

News from Honbu

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History Channel Reenactment Issue

Introduction

By Toshishiro Obata

My students and I enjoyed working with the History Channel. There is a different kind of adrenaline rush standing in front of a camera. I was able to use my other skills besides martial arts, like Japanese history, actions, wearing armor, etc.

This article was written from Michael Shu's point of view, please enjoy it.

Recreating History

Obata Sensei as the History Channel's Guide to the Samurai

By Michael Shu

On the weekend of October 11th and 12th, Obata Sensei participated in a reenactment shoot for a Samurai documentary to be shown on the History Channel. Sensei was mainly a technical consultant to make sure all actions that took place in front of the camera were as accurate and true to their time period as possible. At the end of the second day of shooting, Sensei showcased his tameshigiri skills for the camera, which undoubtedly will be well featured in the documentary.

The following chronicles the entire experience through my eyes, interspersed with the testimony of the participants which included Obata Sensei, Saito Sensei, and my Sempai James Huang.



James and I both found out about the shoot by being in the right place at the right time on the Thursday of October 9th, pretty much by going to Shinkendo. That day was a little different in that we had two Japanese-American visitors in T-shirts and jeans bringing weapons for Obata Sensei to look at. During class, I noticed Obata Sensei swinging around a naginata which then really caught my curiosity.

After class, Obata Sensei called me over. I trotted over and noticed that our blue side-matt had been turned into a miniature armory with weapons scattered all over. The shorter of the two visitors asked me to show my noto skills with his iaito which I did so nervously. The visitor gave me some pointers on how to improve and then Sensei gave a thorough tutorial on how to noto in the most natural and safe manner. "The noto lesson was a little bit disturbing in the sense that I really got the feeling I needed to practice a LOT more," said



I finally found out that the shorter visitor was none other than Mike Yamasaki, a former student of Obata Sensei's. Mike has since become an expert in Japanese swords and won first place in a sword identification contest in Japan a few years back, the first Japanese American to do so. Mike now supplies Obata Sensei with up to date information on the sword community.

After Sensei's noto lesson, Mike asked me my height and weight. Not sure what he was getting at, I gave him my best estimates. He then gave a contemplative "Hmmm" and wondered out loud if I could fit the armor. I was thinking, "Whoa! Armor? What armor?" I must have said that out loud since he started explaining that there was a History Channel shoot the coming weekend. Then I was thinking "Whoa! TV shoot? What TV shoot?"

I then remembered writing down a message recorded on the Honbu answering machine of a producer of the History Channel wishing to meet with Obata Sensei. Then it all hit me. However, I wasn't expecting people coming in and making casting calls, especially on such short notice.

Mike Yamasaki and his partner Joe (the taller visitor) were supplying the iaito and other weapons to be used as props on the set. Mike learned through Greystone Pictures, the production company of the shoot, that his former sensei Obata Kaiso was trying to be contacted as a technical consultant and so became a sort of liaison between Greystone and Obata Sensei. Mike was there that day to make sure the props they were using were okay. Saito Sensei and I had some fun taking pictures as you can see.



I gave my contact information to Mike Yamasaki and cleared up my weekend to take part in the shoot. I had no idea what to expect, but as long as Obata Sensei and my Sempai were there, then I was coming along for the ride.

Day 1 – Saturday October 11th – Sable Ranch

Waking up 6:30 AM and driving north up the 5 freeway for what seemed like forever was a new experience for me already. Right when I was about to get to the exit, a large black Mercury sedan merged in front of me and went through the same exit. Soon I realized that sitting in shotgun was a very familiar bald head. The Obata Sensei Wagon was right in front of me! I felt relieved that I had someone to follow to keep me from getting lost.

A long winding mountain road and a rough dirt road later, we parked and were waiting in a large dirt field at the lee of a small mountain range. James had already arrived and so had some stuntmen and horse wranglers. James was



Cold James

wearing shorts and looked like he was freezing his butt off, as he said, "It was freezing cold! But nice to be out in the 'countryside'". Even wearing a sweater I was shivering heavily and Saito Sensei seemed to have also have joined the shivering club, but Obata Sensei seemed oblivious to the cold. He was probably thinking about how weak we all were.

