

## Interview with Raymond Floro

Real Fighting, Issue 7  
www.realfighting.com



**“That's why I like Raymond Floro, he's one of the only Filipino instructors to admit the truth publicly... He will also prove his point in person, one-on-one, to anyone, and has done so many times.”**

The problem with Filipino fighting arts in America and Europe is that many instructors have taken simple and direct techniques and have made them overly complicated. They've created this baroque over-elaboration in an effort to attract more students and build their organization.

The truth is -- this stuff isn't very complicated, and you don't need to spend years practicing it. Angel Cabales stated years ago that it only takes about six-weeks to be completely familiar with the basics, that's a far cry from what most people are told. The vast majority of the forms and techniques taught nowadays by many FMA schools are completely useless in a real confrontation; but how many people are going to admit that they've wasted 5-10 years on this nonsense? Very few.

And that's why I like Raymond Floro, he's one of the only Filipino instructors to admit the truth publicly! He acknowledges that most FMA styles teach superfluous movements and don't prepare students for reality. He will also prove his point in person, one-on-one, to anyone, and has done so many times.

I met Australian based Raymond Floro in New York City several months ago. We initially communicated through the Internet about products and then eventually about training theories. I found that we shared many of the same ideas about the knife and fighting in general.

My main purpose in meeting him was to review his unique fighting knife for this issue, but I was also pleasantly surprised at how generous he was in sharing his unique system with me.

I learned that he had just trained the Korean Special Forces and was intrigued to hear the story.

**Realfighting:** When did you first start practicing any form of MA, and what did you study?

**Raymond Floro:** The very first Martial Art I practiced was Okinawan Karate (Goju-ryu), under Paul Starling. That was when I was 9 years old (I'm 41 now). Paul still has successful schools around and is still actively teaching.

**RF:** Did you enjoy karate?

**Floro:** As good as it was I never felt "at home" with Karate. All I can say is that it wasn't me. I could

never get the exact techniques in practice to work when sparring, so I was very disenchanted.

**RF:** How long did you study it?

**Floro:** For about three years

**RF:** Did you study anything else?

**Floro:** Concurrently, I had an infatuation with the knife (I always like the knife). I don't know where it came from, but even when I saw people using nunchaks, tonfas, the bo, etc. I wanted to learn how to use the knife. Of course at that time there were no schools offering knife instruction.

**RF:** Where you born and raised in Australia or did you migrate from the Philippines?

**Floro:** I was born in the Philippines in 1963, and my family migrated to Australia in 1970

**RF:** What was your first exposure to the knife?

**Floro:** During my karate days, I discovered a book called "Modern Arnis" by Remy Presas. This was my first real exposure to the knife and stick.

**RF:** When was your first real physical exposure to the stick and knife?

**Floro:** My Auntie knew a friend (Tony Dedal) who taught Arnis (Balintawak style), and introduced me to him. Around the same time I found an Aussie instructor of Modern Arnis (Richard Bridge) who was kind enough to teach me also.

**RF:** When you were studying karate, weren't you aware of FMA's?

**Floro:** No, I never knew that the Philippines had their own martial arts, and to think that it was based on stick and knife (must be in the genes). **RF:** So with a few years karate and some arnis, what made you turn to fencing?

**Floro:** Well I mentioned before that I loved the knife and would love to have learned how to use it. During my time with Karate, I stumbled onto a book called "Secrets of Modern Knife Fighting," by David Steele...the book is still in print. That book was the catalyst that started my lifelong interest in knives. In his book, Steele mentions the "parallels" of modern fencing to knife fighting. So taking his advice...I took up Olympic fencing.

**RF:** Did Steele's book also influence your knife collecting?

**Floro:** Oh yes, Steele mentioned brands of knives like Randall, Ka Bars etc...and to this day, I still love collecting these.

**RF:** So how did you get into fencing?

**Floro:** Well I sought out a fencing instructor, and as fate would have it, I found a great Maestro that lived only 10 minutes walking distance from me; and I started taking private lessons.

**RF:** Which were your favorite weapons?

**Floro:** My weapons of choice were the foil and the saber; mainly due to the recommendations of my Maestro, and also because of David Steele's book.

**RF:** Did fencing come easy to you?

**Floro:** Yes, after my first month of instruction, I won the school championships, after three months of instruction I won the State Championship, and a few more months after that I was in the finals of the Australian Championships. In total I fenced for about 3 years.

**RF:** Did you have any chance of joining the Olympic Team?

**Floro:** Yes, I wanted to qualify, I'm sure I could've made it, but I was only in high school at the time. This was in the 1980's, (when the games were held in Los Angeles). My father demanded that I go to college straight away after high school, so I didn't have much of a choice.

