The art of Defendo: How a forgotten (Canadian!) martial art saved democracy

Discover the utterly Canadian martial art called Defendo, developed by Bill Underwood during the Second World War, who mastered the art of offing bad guys with your bare hands

Joe O'Connor

John Ferris was 15-years-old, athletic and apprehensive, upon meeting Bill Underwood for the first time, at the old man's self-defence academy in Toronto's east end. Underwood was in a white undershirt, dress pants and stocking feet. He wore owlish glasses with black frames and looked like an 84-

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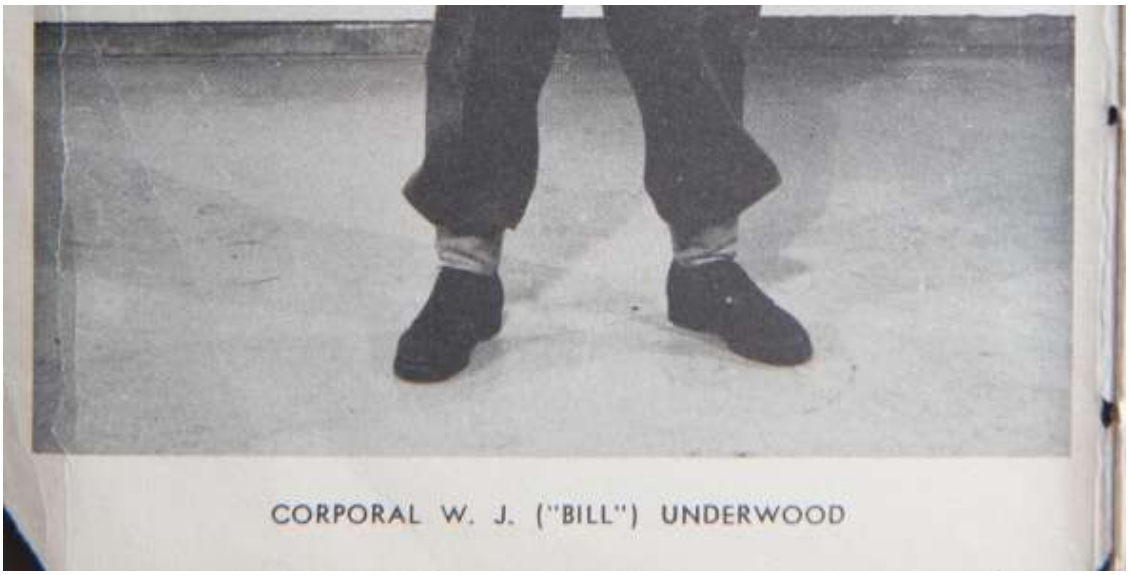
year-old Grandpa, with a stick-out belly, long arms and a kindly way. When he spoke, his accent betrayed his British roots, while his preference for tea — two bags to a cup — did not hint at any internal menace or capacity to cause grave bodily harm.

“Bill was a short old man,” Ferris recalls. “The first time I was introduced to him he came right over, and it was as if he wanted me to know that it didn’t matter that I was young — I still didn’t stand a chance against him. And then he put me down, hard and fast, and I remember saying, ‘Bill, that really hurts,” and Bill said to me: “Don’t worry. Nothing is going to break.””

So began Ferris’ stint as a human rag doll, with suitably flexible limbs and forgiving bones that an octogenarian, in glasses and an undershirt, would wrench and twist and throw about gymnasiums and church basements, demonstrating his craft.

“Bill was a showman,” Ferris says.

He was that, and more.



A photo of Corporal W.J. (Bill) Underwood, creator of Defendo and Combato martial arts and self-defence disciplines â a uniquely Canadian martial art.

Robbie Cressman is an amateur historian and the keeper of the Underwood legend. It is a mostly forgotten story about a great Canadian innovator whose homegrown creations, at root, involved keeping the good guys — soldiers, cops, commandoes, spies, citizens and seniors — safe while saving democracy. Cressman's interest in Underwood has a professional application. The 48-year-old is an elite hand-to-hand combat instructor, working with law enforcement and military personnel around the globe. Part of his mission has been to popularize the Underwood name, by telling Bill's story to the "deadly serious" people he works with, while the other part involves teaching those same people how to fight like a Canadian, as Underwood once did.

