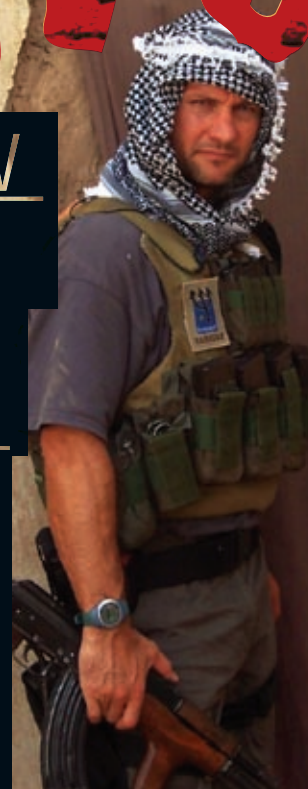


# The New Wave Man

AN INTERVIEW  
WITH

ROB REDENBACH

From martial arts hobbyist and knockabout Australian Army recruit to Defensive Tactics teacher for Nelson Mandela's bodyguards and some of the world's elite law-enforcement units, Rob Redenbach has had a storied life. He's also experienced his fair share of combat, from dojo sparring sessions to civilian bar brawls and even armed warfare. His life story (so far), *Waveman*, is an inspiring and exciting read that offers as much philosophical insight and as many revelations about humans' combative nature as it does thrilling boy's-own-adventure tales. Here, Redenbach gives us an insight into the man behind the book and let's us in on some lessons he's learned the hard way.



INTERVIEW BY BEN STONE

**If you had to list the three most important lessons you've learned about combat, what would they be?**

1. It's what you learn after you think you know it all that adds real value.
2. Training to improve is completely different to training to impress: to survive real combat you must train to improve.
3. A person about to escalate from verbal to physical violence makes a move before they act. This 'movement before the movement' – which may be a twitch of the head, a move of the shoulder, etc – is ubiquitous. Of course many

instructors speak of being aware of 'telegraphed' strikes during a bout, but the 'movement before the movement' is different: it heralds the transition from possible force to actual violence.

**In formulating a defensive tactics system, is the most important element understanding how fights take place from a physical perspective – e.g. distancing, the nature/type of attacks, etc. – or from a psychological perspective (both from the aggressor's and defender's point of view)? Or is the key, perhaps, in understanding how one affects the other?**

The two are intrinsically interwoven. You must understand people, i.e. you must understand how people move, generate power, absorb shock, think, feel, communicate, etc. [Your] depth of understanding will, ultimately, determine your level of competency – not just as a martial artist, but as a person.

**Through what training, work or other experience did you make these discoveries personally?**

Perhaps more than any other single learning environment, bouncing taught me the importance of understanding people. Apart from being poorly paid and mostly very boring work, bouncing is an

excellent (temporary) learning experience: it is a real-world environment and, among other things, you learn how both verbal communication and physical skills work – or don't work – against non-co-operating opponents. Say the wrong thing at the wrong time and you could unwittingly escalate a non-physical confrontation into a physical one. Even if you say the right thing at the right time, but in the wrong way, you can have a serious problem on your hands. The same principle applies to physical skill: it doesn't matter if you can do a flawless right-cross, wrist-lock (or whatever) in the gym, if your timing is off or if you're overwhelmed by

fear when you try to do it for real, you'll probably lose.

**You have studied numerous traditional martial arts in depth, but also have been to the other end of the combative spectrum, teaching and applying military/law-enforcement defensive tactics and working private security in war zones. Where in this broad spectrum were the above lessons learned – were any uncovered during your traditional martial arts phase?**

**in fact a charlatan), you became somewhat disaffected with the 'instructor worship' mentality that sometimes infects martial artists. What tips would you give a student to avoid similar pitfalls when seeking an instructor?**

Read. Read biographies and autobiographies of not only great martial artists (living and deceased), but also great leaders from history. The more you read the more you'll have a point of reference to identify what attributes are genuinely admirable. Also, have the courage

narrow-minded and even xenophobic some people can be! Beyond that, it also allowed me to interact with some of the most admirable and combatively savvy people I've had the good fortune to cross paths with.

**I was recently told by an Australian martial arts instructor that he was heading to Beijing to instruct Chinese military and police in Defensive Tactics. I asked how he felt that the officers he would be teaching may well employ those skills in locking up and beating innocent**

**Chinese (many of whom were simply protesting after their homes were demolished without compensation during pre-Olympic construction works), as was happening at the time. He didn't reply. Having worked in Iraq, where the presence of Western military is a hotly disputed moral issue, how important is it to you that you're morally comfortable with the policies and aims of those organisations/governments you work for?**

Over the years I've said no to a number of commercially

**"Working in Baghdad is dramatically different to studying in Seoul, but you can (and should) learn everywhere." – Redenbach**

Looking back over the past 25 years, I no longer differentiate between one learning environment and another. Of course, working in Baghdad is dramatically different to studying in Seoul, but at the risk of sounding evasive or overly philosophical, you can (and should) learn everywhere. I've tried to do that.

