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GM Taejoon Lee

Chief Instructor

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A Hwarang's Journey

By Chief Instructor Alex Krijger

Introduction:

Alex Krijger is a 4th Dan Hwa Rang Do® Instructor of the Netherlands, who holds the title of Susuk Sabum (Chief Instructor). He is the highest-ranking Hwa Rang Do Instructor in the Netherlands with over 25 years of experience and oversees all the clubs. He is currently a SAP KeyUser for Total Refinery in Vlissingen,

leading a project that affects almost the entire Total organization and its personnel as well as the managing contractors onsite. He is one of the most dedicated and loyal disciples of Founder, Supreme Grandmaster Dr. Joo Bang Lee and Grandmaster Taejoon Lee.

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The Beginning:

As a child, my parents felt strongly that all children should participate in some form of sports. I did the typical sports activities like gym and your regular athletics. It wasn't my first choice, but I did what my parents wanted me to do. Soon I discovered that I wasn't a team player as I did poorly in team sports like soccer and basketball. I began to gravitate more towards individual sports.

In my hometown, Vlissingen, one of the main harbors in the Netherlands with only a population of around 40,000 people, there wasn't a large variety of sport activities. So, when I reached the age of 10, I was able to change the type of sport to my choosing. I became fascinated with the martial arts mainly due to watching the popular TV series with David Carradine, "Kung Fu."

In Vlissingen, like many cities throughout Europe at the time, there were no martial art clubs other than judo and karate. So, my first choice was judo. In hindsight, I cannot say exactly why I chose judo, but the important thing was that I wanted to practice a martial art. It really didn't matter what it was. At the time, to be able to practice and train in the martial arts, which I always dreamt about was a great experience, learning the falling, the joint locks, the throws and grappling; I was hungry to learn. However, there was something missing. It wasn't what I expected from watching "Kung Fu". It was missing the esoteric, philosophical, mystical nature of what I saw and what initially attracted me to the martial arts. Needless to say, I didn't continue much longer. I am not saying that Judo was bad, but it didn't provide what I was searching for.

Being discouraged, I didn't train in any martial arts for many years, but there was something inside me, a calling, a desire that I could not ignore. After approximately 4 to 5 years later, I decided to try something different. That was Kyokushin Karate, also known as Mas Oyama karate. It was great training, hard style, fighting with no protection, full contact, and at the end of each training you felt really exhausted, but it gave me a great feeling of strength and confidence.

My self-confidence had improved, yet I still felt something was missing. Not being fully satisfied, I also stopped training in Kyokushin and decided to explore further. With my friends who also trained in different styles, we decided to combine our knowledge of judo, jujitsu, kyokushin, and boxing to create our own thing, our own mixed martial art, the first in the Netherlands.