"There should be a monument to Bill Underwood in this country," Cressman says. "The mindset of what I do came from Bill Underwood, and for very aggressive people, if you would, I took Bill's original methods and adapted them to incapacitate someone very quickly with your hands.

"But it is the history that is the glue."

Bill Underwood performs during a USO show, showing off how effective Defendo could be against stronger â and younger â opponents.

Bill Underwood, aka the Little Giant Killer, aka Mr. Defendo, the subject of Don’t Mess with Bill â the Academy Award nominated (1980) short doc. Bill Underwood had a booth at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto for about a decade. He would invite ‘all-comers’ to come at him with their best attack.

Before Underwood came along, Canadian army recruits were taught to box and wrestle, gentlemanly stuff, featuring combatants bobbing and weaving and rolling around on a mat. Underwood didn’t care for boxing. He was already in his mid-40s and a veteran of the First World War when he volunteered for duty during the Second and became a trainer. His big idea involved teaching Canadians to fight dirty. Forget bobbing, weaving and wasted movements: press the attack and strike with the elbows, the edge of the palms and the outside of the forearm, hard bone surfaces. Target the enemy’s throat, Adam’s apple, head, kidneys, groin and the back of the neck, with the goal of inflicting maximum damage (aka death). Underwood referred to his made-in-Canada martial art as “Combato.” It was easy to learn, deadly and suited every soldier, big or small.

After the war, Underwood was deluged with invitations from police forces, requesting his services to train rookie cops. Initially he declined. Combato was too dangerous, he said. He then cleansed it of its killer aspects, renaming it Defendo, at the suggestion of his youngest daughter, Patricia Rose, before spending the balance of a long life instructing police — and “nine-to-90-year-olds,” — on how to make quick work of “muggers, mashers and too-persistent admirers.”

“You can easily render your more powerful enemy helpless with only a gentle clasp of the thumb and finger if you have a knowledge of the weak points,”Underwood once wrote. “Brute strength is of little importance if you have a knowledge of the nerves of the human body.”

Canadian filmmaker John Brunton has had a hand in everything from The Amazing Race Canada to the Tragically Hip’s farewell concert. Brunton met Underwood in 1980 when he was in his 20s. He wanted to make a short

Underwood in 1966 when he was in his 20s. He wanted to make a short documentary about super seniors, leading active and inspiring lives. Underwood was puttering around Toronto in a beat-up blue station wagon, teaching Defendo.

Bill Underwood would invite anyone to fight him at his annual CNE booth. He was a little old man. He never lost once, and he would keep his glasses on, levelling younger men using Defendo, his made-in-Canada martial art.

He was kind, polite, supremely confident and a gifted storyteller, whose anecdotes — about wing walking on First World War bi-planes during his youth, for example — struck Brunton as farfetched.

“Bill would tell all these wild stories about killing Germans during the First World War or about wing walking,” Brunton recalls. “And I’d say, “Come on, Bill, you’re out of your mind.””

“But then he’d come back the next day and show me a picture — and it would be of him — wing walking. Bill told these tall tales, but they were true.”

Part of Underwood’s appeal was his sunny outlook. “Everyday is a holiday,” he would say. Keith, who is [illegible] of 59 years, died in 1977.

would say. Kathleen, his true love and wife of 53 years, died in 1977. Underwood grieved by going to Las Vegas, where he met the police chief, disarmed him with a Defendo move — and was hired to train the entire force. He was open to marrying again, but only for “money.” He was a gifted singer. He never smoked.

Bill Underwood bests an opponent at the CNE.

“Old age is in your mind,” he says in Don’t Mess with Bill, Brunton and Insight Productions 11-minute documentary about his life. “If you let yourself believe that you are old and everybody says, ‘Don’t do that, you mustn’t do that, Grandpa, and they try and help you,’ the hell with it.

“You try and help yourself.”

Don’t Mess with Bill was nominated for an Academy Award. The big night was

March 30, 1981. Underwood and Brunton walked the red carpet in Los Angeles. Brunton was star struck. Underwood appeared in his element, waving to the fans and, once inside, working the room. He chatted to Dolly Parton for 15 minutes, praising her music, and congratulated Peter O'Toole for a job well done in Lawrence of Arabia.