**Of the attributes necessary to effectively defend yourself in the variety of dire circumstances you have faced, what did those martial arts give you, and what did they lack?**

Confidence. Unfortunately, that confidence was both an advantage and a disadvantage. Because a percentage of the martial arts training I was involved in was tactically very poor (e.g. voluntarily taking fights to the ground when outnumbered), I had the confidence to attempt to employ techniques I'd learnt in the gym, but I didn't really have the street smarts to follow through and win. It took a lot of hard and painful lessons to replace unconscious incompetence with justified confidence.

**There are points in your journey when, for obvious reasons (in particular, discovering a martial arts 'guru' who you'd travelled overseas to meet, was**

to think independently: just because everyone else puts a particular guru on a pedestal, that doesn't mean that they deserve to be there. If either logic or intuition (or both) tells you to move on and find a different instructor, then do so!

**Perhaps one of the bigger turning points in your career as a DT instructor was when you went to South Africa, with the aim of teaching Mandela's bodyguards. Why did you choose such a seemingly impossible task – an unknown Aussie teaching one of the world's most high-profile political figures – and what did it do for you?**

Your question consists of two parts, so I'll answer them in turn:

1. I'd spent a number of years refining and adapting my DT program. From experiences in places such as Papua New Guinea I knew the program really did deliver results. I figured if it was as good as I thought it was, then decision-makers in South Africa would see its merit, endorse the program and in the process I'd use that high-profile endorsement to further develop my training business internationally.
2. It taught me that I completely underestimated how parochial,



**A 17-year-old Redenbach at Kapooka Army base, 1981**





With Nelson Mandela and his Presidential Protection Unit

attractive offers. There have been times when, financially, I've really had my back to the wall and it's been very difficult to decline. That said, I can honestly say I've never accepted an assignment where I feel that in any way my moral standards were compromised. I have done things that I didn't like doing, but when you operate in high-risk environments sometimes you have to make hard decisions. As for teaching DT skills to Chinese military and police? That's a no-brainer: I wouldn't do it.

**Obviously, as a dad, keeping your kids safe is an important and ongoing task for you. What training have you given them, if any?**

This may surprise you, but I haven't given them any physical training (yet). I have discussed things such as never getting into a stranger's car, but I actually think I a child should develop competencies in other areas (such as football, reading, gymnastics, writing, dancing, etc. — all of which my children do) before taking part in martial training. There are a few reasons for this, and they include: 1) a child's outlook should be well-rounded and not obsessed with any one pursuit; 2) kids, being kids, will be naturally attracted to flashy, spectator orientated martial approaches — although that type of approach is fun, it builds what I think is a dangerous appreciation of what effective self-defence entails. Basically, they have a distorted view of what's real and what's not and the danger of that is they

build unconscious incompetence and unjustified confidence.

**What has been the scariest moment in your career — and was this because it was actually the most frightening/life-threatening of all, or because it happened at a time before you had mastered your fear response?**


I don't think of myself as having a 'career' — I have a life. Without doubt the scariest moment of my life was watching my youngest daughter fight for her life in intensive care. That said, if you mean some type of violent encounter, I suppose being ambushed in Baghdad and having bullets fly into the cabin of the vehicle I was driving would have to rank fairly highly.

**What was your aim in writing *Waveman*, and given the feedback and sales it's had, do you feel you've succeeded in that?**

When I first wrote the manuscript to *Waveman* I seriously considered putting it in a shoebox under my bed. In hindsight, I think I wrote it as a type of cathartic process, and also possibly for my children to read one day and (hopefully) learn something from. In the end I submitted it to Pan Macmillan out of curiosity. I wanted to see if a professional publisher thought it was any good. When Pan Mac' responded and offered to buy the rights, I actually said no. I didn't like the idea of people judging my life. I suppose, like most people, I was scared of negative feedback. In the end though, I decided to publish it because I realised I would have liked to have read a

book like *Waveman* 25 years ago — if I had, I think it would have helped me to get more out of not only my martial pursuits, but also life in general.

Now that the book is in its fourth print run, I'm very glad I didn't leave it in a shoebox under my bed, not just because it has been financially rewarding, but because of the feedback from readers. I've literally had people from 15 years to 80 years of age write to me saying how much they've enjoyed the book and how it has helped them in different ways. As an author, that's very satisfying.

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Instructing SOCOG with an injured arm, 1999



Redenbach demonstrating the never-say-die attitude of his defense system