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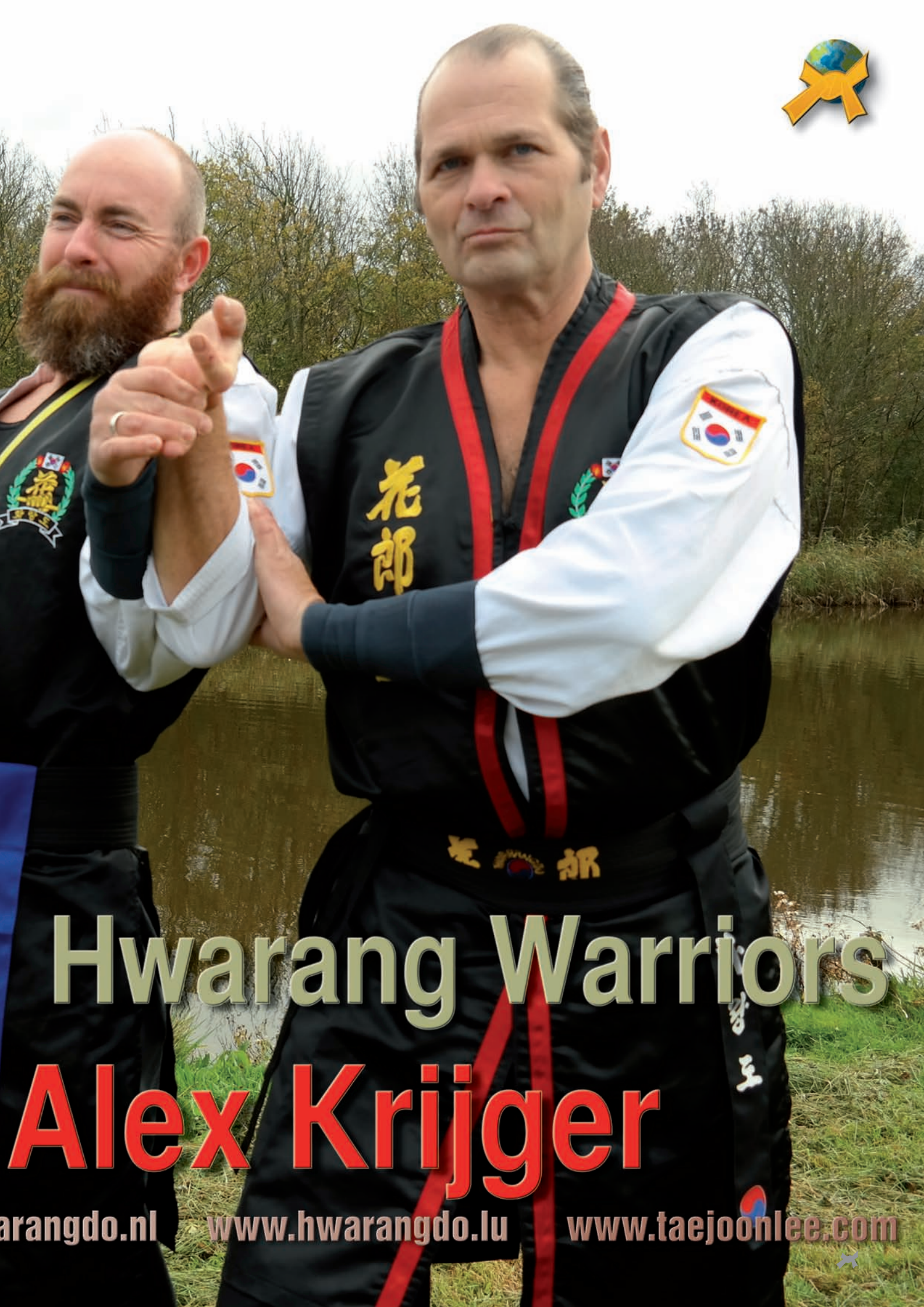
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Although it still wasn't the TV "Kung Fu", it was good to train with my friends and I continued until I was 21 years of age, 1986, when I had to serve my country for 14 months of military service. It was at this time that I met another soldier who would become my friend for life. And, it was him who introduced me to Hwa Rang Do for the first time. He invited me to come to the Philippines when he was stationed at the Dutch embassy. He told me that he had the perfect martial art for me, as he knew of my quest to find a complete, balanced martial art.

My first introduction to Hwa Rang Do® was in 1991 in Manila, Philippines. I only participated 2-3 classes and had a Korean acupressure treatment. It was told to me that the acupressure treatment was part of Hwa Rang Do and that Hwa Rang Do is truly a complete art. I had discovered that Hwa Rang Do is not only a martial art, but also a healing art. They told me a saying, "When you know how to injure your opponent, you also need to know how to cure him." How beautiful is that? It seemed as though I had found what I was looking for. It was love at first sight; I knew I had to learn this art.

When I returned back home to the Netherlands, I made up my mind and made it a goal to learn Hwa Rang Do for myself. I was filled with excitement about this 'new' martial art, to learn it, master it, and then to cherish it. It was a perfect fit for me; jumping up and down like a little boy yelling, "Yes! This is for me, me, yes me!" I immediately started to look for a school where I can continue training. It wasn't easy looking for a place during the pre-internet era. Unfortunately, I discovered that there were no schools in the Netherlands, so I continued to look throughout Europe. I wasn't giving up. I needed to get in contact with the person in the Philippines who first introduced me to what would become my life's passion. I tried desperately to contact him by phone, by regular post. It took some doing, but I was finally successful in reaching him and I had so many questions.

It was very disappointing to say the least to find out that there were no Hwa Rang Do Schools to be found in Europe and the only way to learn it was to go back to the Philippines or travel to the United States. How was I going to continue learning Hwa Rang Do? That was my first lesson in Hwa Rang Do 'if you want something bad enough, then you will find a way to get it.'

So, to get what I want, but not aware of what I needed, I arranged an instructor from the Philippines to come to the Netherlands. Did I know what I was doing? Did I do enough research? Was I really prepared? Would I do it all over again? These questions and much more from many different perspectives would follow, and at the same time guide me during my growth in the path of becoming a Hwarang.

