

# The Samurai and the Guns

*by Akihiro Omi*

My karate and kendo students often ask me how accurately Hollywood movie "The Last Samurai (2003)" starring Tom Cruise and Ken Watanabe depicted the Japanese history. My usual answer is "It was not a bad movie." I say this because the movie correctly illustrated how the Japanese people lived during the transitional era between the Edo Period (1603-1868) and the Meiji Period (1868-1912). The swordplay performed by Watanabe, Hiroyuki Sanada, etc. in the movie was certainly genuine, igniting global interest in budo, Japanese martial arts, like Bruce Lee's "Enter the Dragon" did in the early 1970s.

However, two inaccuracies particularly caught my attention: the Shinto gate, torii, stood at the entry way to the samurai village, and the mounted samurai cavalries charging against walls of rifles and cannons. The former carries religious connotation, while the latter ignores the historic fact that the guns were introduced to the samurai communities more than 300 years earlier than the time depicted in the movie. Allow me to discuss the subject which you might have greater interest.



It actually happened on August 25th, 1543. As the result of a typhoon, a Chinese vessel carrying Portuguese merchant ship along with 100 sailors and crew, drifted ashore on the island of Tanegashima, off the coast of Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu. Lord Tokitaka Tanegashima, who was the governor of the island at that time, purchased two arquebusestyle rifles from the merchants for a large sum of money, and helped them repair their ship, at which point they sailed away to return in their own vessel a year later with more guns to trade.

It only took Japanese sword-smiths six months to replicate the Portuguese rifle, according to diary entries kept by the sword-smith's association in Kunitomo (today's Nagahama City in Shiga Prefecture). A complete replica was offered to the Shogun, Yoshiharu Ashikaga, in August 1544, just one year after the arrival of the first arquebus. The same diary recorded that Lord Nobunaga Oda placed an order for 500 arquebuses with the Kunitomo sword-smiths in 1549. The first documented case of guns being used in a battle in Japan was also in 1549 (six years after their first arrival). The Portuguese merchant, Pinto Ferno Mendes, wrote in his travel log that it was estimated that there were more than 300,000 arquebuses in Japan when he visited the country in 1551.

There is also a record of 3,000 arquebuses being used during the Battle of Noda/Fukushima which took place on September 12, 1570. In April 1575, Lord Nobunaga Oda used 3,500 guns to defeat the 15,000 strong cavalry of Load Katsuyori Takeda during the famous battle of



Nagashino. This battle, between the two samurai loads, became the model for The Last Samurai's battle scene between the modern Japanese imperial military and the old-fashioned samurai rebellions.

On a side note, the Battle of Nagashino took place 43 years prior to the Thirty Years' War in Europe (1618-1648) during which firearms were thought to have been utilized on a massive scale for the first time on the European battlefield.



Japanese martial arts, as well as the core Japanese culture and values, were mainly developed and polished during the peaceful time in the Edo Period (1603-1868). However, it was the Battle of Nagashino in 1575 that triggered a major transformation in Japanese martial arts. The battle's outcome completely altered warfare in Japan and made skill in individual combat with sword and spear almost meaningless. From this point in time, training in kenjutsu became increasingly influenced by Zen=Buddhism, and more focused on self-improvement than the honing of practical combat skills. Nevertheless, even during the peace time, children of the samurai were to study and practice rifle shooting and cannonry, along with other arts, including fencing, archery, horsemanship, spear, stick, unarmed combat, swimming, ancient Chinese literacy and Zen meditation, as part of their general educational requirements.



There is a popular and enduring legend in the Tanegashima island. When the Portuguese ship arrived, a sword-smith named Kinbei Yasaka allowed his daughter, Wakasa, to marry the ship's captain in exchange for Western firearm technology. Wakasa's grave and a monument honoring Wakasa's "loyalty and filial piety" still exist on the island. Although there might have actually been a romance between the captain and the daughter, the charming story was in all probability made up years after the event, if indeed it occurred at all, because the captain of a 16th century ship is an unlikely source of information on firearms. The monument (erected in 1909) may have been just another expression of the increasing nationalism and militarism of the Meiji Period (1868-1912). In any case the legend records that Kinbei, the girl's father, lost the sight of both eyes when his prototype rifle back-fired during its first test shooting. His daughter's sacrifice, assuming that she made one, was therefore in vain.



As to the Shinto gate in the movie, I will have to discuss the subject another time. Misunderstanding and mishandling of the religious object is wide-spread among the martial arts world, as well as in the Japanese-American community in San Pedro, California where a large torii stands as an entry gate, just like in the movie.