"Everybody was charmed by Bill," Brunton says. "How couldn't they be?"

Underwood toured with a USO show, in parts, during World War II, and, as a gag, the act would feature pretty girls sending American soldiers writhing to mat, using his techniques.

Underwood's sense of theatre likely derived from his childhood. He was born in 1895. His father, John, was a chef and a miserable drunk. Money was scarce. Bill always worked, including as a cue boy in Liverpool's Vaudeville Hall, escorting the acts of the day — Harry Houdini, Charlie Chaplin, Buffalo Bill Cody — from their dressing rooms to the stage. Among the marquee performers were two Japanese Jiu Jitsu masters, Yukio Tani and Tara Maki. The men were small and fearless. They would challenge any man in the audience to best them on stage. None ever did.

Underwood would bring Tani and Maki tea and cigarettes between shows and ask them to demonstrate some tricks. He never forgot their lessons, and after immigrating to Canada in 1910, built upon them, creating something new.

Defendo consists of four leverage holds, five hand-grips and 12 pressure points. Bill often likened it to “ballet,” a beautifully cruel dance, capable of sending an attacker to the pavement in what Robbie Cressman refers to as “crazy pain.”

Underwood detailed his methods in several books. His fourth and final, Defendo: The Occidental System (Western) of Self-Protection, was released in 1969. It includes a forward written by John R. Murray, then deputy chief of the Metropolitan Toronto Police. “I well know that a citizen trained in Defendo is a great help in reducing the crime rate in a community.”

The book sells for about $400 on Amazon today. It posits scenarios and steps to remedy them, with accompanying photos. For example, if you are being strangled from the front: “Reach up with one arm and grab (your attacker) behind the neck. Raise your other hand and point your thumb. Drive your thumb into the hollow of his neck underneath his Adam’s apple. At the same time, pull him toward you with the hand behind his neck.

“This will close the windpipe.”

Underwood believed Defendo practitioners should sharpen their craft where the air is “clean and pure,” and, when confronted by an attacker remain, “calm, cool and callous.”

“Destroy them,” he once said. “Don’t feel sorry for them.”

Johnny Carson embraced “the little giant killer” from Canada, welcoming Underwood to The Tonight Show on four occasions.Underwood was discovered by Hollywood during a trip to California to visit his eldest daughter, Shirley. He stopped by NBC’s studios in Los Angeles, or so the story goes, and asked the security men if he could meet with some executives. They laughed. Underwood offered to demonstrate Defendo, felling man after man, until a call went up the line to bring some of the decision makers to the front desk to check out the old guy.

A star was born, and cemented — after Underwood, then 85 — appeared on Carson alongside the actor, Lou Ferrigno (aka the Incredible Hulk), April 4, 1980.

Bill Underwood during one of appearances as a guest on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson.

“I could sit on your knee,” Underwood says to Ferrigno, before dropping him with a wristlock. “Has anybody ever attacked you?” Carson wonders. “I go looking for it,” answers Underwood, explaining how, for nine years, he had a

booth at the Canadian National Exhibition and would invite all-comers to come at him with their best attack, echoing the Jiu Jitsu masters of yore.

“It is interesting,” Ferrigno says, eyeing Underwood with wonder. “I won the world’s strongest man competition, and it just goes to show you how someone his size uses my weight and strength against me.”

“I never take my glasses off,” Underwood closes.

Fan mail streamed north to Toronto thereafter, addressed to “Mr. Defendo.” Newspaper and magazine articles appeared. But Underwood died penniless at age 90 in 1986 at a nursing home north of Toronto. The show was over and without its star, Defendo vanished from popular history’s view.

But Underwood’s legacy persists, among the deadly serious people Cressman works with, as well as more ordinary folks, such as John Ferris. The human rag doll is now 50. He has a wife, a daughter and a good job, and has yet to encounter any thugs, looking to relieve him of his wallet in a dark alleyway.

But if he does, he knows just what to do.

“The beauty of Bill’s system was how easy it was to learn,” Ferris says. “I remember practically every move.”

Bill Underwood in his later life.

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