**RF:** Have you any regrets?

**Floro:** I had no regrets due to the fact that I initially studied fencing to learn how to use a knife. The high level of competition I was achieving made it so competitive that the enjoyment was starting to wane; and of course there was no way fencing could sustain me. Lastly -- at that level, injuries to ankles, knees, hips, back began to nag me. In the end the costs far outweighed the benefits.

**RF:** Did you practice the Italian or French school?

**Floro:** The fencing style I practiced was the "Italian" school, more powerful and less "wristy" than the French style. In fact, one of my trade marks was that I used to strap the foil to my wrist, so that my arm and sword would move as one.

**RF:** What was your favorite technique?

**Floro:** I had one of the quickest and most explosive step forward-lunges in the sport, and my counter attacks were lightning fast. I achieved this through "paring down" what I used in competition. What I mean by this is that I specialized and drilled constantly with only a few techniques. For example I won the State Champion with one combination attack and two parries. Even though I only had a few techniques, I did them well.

**RF:** And that's all you need, to perfect only a few techniques.

**Floro:** Exactly, take Bill Wallace for example, he only had three kicks and three punches, yet he was undefeated in his career.

**RF:** Has your fencing experience helped you in your teaching the knife?

**Floro:** Yes, this philosophy and mental attitude has been carried into my teaching, and the development of my unique fighting system. I "throw out" many useless techniques and keep only those that are effective and have a high probability of success.

**RF:** Many instructors teach their military and LE students one way, and their civilian students another, is that the same with you?

**Floro:** No, never, I teach my students only one way, I try to simplify things. Although I did alter some things after extensive conversations with WR Mann of "RealFighting," he made me aware of the legal ramifications in the defensive use of blades and improvised weapons by civilians and LE.

**RF:** So the mindset you teach for civilians and LE/military is different now?

**Floro:** Yes, when I teach civilians, the mindset is to get away and escape at the first opportune moment. Whereas, teaching the military is the "get in, take them out, get out" mentality

**RF:** How did the project with the Korean Special Forces come about? What do you do with them?

**Floro:** My first contact with teaching the US and Korean Special Forces in Korea was by way of email. A Sgt. First Class Jeff Guthery sent me an email inviting me to teach the troops because he saw a video clip of me sparring on the internet. He was impressed by what he saw, so he sent me an invite.

**RF:** That's a great story, these things don't happen too often

**Floro:** Yes, at first I thought someone was playing a joke on me, but it was such a fortunate turn of events. I had a lot of feedback from Sgt. Guthery about what they were after, and several emails from

Kelly Worden who had experience with teaching Special Forces.

**RF:** What curriculum did you teach?

**Floro:** The curriculum I focused on was my knife modules (which have been very well received). I also taught a bit of stick and machete work.

**RF:** Was it mainly drills, sparring, or both?

**Floro:** The program was heavily sparring-based. I taught a few key moves and concepts, and the rest of the time I pressure-tested them through full contact sparring.

**RF:** Was that a one-time assignment for you or will you go back to teach them again?

**Floro:** The Special Forces Detachment in Korea has a philosophy of choosing a different instructor each year, so that the troops get exposure to a lot of what's available out there, but they were so impressed with my program that they asked me to come back regularly each year.

**RF:** What did the Korean Special Forces want to learn from you?

**Floro:** They wanted to learn an efficient and effective knife system that could be easily learned.

**RF:** Why so much emphasis on the knife?

**Floro:** Because they regularly do "infiltration" exercises into North Korea. The standing policy is that if they are stranded on the "communist" side, no help whatsoever will be forthcoming - they walk home or die; so the possibility of close quarter combat is very real.

**RF:** Did you also have to deal with the Korean attitudes about their own martial arts?

**Floro:** Oh yes, the Koreans truly believe that TKD and hapkido is the "ultimate" response in hand-to-hand combat. I was asked to show them alternate but still effective systems. To open their eyes, so to speak.

**RF:** Isn't it true that most of these guys don't have much time to practice with CQC skills?

**Floro:** Exactly -- not only did I have to show them an effective knife fighting system, but remember, they have to use it with 50 plus pounds on their back

**RF:** Let's get back to your early training; you studied Balintawak style until the '80's, then you took a trip back to the Philippines where you met Tatang and the Ilustrisimo system.

**Floro:** Yes, I met Tatang through Edgar Sulite and Tony Diego. I kept traveling to the Philippines on and off for years to study the system. Usually three to four times a year, staying three to four weeks per visit.