Next to our makeshift parking lot was a group of abandoned buildings, James mentioned, "I figure they often use it for a ghost town?" There were also some fenced off areas for horses, but other than the horses that were driven over here for the shoot, I only saw about six cows and a very brave donkey. Oh, and we had to keep vigilant about stepping into manure. That stuff was everywhere!

We were waiting there in the makeshift parking lot for more than an hour, passing the time and ignoring the cold by watching the donkey accost the horses and talking to the stuntmen about their adventures. Obata Sensei also threw in some of his own film experiences; note that 90% of all that was said was in Japanese so James and I were standing there spaced out most of the time. We later learned that home base was being set up in one of the abandoned buildings so we moved into the empty, concrete floored building (probably used a lot for filming).



Saito and Obata Sensei enjoy the scenery

The wardrobe ladies then came out with the armor (yoroi). There were three complete sets of uniquely styled yoroi, one black, one gold, and the other having the colorings of a noble.

After the three people to wear the yoroi were determined (including Saito Sensei) came the long process of dressing each individual up. Obata Sensei was invaluable in the proper fitting of the yoroi for the knots were very complex and intricate. I photographed the main steps of Saito Sensei's fitting into the gold armor.



Kimono



Leg Guards



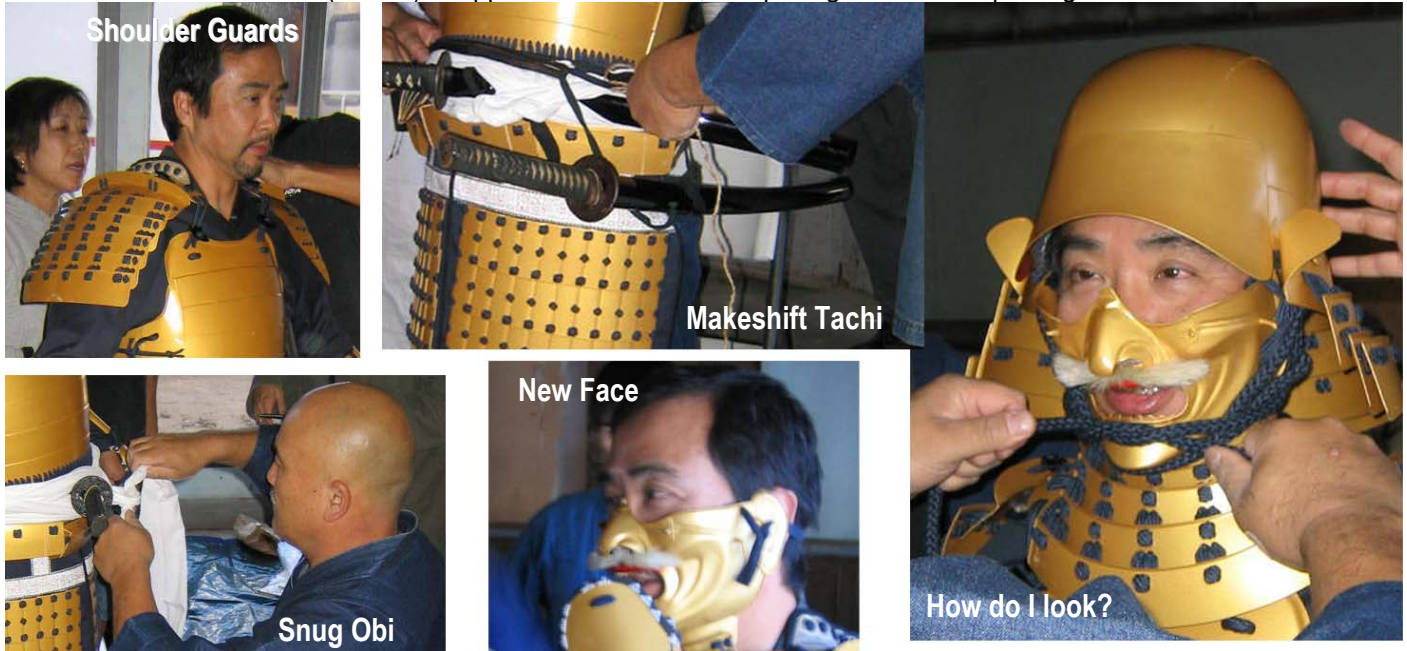
Arms and Waist



Almost there!

