Respected sergeant gets inner peace from a Brazilian art of war

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"I think the class itself has not only improved my stamina, agility and explosive strength significantly, it requires strategic thinking, which has also had a great impact on my ability to solve problems from different angles."

—Sgt. Jason Ryan, intelligence specialist, Multi-National Corps—Iraq, talking about Brazilian jiu-jitsu

With swift calculated motions, Sgt. Jason Ryan, an intelligence speciallist for Multi-National Corps—Iraq, puts his opponent into an arm bar.

It's combat. It's training. And to Ryan, it's also therapy.

He attends Brazilian jiu-jitsu classes like this one, at the Paul Smith gym on Camp Victory, several times a week to boost morale, practice patience and gain a variety of other different benefits.

"Jiu-Jitsu is a very demanding sport, physically, and mentally," said Ryan. "I think the class itself has not only improved my stamina, agility and explosive strength significantly, it requires strategic thinking, which has also had a great impact on my ability to solve problems from different angles."

Brazilian jiu-jitsu is a "mixed martial art" that evolved from Japanese jiu-jitsu. The purpose of the art is to enable practitioners to overcome larger, more powerful opponents with minimal violence by maximizing positioning and leverage, said Mike Merth, martial-arts instructor and a civilian forensic DNA analyst for the provost marshal office.

The martial art also teaches patience, Ryan said. For example, "Freaking out while getting choked out doesn't help you escape the situation," he said. "You've got to teach yourself to be calm enough to think through the escape you'll need to implement to avoid being submitted."

Ryan enjoys the morale-boosting hobby and tries to share his love of it with others. Some of them join him in training with Victory Top Team, a mixed martial arts club that's operated on Camp Victory for several years.

"Many of the Soldiers in our unit find it intriguing and are always asking him questions about jiu-jitsu, just as they do with work-related questions," said Warrant Officer Steven J. Wilcox, intelligence officer in charge, MNC-I. "Sgt. Ryan shares his knowledge of jiu-jitsu and his military experience with anyone who is looking for an answer to accomplish a goal or the mission."

Ryan began learning Chinese kempo karate when he was a child and later became interested in jiu-jitsu.

"I'm from Hawaii, which has a rich history of martial arts," said Ryan. "Almost every kid in Hawaii learns a fighting art. I learned [Brazilian jiu-jitsu] but was unable to keep up with it for the past 12 years. I found out about Victory Top Team when I first got here in September, and figured it was a golden opportunity to get back into it, and train with fellow servicemembers."

After throwing each other into one uncomfortable position after another, Ryan and Merth continued to joke around and keep good spirits.

"He has taught me so much," said Merth. "On the mat, he is one of my favorite opponents to grapple with. He reflects a positive learning environment, so we can easily learn from our strengths and weaknesses."

Merth said his sparring partner has also been a great influence on him away from the mat. "After class I often ask for constructive criticism to make the classes better, and he doesn't hesitate to let me know what's on his mind," Merth said.

Photo by Pvt. Karin A. Leach, 114th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

Sgt. Jason Ryan, bottom, an intelligence specialist with Multi-National Corps—Iraq, puts Mike Merth, a martial-arts instructor and forensic DNA analyst for the provost marshal office, into a submission hold during a practice at the Paul Smith gymnasium, Camp Victory April 28.

Ryan enjoys teaching others and gets a good response from the students he interacts with, said Merth.

Along with helping others advance with their martial-arts skills, Ryan takes his job as a noncommissioned officer seriously.

"He continuously demonstrates leadership," said Wilcox. "He shows a genuine concern for his Soldiers, he is technically and tactically competent. When anyone shows an interest in jiu-jitsu, he always extends an open invitation for them to join and attend the class. Even when the class is over, Sgt. Ryan will spend extra time with anyone who is eager to learn a technique or with anyone who just wants to continue to practice."

Being an NCO "means providing my soldiers with the tools, guidance, and experience they need to succeed in their mission," said Ryan.

"It means taking care of them while they are so far away from home, and ensuring that they return, safe, sound, and prepared for their next assignment. It's preparing them to be an NCO themselves, to maintain the commitment of caring for fellow and future servicemembers and to maintain the strength, of the Army."