

# Hajime!

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It was now six months since I started Japanese *kyudo*. In four months I had graduated from an intensive training program at the Tsurugaoka Shrine in Kamakura, Japan. Two months later I won a competition that required me to perform a complex shooting ritual called *yawatashi* at the start of the following *getsurei-kai*. Despite my handicap in my shoulder, I felt like I was somewhat fitting in even though my form was still restricted.

Every weekday I made my way via my little scooter to the dojo. Saturdays were reserved for practicing *Iai-Batto-jutsu* but every once in awhile I decided to skip sword fighting practice and go to *kyudo* when there were no classes scheduled. Nothing made Saturday practice any different from others except the noise. From the first floor dojo came very strange sounds that echoed up to the rooftop range. "IN-YO----!" followed by what sounded like gunshots. Upon investigation, the doors were always closed and I didn't dare poke my head inside. However, one Saturday, the doors were wide open and I felt drawn to the sounds.

The main dojo of the shrine was sacred and etiquette was required to enter. I summoned my courage, bowed and entered trying to seek refuge in a spectator area that overlooked the aged wood floor leading to a very ornamental seat of honor called the *kamiza*.

"IN-YO----!" My eyes were immediately drawn to a man standing atop a wooden horse, drawing a long black bow with strange bamboo arrows with bulbous ends. As his *kia* was drawing nay he released the arrow, which flew only 5 meters and hit a padded target hanging on the wall and bounced, landing amongst other arrows scattered on the floor. This arrow was followed rapidly by two more which he retrieved from the sash about his hips. When the man completed his shooting, he gracefully dismounted the wooden steed and bowed to the horse. A young man came dashing forward to collect the arrows before another archer mounted and began the same process of shooting three arrows.

I watched this bizarre shooting sequence and recalled seeing elaborately dressed archers perform ceremonies every fall, racing through the center of the shrine, hitting and breaking wooden targets along a straight track. This must be their practice. How odd to shoot from a wooden horse. Then it dawned on me that space is a commodity in Japan. Ingenious!

I quickly lost track of time and before I knew it the archers were gathering to end practice in the formal manner of kneeling and bowing before the *kamiza*, sensei and to each other. All of a sudden the archers were milling around me. I realized that all their gear was at my feet. Embarrassed I worked my way towards the door. Just before escaping I recognized a young man who was in my *kyudo* class.

A few weeks later, the same young man, Miyagawa, came to *kyudo* practice. I approached him and asked him about the strange practice. He was proud to tell me and a group that had soon gathered round, that he belonged to the Ogasawara *Kyuba-jutsu Reiho* of mounted archery and etiquette training. The school was nearing its 800 year anniversary and the teacher, Kiyotada Ogasawara, was the 31<sup>st</sup> generation teacher in an unbroken line of succession as grand master. After talking at length, Miyagawa invited me to travel with him to an event where he would be riding. Eager to see more I accepted and we traveled to a small town in the countryside, rich in culture and steeped in tradition. I was absolutely fascinated by the pageantry.

The archers were dressed in elegant silk robes, layered under deer skin chaps, with brocade chest and armguards. They wore red lacquered, weave hats and also donned swords. The arrows for the ceremony were graced with two wide eagle feathers opposed by two narrow grouse feathers. The senior archers wore a back quiver because their arrows were tipped with a forked spear head. The others wore their arrows through their sashes. The bows were shiny and black with black strings. The senior archer's bows were distinguished with tan colored rattan wraps that signified their rank.

All the villagers came out to watch as the procession marched from a small shrine to the riding grounds where three wood targets were posted on bamboo poles only 50 meters apart. The first rider was the future of the Ogasawara school; the grand master's 18 year old son. His bow signified his rank and the grandeur of his garments illuminated the overcast day.

He started with an arrow knocked on his 3 meter-long bow. Once the horse reached full gallop, he released the reins, stood in the saddle and began drawing the bow high above his head. By the time he settled into anchor, the target was fast approaching. With a quick eye, he loosed the arrow and it pierced the wood. The target broke into shards. Before the arrow hit, it seemed he had reached back and pulled another arrow from the bottom end of his quiver and knocked, loosed and demolished another target. The third arrow also found its mark. The rider swiftly retrieved the reins and stopped the horse. The whole process taking only a matter of seconds.

Four more archers followed him before the riders paraded back along the track and reaped hardy applause from ecstatic villagers. After the top five riders finished, groups of five continued in the same fashion until all the riders had completed a run. Sadly, some of the riders were thrown from their speeding steeds before ever completing the track. At the completion, the riders paraded back to the shrine.

I ran back to the staging area eagerly awaiting Miyagawa's return. I had so many questions! My first was how I could become a part of this fascinating tradition! There wasn't much time to discuss matters because the local shrine was going to hold a banquet in honor of the riders. At the banquet, I was asked what I thought and I couldn't contain my excitement, or my desire to get involved. A few frowned at the idea but never talked about the steps to join the school. After the banquet, the riders went to change their clothes. As a gesture, one rider offered to let me put on his riding trousers and his brocade arm and chest guard. To top it off, he let me wear his hat and take photos! I was caught: hook, line and sinker.

All the way back to Kamakura, I talked non-stop about the day and pleaded with Miyagawa to give me insight into joining the Ogasawara school. It wasn't until weeks later that I was sitting in my favorite noodle shop chatting with the owner. He had lots of *yabusame* photos from Ogasawara on the wall but little did I know that my favorite little noodle shop was also a hot spot for the Ogasawara riders.

Maybe the owner tired of me rambling on and on about *yabusame* that he arranged to introduce me to a senior archer, Mr. Araki. I pleaded my case but Mr. Araki said the decision could only be made by the *soke* of Ogasawara. However impossible it seemed to ever meet the grand master, Mr. Araki gave me an inside tip. So as instructed I just happen to show up at the noodle shop the very night Ogasawara-sensei was with his top riders. I felt like I was walking into a job interview to be a nuclear physicist. I knew nothing about *yabusame* other than some meager research I was able to do with a language barrier.

I decided to wear a kimono in an attempt to show my passion for Japanese tradition. The shop was but a single horseshoe table and the shop master sat me right in the center of their group. Conversation was slow but eventually Mr. Araki broached the topic of my interest. Ogasawara-sensei who was quite inebriated by then seemed perturbed that a western woman would be interested in his nearly 800 year old school. He scoffed at the idea and continued drinking. The others, however; started asking me questions and seemed intrigued that I would wear a kimono and even more so when they realized I had sewn it myself.

Ogasawara continued to ignore me but the senior archers told me about an American man who used to ride for their school. They spoke very highly of him. I was excited and asked where I could find Terry Sherwin. The room got very quiet. Terry had been killed in an accident at the beach, survived by a Japanese wife and young daughter. The anniversary of his death was approaching and the memory of the tragedy was all too fresh in their minds. I left the shop that night feeling like I had made no progression towards my new dream of being part of their school.

On my way home, I went to the grave of Minamoto no Yoritomo, the first *shogun* of Japan and said a prayer. His teacher, unbeknownst to me was the first generation of Ogasawara. I wouldn't come to realize this until later. I also took some flowers to the beach where Terry was killed. I couldn't explain the passion that was slowly consuming me. What was so important about this school that I was losing sleep at night? How far would I have to go to prove myself? Well, that's another story.