The kimono was the first article of clothing to be worn, followed by the hakama. The jika-tabi and waraji kake came next, followed by the leg guards in which the hakama was tucked. After the waist /thigh guards were strapped on, the arm guards and the attached sleeves followed. Both leg and arm guards were strapped into place with strings tied

tightly around the guards and the limbs. Then came the torso armor which was buckled into place by a complex system of knots. A special obi was wrapped around the waist afterwards to hold the swords in place. Then the mempo (mask) was tied on and the kabuto (helmet) strapped onto the head, completing the samurai package.



As for the swords, armored horsemen usually wore tachi, which was worn dangling with the blade pointing down, as Obata Sensei pointed out. Mike Yamasaki didn't have any tachi, so Obata Sensei was able to improvise with the existing katana by retying and taping the sageo together so that it can be worn tachi style.

We learned a lot about armor that past hour. What I got out of it was that knots are what hold the samurai together. I think Saito Sensei and the others learned something else, however. And that is that wearing armor isn't all that cool. In fact it was like an oven to be inside according to Saito Sensei.

"Seeing Saito-San, who is normally a fluid as quicksilver, swinging somewhat stiffly in armor was weird. I figured that if it did that to him, then I'd probably be just as Frankenstein'ish moving around on the battlefield," James commented.

Obata Sensei, Saito Sensei and the horseback rider were the first ones off to the location for shooting. I didn't know where they were going or how far it was but Saito Sensei took the car. Getting in the car was an adventure in itself for Saito Sensei as one can on the left. And so the shooting began off in some corner which was a mystery to James and me.

The only costume James and I had on were the jika tabi and waraji kake. They were not all that comfortable but I made a point as to walk around all day with them to get a feel for what it was like to travel Japan in those things. Unfortunately, since they didn't fit that well, much pain ensued.

There were quite a few hours of waiting between 11 AM and 2 PM. James and I really felt like fifth wheelers with Obata and Saito Sensei out filming, though I didn't envy the fact that they were out in the blazing sun with heavy armor on. "I tried to do homework for some classes I'm taking on the side but it was rather distracting with all the interesting costumes, armor, and weapons lying around," James said about the waiting.

Then lunch came and everybody returned. Saito Sensei took off his armor with great relief and showed us that his kimono underneath was absolutely soaking. He must have been extremely dehydrated with all his water hanging in his clothes. So everybody ate and drank the nice Italian American lunch, though James and I didn't feel like we earned it.

“It was kind of embarrassing when we were chowing down, not having done a thing and [after lunch] Sensei came in and was like ‘What are you doing?! Get to work helping!’ We jumped up and ditched our plates to run out and help. Not that we knew where we were supposed to be or what we were supposed to be doing,” laments James.

Later that week in class, Obata Sensei told the entire class that he dragged us out because we were sitting in the shade and drinking cold drinks while everyone else was in the boiling sun working.

Well, we finally got to see our location. It was a small pond with grass growing out of it on the far side and a little cottage right next to it. In the distance was a church and scattered about were decorations such as abandoned wagon wheels and the like along the dirt ground. I thought to myself that the camera angles had to be well controlled if we were to make it believable we were in historic Japan. And where there is a still pond, there are mosquitoes. “There were hordes of them, and they feasted on us constantly despite the DEET that we bathed ourselves in,” James shudders.

In the scene that was being shot, a samurai sharpens his katana for the next battle. I watched as Obata Sensei did his work consulting with the director what should happen. It was as if *he* was the director because every action in front of the camera was from Sensei’s direction. Obata Sensei gave countless suggestions from the way the samurai is to hold his sword as he sharpened to the facial expression of the satisfied samurai.