**RF:** You were one of the last people to be certified as a full instructor by Tatang, yes?

**Floro:** Yes, I literally spent hundreds of hours of one-on-one training with Tatang, as well as his senior instructors, Romy Macapagal and Tony Diego. He gave me my official accreditation and I became the Australian representative of the system.

**RF:** You're also certified to teach the Lameco system?

**Floro:** Yes, Edgar gave me the rank of third degree black belt

**RF:** The stories about Antonio Tatang are almost mythical; did he share his history with you?

**Floro:** Yes, he told me he began to learn the family style [Ilustrisimo] at around seven years of age. He was taught by his father Isidro Ilustrisimo, and his uncle Melicio Ilustrisimo.

**RF:** I heard he was a street fighter and began his practical fighting experience against the Japanese.

**Floro:** Oh yeah...he was a soldier during WWII against the Japanese; he joined a group called the Sierra Madre Guerrillas, and made problems for the Japanese and their spies. He was nicknamed "Berdugo," meaning executioner.

**RF:** What about the story of the death matches?

**Floro:** Well, in the old days, they still existed, but who knows the truth, and, at first I was skeptical, since many masters boast about their death matches. But someone actually researched the claims and found that there were arrest records for each event; providing evidence that these occurred.

**RF:** Is the Ilustrisimo style concerned mainly with the knife and stick?

**Floro:** Kalis Ilustrisimo encompasses the staff, sword, stick, knife, chain and bandana and empty hands and in any combination.

**RF:** You've developed your own system, Floro Fighting Systems, what' the philosophy behind it?

**Floro:** With everything in life, I have always liked to keep things simple, efficient and effective. My personal motto has always been "it's what you do with what you already have that counts." I was never happy with many of the traditional styles I practiced because in many instances "what you learned was not what you did in sparring." Either things were too fancy or just too complicated to execute in the high pressure scenario of combat. These same moves were not instinctive enough to my liking.

**RF:** Is that why you liked fencing so much?

**Floro:** Yes, one of the things that attracted me to fencing was that it only had "a few" moves. In fact, I won the state championship by just specializing in one attack combination, and having just 2 parries for defense. The same can be said with boxing -- only a few moves, but still generally more effective than most martial arts available today.

**RF:** Tell us about your training in the Philippines

**Floro:** When I first met Tatang all I saw was a man in his '80's able to effectively spar Martial Artists much much younger. His moves were the epitome of simplicity. He seemed to only use a select few strikes, but was able to dominate his opponents. This type of "simplicity" is what guided me in the development of my system, FFS.

**RF:** Did you travel often to the Philippines to practice?

**Floro:** Every chance I got! I was so hungry to learn EVERYTHING about the Ilustrisimo system. I used to travel to the Philippines 3 to 4 times a year (staying 3-4 weeks per trip). From the moment I landed, I had personal one-on-one training not only with Tatang Ilustrisimo himself, but also with Tony Diego (Current GM) and Romy Macapagal. They used to take "shifts" in teaching me.

**RF:** Were you officially certified to be an instructor with the system?

**Floro:** In 1991, Tatang HIMSELF awarded me accreditation, not only to teach the Kalis Ilustrisimo system, but to also be able to accredit instructors under my tutelage.

**RF:** After you learned the entire system, is that when you began exploring?

**Floro:** Yes, I then embarked on a journey, where with the help of my students, and other martial arts instructors, I then tried to "simplify" what was taught to me to suit my personal style and psyche of fighting. Through constantly sparring, I systematically "pared down" the techniques, we pressure tested each concept and technique. Techniques that were easy, effective and instinctive to learn were kept -- those which were too "complicated" were discarded or modified. I distilled of everything I

learned to that point and threw out 80%. I did this with everything, starting with knife, machete, staff, sword, flexible weapons, pocket sticks and empty hand.

**RF:** And fencing was a large influence?

**Floro:** Yes, I used a LOT of fencing concepts. In fact, one can argue that the entire footwork of FFS is based on fencing. The timing, distance, broken rhythm is also taken from my experience with competitive fencing.

**RF:** When you first went to train with Tatang in the Philippines, weren't you already a formidable threat with your fencing skills?

**Floro:** Yes, one of my most memorable experiences was my FIRST DAY of meeting Tatang and his students, after the customary introductions and greetings were over. I was immediately given a padded stick, and the students lined up for some "friendly sparring." One after another, I sparred virtually everyone in the room (I still have the video of this event). What surprised me was at this time, I had NO real training in the Ilustrisimo system, relying completely on my fencing experience. I can proudly say that I did extremely well (if not dominated this session).

