

Stan 'Sonny' Bissell

*WW2 Close Combat Instructor – Commando Basic Training Centre
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by Phil Matthews

There is a notion that W.E Fairbairn & E.A Sykes were the sole Instructors who taught Close Combat to the Commando units who used the deadly Sykes-Fairbairn knife they'd designed together. The work of both laid the foundation for the majority of Close Combat Instruction throughout the Western World up to the present day, however in some cases their notoriety has sometimes left other Instructors works unknown.

Here is a little information on one of the true “Forgotten Instructors” from WW2 – Stan 'Sonny' Bissell.

In order to get to know how Stan Bissell became the Close Combat Instructor at the “Commando Basic Training Center” (CBTC) it is necessary to know a little of the history beforehand.

STC and CBTC

Prior to the creation of the CBTC it is known that both Fairbairn and Sykes taught their form of Close Combat at a place known as “The Special Training Centre” (STC) at Lochailort in Scotland. . Individual members from all services such as those of the Auxillary Units, Home Guard, Navy, Army, ‘Independent Companies’ as well as the future ‘principals’ in the SAS and Chindit’s attended courses there. Indeed the STC was one of the very first (and finest) Joint Service Training Centers of the War. These courses weren’t aimed at ‘large group’ instruction (in the form of whole companies attending), rather they were aimed at individuals attending and then passing on what they'd learned to their own units on their return.

The STC with Fairbairn and Sykes was however was only a beginning, as the war progressed the differing services had garnered the knowledge needed and opened their own specialist training centers with their own Instructors. It was therefore decided to close the STC and transfer the remainder of Instructors into other services where they were needed. As of 1942 the STC had ceased to exist (becoming instead a Naval Training Establishment) and both E.A Sykes and W.E Fairbairn had been “transferred” into SOE at their respective camps (UK and USA respectively).

The Army early in 1940 had been tasked by the Prime Minister Winston Churchill to produce “Soldiers of the Hunter Class” (Special Forces) and decided that it’s own specialist training center was to be established not so far away from where the STC had been. It was thought that the extreme weather and rugged countryside of Achnacarry were ideal for training what were to be termed the ‘Commando’s.

From it’s opening in February 1942 the CBTC had the job of training Commando troops from any of the Allied Countries in an early ‘Special Warfare and Advanced Infantry Course’. Originally the course lasted three months in duration but was later shortened to only five weeks toward the end of the war. Close Combat was included as part of the PT syllabus and as such was taught by the team of CSMI Frickleton, SGT Bellringer and a man named Stan Bissell who had the nickname of “Sonny”.

The original CBTC base Commanding Officer was Lt. Col. Charles Vaughn, although the center in the main only accepted “regular” servicemen for selection, in 1942 he was tasked with accepting volunteers from another source – London’s Metropolitan Police. One of the volunteers was Stan Bissell who later taught both Armed and Unarmed Close Combat to both Commando and Ranger Troops until the closure of the center at the end of the war. (The CBTC closed on the 31st of March 1946 but training ceased prior to this date).

Stan Bissell

Born in London on the 26th of October 1906, Bissell started his martial training by learning “Cumberland and Westmoreland” (C&W) style wrestling after he joined the Boy Scout movement with his two brothers. C&W is a very ‘regional’ style of wrestling with much adherence to rules, (See notes), in particular revolving around the use of what is termed a “back hold”. This was around 1914 or 1915 and Bissell’s Instructor was a man by the name of ‘S. V. Bacon’, an Olympic Champion in 1908 and whom I believe was a Hand-to-Hand Combat Instructor during WW1 (See notes). Later claiming that C&W was a “restricted style of wrestling” Bissell studied Freestyle wrestling which allows more grips, holds and throws than the other style. In his time in Freestyle wrestling Bissell won Seven National Wrestling titles and numerous International titles. He also represented Great Britain at the 1948 Olympic Games and after his own competitive career was over coached many other Olympic and Commonwealth Games competitors.

Bissell joined the Police in 1926 and served with the well known branch of that service – the London Metropolitan Police Force. (Met.) He served with distinction and in 1931 he later headed what would now be termed “Officer Safety” and Instructed in both PT and Physical Arrest (Self Defence) skills to all members of that Force at their training Headquarters – Peel House. It is known that the noted Jiu -Jitsu “Instructor” Leopold MacLaglen came to demonstrate to the Met. at some point between the two wars and it may be possible that Bissell was the man responsible for his invitation.