Next came the shots of kyudo (archery) in which a stuntman dressed in armor was to shoot arrows. The bow prop wasn’t authentic in that it is of Native American style so it had to be flipped upside down to hide certain details. I learned a bit from Obata Sensei about the differences between western and Japanese archery, such as the method of holding the arrow. It was about this time that James and I decided to head back since we felt pretty useless and everybody else seemed to be pretty busy.

Within a few minutes after arriving back at home base we were called to be dressed into costume. We found out then that we were to play a group a ronin. I was dressed in a black kimono with a striped hakama which was actually a skirt (to make it cheaper no doubt, but boy was it breezy). Aside from covering my... facial blemishes, the make-up crew had to cover up my tattoo, they did a pretty nice job despite the fact that it’s very hard to hide. As for my hair, I only needed to tie it back – so it was a good thing for me to have long hair for once.



James (Middle Left) and I (Middle Right) as Ronin

James, on the other hand, has a sort of crew-cut hairstyle so he needed a wig. After being dressed up using his own hakama (none fit him so he gets his own comfy pants) he threw on this scruffy wig very reminiscent of Musashi. “The wig had sort of a burned out rock n’ roller feel to it.” I think it made James look really cool, and many people couldn’t recognize him.

Two other stuntmen were dressed up, one in a sort of monk-style ronin getup with the straw hat. Then the director called us through the radio and we were packed into the jeep and driven to the location. “Four ronin served hot and fresh,” I joked with the director as I hopped out of the packed jeep. We waited as the stuntman who was doing archery finished an after-battle seppuku.

By the time we were up, it had gotten pretty late and the sun was setting so Joe quickly dressed us up in our iaito and the next thing we knew, the director had us doing group running and walking shots. Images of us walking in super slow-mo flashed through my mind as we walked (in a super cool fashion of course) towards and away from the camera. After they took shots of our feet, I felt that what they had us doing was very tame compared to what Saito Sensei got to do. That was until the director asked me to draw my iaito.

I was to be a silhouette in front of the setting sun doing battoudo techniques. Obata Sensei gave me a super quick santengiri routine convenient for me to do so standing still. Then the director asked me to stab the camera. I was thinking (!!!!) but Obata Sensei assured me Saito Sensei had already done so and showed me the safest way to mock-stab the camera. After practicing we did a take and I actually hit the lens shade of the camera. The cameraman looked very nervous and my turn was over ☺

Then James came up and did some other battoudo techniques similar to what I did. After that, the director asked for a fight scene. I looked over to the stuntmen to give them a chance in front of the camera but they looked terrified, so it was me and James then. Obata Sensei then came up with a short fight routine involving kirikaeishi's and some thrusts.

"It was a little nerve-wracking since Sensei choreographed the tachiuchi on the spot. I had embarrassing nightmares about embarrassing him on set and the repercussions that might follow," James comments on the fight scene. Actually I think I was the one who needed more direction from Obata Sensei, I wanted to make sure I knew what he wanted before either of us got skewered with an iaito.

I found that the scariest part of doing the fight scene over and over again was the possible damage to the swords we were using. Every time our swords collided (even gently) I would cringe. "I only wish I could have physically blocked with the iaito... but the iaito were too expensive and not ours to bang around, unfortunately. It was also fun to 'pretend-kill' Michael," James remembers (yes, I was the one who loses), "Of course, had I known about the pictures of the humor section in the November Newsletter, I might have enjoyed it more." Should I avoid doing tachi-uchi with James for a while?

After our little fight scene, we called it a wrap for the day and things were cleaned up. We changed from Shogun era samurai back to the scruffy people we were, though James went from scruffy ronin back to clean-cut teacher. Obata Sensei thanked us for our participation and we left for the day. But another day was to follow, this time without the blazing sun of mosquitoes thankfully.

Day 2 – Sunday October 12th – Hotshots Studios

After a considerably shorter drive to Van Nuys, I found myself standing with Obata Sensei and crew in a small parking lot in front of the small studio we were to be filming in. "I originally expected it to be much bigger, with the set already built. It surprised me that it was just an empty room," James comments. I also found it to be rather small for the name 'Hot Shots Studios' but I guess it's all we really needed for the interior shots. James had to leave for a school project before the action started so he missed out on most of the fun.