**RF:** Do you teach in the classical fencing manner?

**Floro:** Yes I do, the method that I use closely follows a typical one-on-one fencing lesson. I teach my students a few moves, and then when I am happy that he/she has a grasp of the fundamental principles, we spar. During the "sparring" session, I make corrections, I also show variations that he/she can achieve by making specific and subtle changes to the angles, distance or timing. I continue this line of training until the student is able to do it instinctively. At this time, I also determine whether any simple changes can be made to suit the student's body type, temperament etc.

**RF:** So you're "tailoring" the system to suit the student, rather than try and make the student suit the system.

**Floro:** Exactly, an example of my training involves teaching a student to perform a "Cross Block," then we'll spar. I limit the student to use ONLY this move for his/her defense. In the process of sparring, I'll attack and counter attack at all angles and levels, and he/she will have to cope with the onslaught with this ONE move only. In the end, the student comes to realize, that instead of NEEDING a dozen techniques to defend themselves, they only need to understand the correct principles of ONE concept. This "isolation sparring" is used to teach and demonstrate the rest of FFS, we do the same for attacks, counter attacks, feinting and drawing.

The "evolution" of FFS has always been to SIMPLIFY -- FFS have few techniques and concepts, and I always look for more efficient and effective ways to do these things. My research is carried out by attending seminars, and brainstorming with other instructors and students. When I find something that is BETTER; I do not add it to FFS, instead I REPLACE IT with something I already do. By replacing techniques, rather than adding them, FFS remains "streamlined" and you become very "picky" when looking at techniques. If I could summarize FFS to just one technique, I would be very happy.

**RF:** What about dealing with south-paws and differently sized individuals?

**Floro:** An important aspect in choosing my techniques is that it should not be dependent on whether the opponent is left handed or right handed, whether he's bigger or smaller etc., a lot of "2-man" drills are dependent on both participants being either right handed to right handed or vice versa; also, if a small lady or a child CANNOT execute my techniques effectively, I toss them out.

**RF:** What are the main differences between FFS and Kalis Ilustrisimo?

**Floro:** I'll list the main difference here:

**#1)** FFS utilizes more thrusts. Due to my fencing background, I have found these techniques very natural. I have found that the thrust can really jolt my opponent (even with a helmet), so it's great to use this technique against an opponent who likes to "blitz" or close in. A lot of FMA have "banned"

thrusting when sparring, which is such a shame as it is an extremely valuable tool; ask any doctor or medic, and they'll tell you, most deaths in a knife situation occur when victims have been stabbed NOT slashed.

**#2) Distancing** - FFS practitioners either at long range or extremely close, they hardly stand in medium range because we found that there is a high probability of "double kills," Ilustrisimo prefers the medium range. Utilizing fencing footwork, the FFS practitioner can really close the distance quickly

**#3) FFS** - Uses "Linear Motion" as it's the basis for footwork, which is taken directly from fencing. We find this faster and doesn't require much room to move (a good point to remember when attacking in crowded places like bars or trains etc, Ilustrisimo uses more traditional FMA angulations.

**#4) FFS** executes their techniques in a tighter motion (closer to the body), whereas Ilustrisimo today tends to move wider.

**#5) FFS** - only uses the alive hand (non-weapon hand) at extremely close range. We found that especially in weapon sparring, the non-weapon hand gets hit often if it tries to get involved in distances greater than extreme close range. KI - likes to use alive hand at any distance.

**#6) FFS** have done away with traditional Filipino terms, Aussies can't pronounce them, let alone remember them. I've used the same "numbering" and terminology as in fencing.

**#7) FFS** is more focused on knife; KI is more focused on longer weapons such as machete.

#### **Similarities of FFS to Ilustrisimo**

- Fight mentality - efficiency, directness, go for the kill
- General similarity in way techniques are done
- The Faking and drawing and "setting up" of opponents are the same

**RF:** You mentioned that you prefer teaching one-on-one and small groups?

**Floro:** Yes, I believe one-on-one training is a better method of learning than in a large class, mistakes are immediately corrected. In class situations, beginners sometimes get away with sloppy technique and develop bad habits, which are harder to correct later on.

**RF:** You know a lot of people nowadays are anti-weapon, how do you respond to them?

**Floro:** Well many people tell me that they never carry a weapon, so inevitably they ask, "what's the use of knowing how to use one if I don't carry one?" Yes, that's true, but chances are your attacker(s) will have an edged weapon; if you understand the principles of a knife attack, you will also know how to defend against one.