



THE

# BLACK BELT

## *Sword Skills of the Western World*

*by Jason William McNeil • Photography by Rick Hustead*

Japan's samurai and ninja, Korea's Hwarang warriors and China's knights-errant—all those swingers of sharpened steel from the annals of history cut inspirational figures in the minds of martial artists. Seeking to embrace the mastery, the discipline and—truth be told—the mystique of those men, modern martial artists in search of skill with the sword have traditionally turned their eyes eastward to the fencing traditions of East Asia.

In their quest for knowledge, though, these students might be missing the obvious. While the sword-wielding warriors of half a world away have certainly left behind rich martial traditions, those who look only to the East are missing an equally rich legacy of sword fighting.

"Unfortunately, many American martial artists are ignoring a wealth of advanced bladed-weapons techniques and combat strategies that are right under their noses," says Anthony De Longis, a real-world sword master as well as a professional actor and fight director who often brings his skills to film and

television. "Their pursuit of excellence caused them to set their sights on distant shores and the martial stylings of the Far East. The techniques of those cultures have survived the test of time because they work. However, any serious study of bladed weapons should include a dive into the deep well of Western swordplay, commonly known as fencing."

Not to be confused with its modern incarnation—which is also an Olympic sport—traditional Western fencing encompasses an array of styles, skill sets and strategies with a variety of weapons. It was designed to meet the needs of soldiers and civilians who faced real blades in battles, where the difference between life and death was often as little as three fingers of steel.

"Fencing evolved relentlessly over the centuries, transcending national boundaries and cultures," writes Nick Evangelista in *The Art and Science of Fencing*. "The language of fencing comes to us after being studied and tested in the blood of our ancestors."





Anthony De Longis (right) and his opponent begin by touching their blades (1). The opponent attempts to cut De Longis' cheek, but the sword master catches the blade with his sword guard (2). He then executes a "pressure slide" to displace his foe's weapon and cut his face (3).



"[The traditions] are diverse and plentiful, intensive and specific," De Longis adds. "For over 400 years, men of the sword lived and died by the blade, refining their theories and training methods, recording their discoveries as a legacy for future generations. That's us."

## The Saber

For martial artists looking to add Western sword skills to

their repertoire, the cavalry saber may be the perfect place to start. With its curved blade and single edge, it resembles the Japanese *katana*, and skill gained with it readily translates to the Eastern arts. The saber, however, remains very much its own creature.

The saber developed—and was primarily used—as the weapon of the cavalryman, to great and often horrifying effect. During the Napoleonic campaigns, the sabers of the British Light Dragoons reportedly caused such terrible wounds that the French protested to Wellington against the use of this "barbarous" weapon. As the preferred fighting implement of the mounted officer, the saber naturally found its way into more-pedestrian conflicts, and techniques were developed for unmounted combat, as well. Historical personages as diverse

The opponent (left) thrusts his blade at Anthony De Longis' chest (1). De Longis steps backward using a move called the "pass back," then raises his saber and uses the tip to skewer his attacker's forearm (2).







Anthony De Longis (right) invites an attack, and James Houston obliges (1). As Houston attempts a face cut, De Longis steps to the left and deflects the technique with a rising parry (2). He counters with a descending vertical cut, pinning the opponent's arm while targeting his face with the blade's tip (3).

as Otto Von Bismarck and Abraham Lincoln have been linked with saber dueling over matters of honor (although it should be mentioned that Lincoln's challenger backed out when the young lawyer chose sabers to settle the matter—Lincoln's legendary height and reach would have given him a decided advantage

with the long blade.)

Although some naysayers found the cavalry saber cumbersome and ill-suited for unmounted combat (primarily those who favored the thrust over the cut), people with firsthand experience were hard-pressed to deny the brutal efficiency of the heavy steel chopper. In *The Secret History of the Sword*, J. Christoph Amberger relates a 19<sup>th</sup>-century account by a Capt. Nolan, who discovered that many of the fiercest warriors of India were in the habit of remounting saber blades cast off from the British dragoons and using them with horrific efficacy. Reports abound of heads being severed, legs being cut off, and one or both hands being removed with a single cut. When asked which techniques and methodologies the Indians were taught to

## “Blood ’n’ Guts” Patton, Gentleman Fencer

One of the more interesting entries in the history and technique of the cavalry saber is the U.S. Army's *Saber Exercise of 1914*, prepared by an ambitious and opinionated young second lieutenant named George S. Patton Jr. (“15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, Master of the Sword at the Mounted School for the two-edged model 1913 saber”), who later achieved some small measure of fame while commanding troops in Europe.

Patton's treatise, which remains controversial to this day, was exceptional for its methodology and its timing. Asserting the absolute superiority of the thrust, he dismissed all cutting attacks and most defensive techniques, maintaining that “the saber is solely a weapon of offense and is used in conjunction with the other offensive weapon, the horse. ... No direct parries are taught because at the completion of a parry, the enemy is already beyond the reach of an attack. The surest parry is a disabled opponent.”