After much effort, I was finally able to get an instructor to come to the Netherlands. He was a student of one of the students of the Founder of Hwa Rang Do, Supreme Grandmaster Dr. Joo Bang Lee during the formative years in the 1960's in Seoul, Korea. As my first Hwa Rang Do Instructor, I owe him much gratitude in introducing me to the history, tradition, and values of Hwa Rang Do. I will remember him always.

Why I committed to Hwa Rang Do?

After six months of daily intensive physical and mental training, the Philippine Instructor had to return back home to the Philippines. During this time, we were also able to start the first Hwa Rang Do Club in the Netherlands. At first, I was devastated; all the work, the time and effort in bringing him over, my hopes and dreams of mastering Hwa Rang Do, all gone! However, I knew that this situation was not permanent and although it was difficult to deal with at the time, it would become a blessing in disguise.

Even though he was leaving, and I only had six months of training, I was committed to continuing the club no matter what. When he was leaving, he said something that I will never forget, "Without me, the club will close within six months." I suppose he didn't have much faith in me, but then he didn't really know me. I was determined to prove him wrong. When I make up my mind to do something, I never give up. Now, after almost three decades Hwa Rang Do is still alive and well in the Netherlands.

In the beginning, it felt good to teach and help other students grow in the art that I love, but more importantly I began to see for the first time how Hwa Rang Do can help its practitioners in their personal, private lives. It was truly a complete art, which developed the physical, mental, emotional, and later the spiritual self. However, I knew

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that I had a deadline, that my knowledge was limited and I had to find a way to continue my training in Hwa Rang Do or I would not only fail my personal goal, but now also the students, and the prediction of closing the club would come true.

“First, you need to know what you want, then you must ask the right questions in order to get the right answers. Once you have the answers, then you must commit to them and never give up until the goal is reached.”

I knew what I wanted, but I was asking the wrong questions, searching in the wrong places, trying to make it easier by doing what's familiar, avoiding the obvious. I needed to go to Los Angeles, I needed to go seek out the source of Hwa Rang Do, the Founder Dr. Joo Bang Lee, Dojoonim (The Owner of the Way). Miraculously, around the same time in 1994, I found out that Dojoonim Dr. Joo Bang Lee and his sons Master Henry Lee (currently Grandmaster Taejoon Lee) and his brother Eric Lee would be performing at the BudoGala in Germany, the largest martial arts demonstration in Europe at that time. This was a dream come true! I did everything I could to make sure I was there.

I was so excited at the opportunity to finally meet them, but at the same time, I was filled with anxiety and worried how I would be received. In the largest indoor sports auditorium in Dortmund, I sat quietly, intently among the sold-out seating of 15,000 eager spectators. There were many great performances by world famous martial artists, but all I wanted to see was the Hwa Rang Do family. Finally, it was their turn and with Dojoonim leading them onto the mat with his two proud sons to the loud cheering of the crowd, accompanied by an epic music score, it was awesome, and they didn't do anything yet. Their demonstration was incredible, and I was beyond impressed. They received the only standing ovation of the night with the crowd chanting, “Zugabe (Encore)!, Zugabe! Zugabe!”

After the performance we went backstage and met them for the first time. I was so nervous to meet them that my bad English got progressively worse as I continued speaking with them; it was incomprehensible. When they understood about my experience with Hwa Rang Do in the Philippines, Dojoonim welcomed me like a father and I

finally felt like I was home. And, in that moment I knew that I was being disingenuous and that I needed to do Hwa Rang Do the right way, officially, with his full blessing.

I wanted to go to the US as soon as possible, but life, things got in the way, and finally in 1996 I would fly to Los Angeles to train under the direct guidance and supervision of Dojoonim and hopefully with his sons. In honesty, it took me two years before I went to the US because I was being reluctant, reflecting, thinking, doubting whether this is something I really could do, knowing that this time there was really no turning back. It would be the first of many trips I would make to the US, to Dojoonim, to my Hwa Rang Do family.

In my first trip to the World Hwa Rang Do Headquarters, I had a long conversation with Dojoonim. He spoke so passionately about Hwa Rang Do and asked me so many questions about the Netherlands that I became overwhelmed with emotions. Dojoonim showed so much interest in me and saw my potential that he took time to sit down with me with such care and thoughtfulness, I was deeply moved. I knew I had made the right choice and I swore to myself that I would never let him down.