As the crew unpacked materials to build the set, Obata Sensei, Mrs. Obata, Saito Sensei, Mike Yamasaki, Joe, and some other people from yesterday stood outside in a circle discussing today's work. I came just when they were talking about who should be doing what for the hara kiri scene and Obata Sensei then looked at me and asked me if I wanted to commit suicide for the camera. I said I was willing to but then Obata Sensei asked if I wanted to shave my head, which made me have second thoughts. Eventually the costumers selected the guy who did the sword sharpening scene from the other day.



It took a couple of hours for the set to be built and I had my doubts about how they can turn plain white walls and a concrete floor into a Japanese interior. The carpenters did their magic and lay down the tatami mats and lo and behold, we had a corner that looked straight out of a traditional Japanese home. The sliding doors were faked and we used the same set for different interiors by adjusting the décor.

While we were waiting, Saito Sensei and the one to be committing hara kiri were getting into make-up and costume. Saito Sensei was to be the Kaishyaku who beheads the individual after he cuts his abdomen. Both Saito Sensei and the guy had to have the half-bald samurai hair styles and there was only one bald cap. So the make-up specialists had to improvise with cloth and it worked out due to Saito Sensei being in the shadows of the shot.

During Saito Sensei's dressing, Obata Sensei guided the actor how to draw the blade across his gut. During hara kiri, usually the punished was to draw the blade across his stomach from left to right and then cross that cut by making another one from the top to bottom. The truly honorable would pull out their intestines before the kaishyaku beheaded them. Thankfully the last part was left out in this shoot but we were still left with the cross cut. There were even some blood shots planned and some fake blood in a pump was prepared later on.

And so Saito Sensei and the actor got into their final costuming and the camera and lighting were set up. There was talk of Saito Sensei holding an actual shinzen for some shots but they settled on an iaito for safety reasons since the shot called for Saito Sensei to cut at the man's neck.



Once everybody got into their positions there were quite a few rehearsals to get the timing right. Originally a spectator of the hara kiri was needed so I got into costume only to have them cancel that when I was almost completely dressed up *sniffle*. Anyway, of things adjusted during rehearsals were the movement of the camera and the pacing of the movements of the guy. There was quite a bit of acting in facial expressions and body movement needed from the guy and Saito Sensei. Obata Sensei guided Saito Sensei on drawing the sword and ready position, as well as when to cut.

Time for the camera to roll and many many takes of the scene were taken from different angles. It must have been rough for the guy and Saito Sensei to go through

all those takes, especially since there had to be quite a bit of tension.

After the director was satisfied, Saito Sensei took a break and preparations were made for the blood close-up. The blood was mixed and put into the pumping apparatus that fed into a tube. The set was then protected by a bunch of trash bags and the tube fed into the cloth wrapped around the guy's stomach.

Because of the tubes and trash bags, this shot was only to be a close-up. The blood was hard to control and it seemed like the couple of shots that were pulled off were not going to be used.

After lunch, I was told I was going to pull a dagger (chisagatana) out from its' sheath in a close-up. I later discovered that I was to play Asano Takumi no Kami Naganori from the 47 Ronin who dishonored himself by attacking someone in the high court. So Mike Yamasaki drilled me on how to properly and safely draw the blade. The chisagatana I was to use was actually an antique and that made me very nervous – I didn't want to ruin a piece of history.



I got dressed in a very fancy noble's costume that Mrs. Obata thought was really neat only to find out that the *only* shot of me taken in that costume was the close-up of my hands drawing the chisagatana. Well, needless to say we shot that scene very quickly and with very little wear and tear on the antique I was playing with.

I felt that after being dressed up so fancy, covering my tattoo, doing make-up, and tying my up my hair that it was a waste if I wasn't to be in any other scenes. So I was placed into the "bar scene" as Ooishi Chikara the son of Ooishi Kuranosuke (of the 47 Ronin) to get his drunk father to exact revenge in Edo. The set was redecorated and Mike Yamasaki's wife Grace was made into a waitress with fancy hair and kimono.

