

# TAUM DELL'ARMO

Carmel Samurai

By George Donaldson

Photography by Glenn Fidler Photography

**T**he Monterey Peninsula in general—and Carmel in particular—has long been a place that attracts one-of-a-kind characters and outsized personalities. Think Steinbeck, Day, Ricketts, Morse, Eastwood. These people share several traits, but one in stands out: a passion for life and for the endeavors they engage in. It's no stretch to add A. Taum Dell'Armo to that list.

Taum (pronounced just like “Tom,” the name he grew up with in the South Bronx) long held a dream to live in Carmel. “I used to call it my ‘Someday Place,’” he says. “I first visited in 1972 and vowed that I would move here someday.” “Someday” became “today” 16 years ago when he and his wife Diane took up residence here. As is so often the case, the route from his home in The Bronx to Carmel was somewhat circuitous.





"When I was young, I thought my whole life was going to be spent in New York," Taum says. An advertising major, he envisioned a life of moving to ever-more-luxurious apartments while riding the Madison Avenue corporate escalator. The war in Vietnam threw a curveball at that particular game plan. "I was about to be drafted into the Army, but instead chose to join the Air Force," he explains. He was posted to Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. This period opened Taum's horizons and gave him a new perspective. "I realized there

were people who were living life differently than in my experience," he recalls. "They would go up to the city to visit museums and see shows, then return to a peaceful, quiet life. That appealed to me." It was also during this time that Taum was first exposed to a discipline that remains a large part of his life to this day: martial arts.

"I was fortunate to hook up with Franklin Hargrove, a very prominent Karate teacher," Taum says. "He is a 10th degree black belt, was classically trained in Japan

and is in the Karate Hall of Fame." Hargrove set up a dojo at the base. "It was a very traditional dojo, not a Chuck Norris strip-mall kind of thing. You had to learn Japanese to study with him. Hargrove took me under his wing. I was about 21 at the time. Since then, I've studied karate, tai chi, aikido and judo—but that was only for six months." A judo-aficionado friend bet Taum that he wouldn't last six months in that discipline. "I quit one hour of after the six months were up. It was a matter of pride. I tell you though...I grew up in the South

Bronx and I had never been beaten up that badly," he laughs.

After the Air Force, Taum did pursue that advertising career, but he escaped the concrete canyons of Manhattan, becoming the Senior VP of West Coast operations for Ogilvy & Mather, at the time the world's premier advertising agency. How did the name change come about? "My yoga mentor chose that name for me. It's a Sanskrit word representing the essential vibration of the universe."

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Eventually he was drawn to Iaido-jitsu, a martial art that utilizes the sword. As in Samurai sword. It's a tough road. "For the first 15 years you're considered a beginner. I found someone here who would teach me combat sword."

This experience led him to begin collecting antique Samurai sword fittings. "They are exquisite works of art," he says. "Over time they became more ceremonial than functional. Kind of like a Rolex in Western culture." Taum says that Samurais carried two swords, one long (?) and one short (?). When studying Iaido-jitsu, a student is only allowed to obtain a sword after nine years of work. It's a sharp sword, but not super sharp. Eventually, he is allowed to own a *shinken* (Live Sword). "The others are for practice," Taum explains, "but the shinken will cut you just by looking at it."

This level of craftsmanship is the result of centuries of dedicated experimentation and hard work.



Basically, the blade is composed of a sandwich of two types of carbon steel—soft inside and hard outside—painstakingly hammered into shape and polished and honed to perfection. "Only a handful of master sword makers are recognized by the Japanese government. All are registered. It's a very tightly controlled craft. In fact, in Japan it's illegal to own a shinken unless it's made by a master. When the government comes across one that isn't by a master, it is destroyed." These masters may not produce more than two a month. They cannot be rushed: each takes about a year. Every individual part (there



are between four and six individual fittings in addition the blade in each sword) is produced by a master. "There's no art in the world that involves more masters to create the work," Taum says.

With this level of control exerted on the tradition, it's remarkable that Taum Dell'Armo, an American, has gained the trust of some of those highly-venerated masters. "I started to make a sword," he says. "I thought I'd put some of my antique fittings on a new sword." That experience led him to idea "The 8 Samurai."

"The Eight Samurai is a unique series of eight swords crafted by eight of the greatest Japanese Master Swordsmiths, created for eight select clients," Taum says. Each is signed by the Master—and in an unheard-of twist—also contains the name of the original owner. "This is great honor." Each sword will be registered with the Japanese Government and the Society for the Preservation of the Japanese Sword (NBTHK), the official institution charged with the preservation of this unique art form.

Taum will work with each owner to develop a theme that is carried out with carefully-chosen, genuine Samurai antique elements (of a minimum 150 years of age) on the sword. A 75-page book will be produced for each sword explaining the theme and prove nance of the piece along with an explanation of the series. Each sword will take up to two years to produce by a team of seven masters and their



apprentices and Taum says the series is expected to take nine to twelve years to complete, at which time another book will be produced with details of all eight swords. Each will be encased in an elegant wood-and-glass display case, produced by a Carmel Valley master cabinet maker.

"This type of project has never been done in the 1,000-year history of the Samurai sword," Taum says proudly. "There will only be eight members; eight today, tomorrow, forever. We call it the most exclusive art club in the world."

There are very few people in the world who could carry off such an audacious and ambitious undertaking, and many have doubted that he can do it. But they don't know Taum Dell'Armo. The fact that he is already at work on the first of the series with a venerated Japanese Master Swordsmith is proof positive that when this guy puts his mind to something, it's going to happen.

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