Wrestling wasn’t the only art he studied although it was always his greatest love, as with most people of the era Bissell learned boxing but even more interesting for the time period was that he also learned Judo! The London BudoKwai was one of the scant handful of Judo Clubs in Britain at the time and Bissell trained there, eventually he attained a Second Dan ranking in the art. He also competed in Judo and was the captain of a British squad that beat a German Judo team.

The pre-war years are still patchy but as far as is known he competed in the 1930 and 1934 British Empire Games in wrestling, gaining a silver medal both times. As well as this and other competitions he was still instructing the Police until early 1942. This was when the then Commander in Chief of The Commando’s (Brigadier Haydon) asked for volunteers from the Met. Police to try directly for Commando selection. This request was unusual in that it allowed CBTC selection and training without the usual Armed Service enlistment requirement.

Over 500 men from the Met volunteered, Bissell was one of those and although by no means the youngest volunteer (he was 35 years old at the time) he not only passed the course but also so impressed the C.O (Lt. Col. Vaughn) that he was asked to join the permanent training staff at Achnacarry.

Bissell taught Close Combat until the CBTC’s closure, he taught Commando’s from the United Kingdom, Canada and other Commonwealth Nations, “Darby’s” Rangers from the United States and a host of members from other ‘lesser known’ Special Forces. Even the late Col. Rex Applegate attended the course before his training with E.A Sykes!

A little clarification is needed on the subject of what Bissell actually taught as even from the little available in print there is a little confusion from some sources; Major James Dunning (Former CBTC Staff Instructor) in his book, “It Had To Be Tough” states;

“The third feature of the PT’s staff Instruction was the much publicized Unarmed Combat. It was based wholly on the Fairbairn/Sykes programme and routine”

However in the book “The Close Combat Files of Col. Rex Applegate” Melson and Applegate state that after Fairbairn and Sykes left the CBTC:

“The depot provided it’s own combat firing and close combat instruction from a former London Policeman at odd’s with what he had been taught by Fairbairn and Sykes, but to the liking of the Depot Commander”

Two very different opinions...

When asked about the matter of “who taught Stan Bissell” the late Peter Robins (Researcher of W.E Fairbairn’s History and Combatives system) had the following to say :

“Bissell taught at the CBTC but he was still tied up with police training in 1940 and 41 when the Special Training Centre at Lochailort was pioneering all that followed, so though I give all credit to Stan Bissell he was not one of those chosen by Fairbairn and Sykes. They never even met.” Across the world many of the Close Combat Instructors during World War Two were men who were highly experienced and had been involved in other close combat arts for a long time. It has been noted by some researchers that if they didn’t like what they were teaching they could replace or ‘mix in’ techniques that they did. These could be techniques things that they themselves were more familiar or ‘comfortable’ with teaching.

Bissell never met either Fairbairn or Sykes (F/S) during or after the war but it should be noted that he did teach some techniques which are very much obviously of F/S origin. Although not the “Silent Killing” course ,it appears that Bissell’s approach of developing a program of Wrestling, Judo and F/S Close Combat for the Commando Units was liked better by Lt. Col. Charles Vaughn than the pure Fairbairn/Sykes Instruction itself.

Darby’s Rangers, commanded by Captain William Orlando Darby also attended the CBTC after their early training at CarrickFergus (Ireland) and were taught by Bissell.

In his book “Darby’s Rangers: We Led The Way” he states:

“There was boxing and close-in fighting. There was no particular emphasis on Jujutsu, though the men were given a few good usable holds that each could be expected to remember and utilize when needed.”

A number of ex-trainee’s have attested that they used Bissell’s Instruction to defend themselves, both during the War and afterward, Bissell’s program of Instruction has been proved to fulfill at least one criteria of modern combatives – the need for it to be ‘easily retained’. . After the war Bissell stayed in the Met in his old position and reached the rank of “Inspector”. This he was involved in until 1955 when he “retired” to Canada where he lived in Montreal. It was here that he indulged himself in his other great love, that of physical training. At the YWHA there he was the Director of Physical Training but missing home he and his wife only stayed for four years and then returned to England.

Retaining his involvement in his Police interests Bissell became Head Of Physical Training for the Met. Police Cadet Corps from 1961 until 1970, teaching Fitness and what would now be termed “Defensive Tactics”. He also still kept very much involved in Wrestling, Judo and his love of Physical Fitness, indeed it has been written that up until his mid-eighties he was still regularly performing one hundred press-ups per day as part of his daily fitness regime!

Stan Bissell later moved from London and settled in Codford St. Mary, which is in Wiltshire in the South of England.

The almost forgotten Commando Instructor died there, at the age of 92, on the 2nd January, 1999