To facilitate this “charge and thrust, then charge and thrust again” method of attack, Patton developed what became known as the “Patton skewer” or, less flatteringly, the “Patton pig-sticker.” It was a sharp, straight-bladed saber with a sizable guard, modeled after the British 1909 version.

Unfortunately for saber enthusiasts, Patton's improvements to the art of saber combat went largely untested because by 1914, mounted soldiers had all but disappeared from the battlefield and the saber was already a wartime anachronism. —JWM





**James Houston (left) attempts a thrust to the ribs, but Anthony De Longis parries it to the outside while keeping his blade tip down (1). De Longis then catches his adversary's blade and steps forward to effect a counter-thrust to the chest (2).**

inflict such damage with the resurrected sabers, Nolan says the answer was simply, "Strike hard, sir! A sharp sword will cut in anyone's hands!" Clearly, the cavalry saber was—and still is—a fearsome weapon, whether the wielder is mounted or on foot.

## Best of Most Worlds

"The saber is one of the most versatile weapons in history," says De Longis, who has spent decades studying, experimenting and fencing with swords from around the world. Any of the cutting and slashing techniques from Western fencing traditions—be they Spanish, Italian, French, British or American—can be performed with the curved cavalry saber.

Meanwhile, the weapon offers its wielder one noticeable advantage over its Eastern counterparts: hand protection. "The hand guard is invaluable to a swordsman," De Longis says. "I'm a big fan of the swept hilt and basket hilt—and especially the later bell guards. The more protection, the better."

In civilian, unarmored dueling and for self-defense, the advantage of protecting the swordsman's hand from his opponent's picking, poking and slashing is self-evident. "If given even half a chance, any swordsman worth his salt will attack his opponent's sword hand, the closest target of opportunity," De

Longis says. "With a substantial hand guard, like a swept hilt or bell guard, you have a small shield in front of you. Whenever you're fencing, your hand stays behind that shield, your arm stays behind your hand and your body stays behind your arm. With that alignment, you're very difficult to attack."

With proper training, the saber fencer can erect a defensive "wall of steel." Slight adjustments to the blade angle and body positioning will create a nearly impenetrable defense.

## Cut and Thrust

For as long as men have fought with swords, they've debated the cut versus the thrust. Slashing strokes effected with a heavy blade can certainly inflict massive damage with minimal effort. "A good saber, like Cold Steel's 1860 U.S. Cavalry version, is about as close to an indestructible weapon as you can get," says Lynn Thompson, CEO of Cold Steel and a noted blade expert. "You can break concrete blocks with it, you can drive it through car doors—so you can imagine the chopping and cutting damage it can do to a human body with relatively little effort."

Because thrusting attacks require more precision, it may be argued that cuts are easier to deliver in the heat of combat. Use

*Continued on page 146*

**The adversary (left) attacks with a chest cut, but Anthony De Longis parries it to the inside with his sword tip down (1). De Longis then angles to the right (2), opening his attacker's wrist to a counterattack (3).**





in combination with a bowie knife or a second saber, the trained swordsman can hold his own against formidable odds, slashing a bloody swath through one or several attackers.

On the other hand, De Longis points out that when thrusting with the sword tip, it takes only three finger-widths of steel to penetrate a vital organ. "The use of the point is underrated with the curved saber," he says. "When lethal force is required, often the thrust is the way to

go. It's often the quickest counterattack after a successful defense, especially if your opponent is sloppy with his guard or has a hole in his technique. If you own the centerline, all you have to do is place the point, and he's going to run right onto it!"


Regardless, De Longis and Thompson agree that both cutting and thrusting should be cultivated by the serious swordsman and that the saber is an ideal tool for both practices. "The saber is

primarily a cutting weapon that can also thrust," De Longis says. "With practice, you'll be able to do either or both as needed and, after all, the more choices you have, the better your chances of a successful outcome."

## "Do Not Go Gentle ..."

As firearms usurped the sword's place on the battlefield, the cavalry saber stubbornly remained as an officer's weapon and tool of close-quarters combat into the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its use was taught at military academies even longer. Accounts exist of cavalrymen wading into melees swinging their sabers—occasionally to the astonishment of their increasingly mechanized military comrades—from the infamous "Charge of the Light Brigade" until as late as 1941.

Although its time may have passed as a practical battlefield weapon, the martial artist stands to gain much by studying the saber and, indeed, any of the Western fencing traditions.

"I guarantee," De Longis says, "that any martial art you study will be enhanced by training with the European sword. Bruce Lee found inspiration in fencing; so will you." 

About the author: Jason William McNeil is a freelance writer and martial artist based in Roanoke, Virginia. To read more of his writing or for information about private training with Anthony De Longis, visit [www.blackbeltmag.com](http://www.blackbeltmag.com).

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## For More Information

This article couldn't have been prepared without J. Christoph Amberg's excellent book, *The Secret History of the Sword: Adventures in the Ancient Martial Arts* (Multi-Media Books Inc., 1999), and Cold Steel's instructional DVD, *Fighting With the Saber and Cutlass* (Cold Steel Inc., 2005). Second only to the tutelage of a skilled instructor, they're the most valuable resources available to anyone interested in Western combative fencing and saber self-defense. —JWM