After shooting the drunken Ooishi Kuranosuke schmoozing with the waitress, talking about shopping for Gucci and such in Japanese (audio wasn't going to be used), it was my turn to get into the scene. I was told to utter some Japanese lines and I did my best with what little speaking ability I had. Everybody was constantly correcting me which made me feel like they should find someone else.

Obata Sensei experimented by giving me some very complex lines but after seeing I could barely get the first couple of words right, gave me a about a total of nine Japanese words I could easily say. Those included "Father! What are you doing?" "I don't drink Sake," and "When are you going to Edo?"



So after barely passing for a Japanese speaker in several takes, we called it a wrap for the reenactments. But the best part of the day was just coming up.

While I was changing, Obata Sensei brought a suitcase in and started to change in a kimono. I had thought that the day was over but looking over at the target stands and tatami mats, I remembered Sensei was doing tameshigiri!

The lights were set up in a sort of moody way and the set darkened. I was able to take a snapshot of Obata Sensei dressed in his navy blue kimono and hakama with his daisho (first picture up on top) before the cutting started. The target was then prepped and the camera rolled.

Sensei showed his cutting expertise for the camera while I struggled to get good shots. Sensei did tameshigiri on single and double targets, taking pauses in between cutting sets for the film crew to prepare. Then Sensei made pieces of bamboo fly, he was going so fast I couldn't get well timed pictures of the actual cuts.

The final piece of bamboo was cut and the lights were raised. Everybody applauded and looked dazzled at



having just seen a master swordsman show his true skills. I forget that most people have never seen a Japanese sword used so masterfully when I watch Obata Sensei cut during demonstrations, most of the time I keenly take note of his skills. The director looked thoroughly satisfied and called the reenactment shoot a wrap.



Obata Sensei changed back into his everyday samue as everybody cleaned up. The set was being struck and set pieces put back into the truck (no rhyme intended). I helped Obata Sensei carry some of his belongings back into his Toyota and helped him drive out of the cramped parking lot. With Obata Sensei gone, and Saito Sensei getting his car, I bid the crew farewell and went home.

Those two days were a very valuable experience. Not only did I finally take part in a professional (although very low budget) shoot, but I came to fully appreciate how lucky I was to be studying directly under Obata Sensei. I witnessed just how much he knew about every minute detail of Japanese culture and as James said, "I already knew how lucky we are to be studying with Sensei, but it's one thing to know the amazing wealth of knowledge he has, and another thing to see that knowledge blazing out of him." I also saw how much of a leader he is both inside and outside the dojo. Vicki Van Fleet once said that

Obata Sensei would most probably have been a general had he been in feudal Japan and both James and I would have to agree.

Furthermore, I believe I began to better understand what kind of a person Sensei is in those two days working with him. For me, Obata Sensei came off as a much more open of a person one may initially realize. I saw that he was very open to others and very willing to help and inform those who know little. He also seems to be very open to what others ask of him and will accommodate those requests, for instance when a filmmaker asks for him to do something a little bit more 'showy'. Obata Sensei also seems to have real fun teaching and making examples for those learning from him, joking around from time to time ("Or you could just toss a shuriken at him!").

James and I also learned how fun it is to be a stunt swordsman and even considered creating a samurai film troupe using what we learned. "It would be a great thing if we could have our own stunt team as well... It also made me want to do my own samurai film," James ponders. I have to confess I have even been thinking up plots of samurai films James and I can film together.

All-in-all, it was a great experience to be working on a samurai reenactment even if not on the scale of "The Last Samurai", though the Honbu will be getting a piece of that soon. I hope to work with Sensei on a similar project in the near future. We'll end with James reminiscing about the first day, "A horse sticking its' nose in my car in the morning, freezing and chatting in early morning, baking in the heat in late morning, seeing our fellow Shinkendo students' eyes light up while trying on the armor, Saito san reveling in the wearing of the armor and experimenting with his range of motion, watching a seppuku scene, Sensei giving tips on Kyudo, the light dappling over a little stagnant pond where an iaito was being field-cleaned, and Michael with a camera glued to his face."

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