactical gear. He is wearing a camouflage uniform and a tactical vest. He has a determined expression and is raising his right fist in a power salute. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and the texture of his gear.

FROM MMA TO CQC

**Tim Kennedy on Army Combatives, MACP, SOCP,
Combat Fitness and the Future of Close-Quarters Combat**

by Robert W. Young | Photos by Robert Reiff

For most of us, the “martial” in martial arts is anything but an indication that what we’re learning is war-like. After all, we’re civilians being taught how to defend ourselves and/or compete in tournaments.

That’s not the case for [Tim Kennedy](#), however.

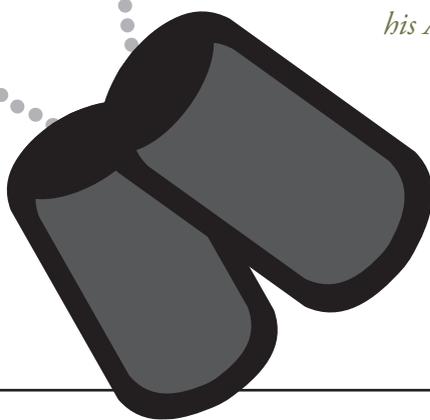
The 34-year-old, now a staff sergeant in the Texas National Guard, got his martial start in a normal-enough way — while he was in middle school, he signed up for karate lessons at the local civic center. When he was 12, he began Japanese [jujitsu](#) under Terry Kelly and Barry Smith and later earned his black belt from them.

During the five years he trained at the dojo in the Atascadero/San Luis Obispo area of California, he kept hearing the same names being mentioned — Jake Shields and Chuck Liddell, in particular. The success of those men, participants in the embryonic sport of mixed martial arts, spurred Kennedy to begin training at other facilities, including John Hackleman’s The Pit and California Polytechnic State University, where he honed his wrestling before following in their footsteps.

Then in 2004, after reflecting on the importance of his nascent MMA career versus the War on Terror, he did an about-face, enlisted in the Army, opted for the Special Forces and became a sniper who was ultimately deployed to the Middle East.

In this interview, Kennedy — who was named Black Belt’s 2011 [MMA Fighter](#) of the Year and, as of November 2013, has a pro record of 16-4 — delves into the military side of his warrior existence and demonstrates two self-defense moves from his Army combatives training!

— Editor



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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 2 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).



DIET OR DIE

Any successful MMA fighter will tell you that the fuel that goes into the gas tank can either enhance or hinder the performance of the machine. Tim Kennedy is no different.

"P.R. Cole at FueltheFighter.com does my diet," Kennedy says. "She's brilliant. She understands athletic performance and what it takes caloriewise to be a full-time athlete. She looks for those powerful foods that can push me to the next level."

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 knee 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 2 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-butting 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).



What will happen when our military returns from Iraq and Afghanistan and all these MACP- and SOCP-trained troops enter the civilian martial arts world?

We've been at war now longer than we ever have before. We have guys who've been training constantly and who have real-life, hand-to-hand combat experience, and they have a desire to teach and to continue learning. It will revolutionize martial arts. These guys will be looking at hand-to-hand combat from a scientific perspective: "How can we change what we know as martial arts to be more effective?"

Is part of that scientific perspective the after-action report, which analyzes the events that took place in a fight with the goal of determining if the training can be improved?

Absolutely. We do AARs after every mission. If you're a good operator, you do AARs after other people's missions, too. As a sniper, I looked at every other sniper incident that happened, especially when one of our snipers got killed. What was his position, what kind of equipment was he using, how was he camouflaged?

You can apply that methodology to everything, especially hand-to-hand combat. You start looking at every single hand-to-hand combat situation, what the guy did and why, what went well and what didn't, and it can revolutionize combat-ives. We've never had that much information available.

Is it fair to say that the future of full-contact martial arts competition will be determined by MMA and the future of self-defense will be determined by the military?

Yes, and there will be a bleed between the two. You'll see a combatives technique that gets adapted to MMA and vice versa. That's how it has been and how it will continue to be.

One last question: What's your opinion of modern military hand-to-hand techniques such as those of SOCP compared to the World War II methods that are so highly prized by many? Are the fighting moves of the good old days really as good as or better than those of the present?

No. The good old days were just that: old. There's something to be said for the traditions of Army combatives — and I appreciate that — but now we're fighting a different type of war against a different type of enemy. If our combatives program doesn't change, we'll die. ✂

About the author:

Robert W. Young is the executive editor of Black Belt. The website for Tim Kennedy's clothing company is rangerup.com.

FUTURE PERFECT

Tim Kennedy isn't totally certain what the future holds, but he does know that whatever his mission is, it will involve combat.

"Of course I want to get back onto an Operational Detachment Alpha team and be a shooter, but I think — I don't think; other people think — that I would be better used as an instructor of hand-to-hand combat," he says. "I've been doing martial arts for 20 years now. They know I have the ability and the experience needed to teach the Special Forces, which a lot of people don't have."

WARRIOR ENDURANCE

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.

The gear that soldiers wear into battle can help as well as hinder self-defense. In this case, it helps: Tim Kennedy uses his helmet to augment his head butt.



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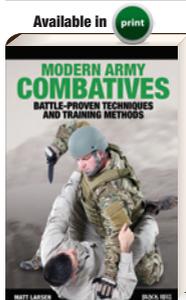
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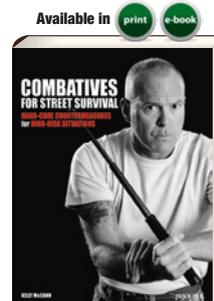
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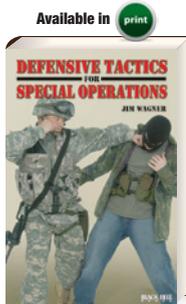
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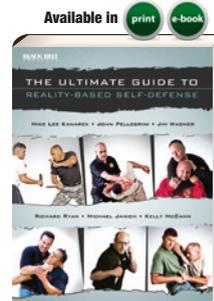
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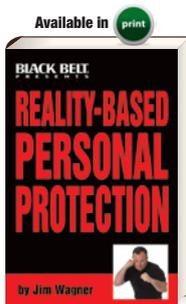
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