During the time I spent training at the World Headquarters, I had to relearn everything from the beginning. All that I had learned previously had to be corrected. I realized that this is what it means to learn from the source, that this is the value of purity, and this humbled me like never before. As I was being trained by the Masters and reviewing my techniques, Dojoonim would make time to help me, teaching, correcting me and having me practice it in constant repetition, again, and again, and again, seemingly never ending. I will cherish those moments forever. This is what I needed! Although I knew what I wanted, Dojoonim gave me what I needed. This was essential as I was now truly training to become a Hwa Rang Do Black Sash.

Unfortunately, during my first visit to World Headquarters, I only met Grandmaster Taejoon Lee (who was only a master then and now a Kuksanim) once and we didn't get to train physically, but we spent much time conversing. Afterwards in reflection, I hoped that I was humble enough to listen and had given the correct answers to his questions as I wasn't used to long

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conversations. All I could do was speak from my heart and less with my mind and in looking back, I think that's what Kuksanim would have wanted.

The following approximately 15 years I travelled yearly to World Headquarters in the USA to practice under the guidance of Dojoonim and Kuksanim.

I have learned much from Kuksanim, but one thing he has taught me stands out:

"First, you need to know what you want, then you must ask the right questions in order to get the right answers. Once you have the answers, then you must commit to them and never give up until the goal is reached."

In 2000, I travelled together with Kuksanim throughout Northern Europe to visit Hwa Rang Do Clubs as well as conduct open seminars, assisting him with his efforts to spread Hwa Rang Do throughout all of Europe, which he started in 1983. During that two-week period, I learned and grew so much just by opening my eyes to see what he did and my ears to listen to what he said. All the ideas, the method, the techniques, that he spent countless hours teaching and speaking were all part of a path, all perfectly designed and synchronized like pieces in a puzzle that fit together creating one beautiful tapestry, which seemed like grains of sand are now fitting together and I am beginning to see its beauty even though it took two decades.

My Hwa Rang Do Club and growth of Hwa Rang Do in the Netherlands:

What started as my selfish desire to learn and improve myself for my own ego and vanity, seeking what seemed to be an easier way to acquiring it, has become my life's work to better others through this beautiful martial discipline of the Hwarang Knights, which I have been fortunate enough to be exposed to. Kuksanim always says, "The longest distance between two points is a short cut." And surely, in trying to find a short cut, I traveled the longest distance.

Opening the first club in 1994 with only a handful of friends and relatives without any intentions of teaching, but only so that I can train and learn for myself, I inherited the club, becoming a teacher overnight. Things always do not work out the way you planned; one of many lessons I have learned in travelling the path to be a Hwarang.

After a couple of years, a taekwondo group out of the city Bergen op Zoom contacted me if I was interested to

take over the club because their instructor had left. Of course, I said yes and took over that club as Bergen op Zoom is geographically situated better than Vlissingen. The goal was to start from my hometown, Vlissingen, then spread Hwa Rang Do through the Netherlands and this was an opportunity to realize that goal.

After almost 20 years of teaching and managing the Hwa Rang Do Club in the Netherlands and thinking that I was doing a decent job of it, Kuksanim once more shook my world. He has tried many times to show me a better way of running, managing my club, but I was stubborn to change. Of course, I didn't realize how stubborn I was until Kuksanim brought it to my attention. It all climaxed in 2016 when Kuksanim travelled throughout Europe visiting all the Hwa Rang Do Clubs in a three-month tour. He spent almost two weeks with me and after observing the classes, the instruction, the administration of the club and learning all that he could about how we did things, he gave me an ultimatum to either follow his prescribed methods and standards, which he was implementing to all the clubs in Europe, or shutdown the club. I lasted more than 6 months, but now after almost 20 years the possibility of closing the club was once again a reality.

Kuksanim had a completely different vision on how to run and manage a martial art club than what I was familiar with. He made me realize that I was succumbing to my primal fear of change and have grown comfortable with the daily routines and the conditions of my life. He said that without change there can never be growth and growth is change. Furthermore, he stressed the importance that Hwa Rang Do is not a sport or even a martial art, that it is a school of leadership. And, as leaders we must constantly work to find ways to improve, to better the self, others, and the world, and by our action we lead by example.

This time, his words hit home as also I was struggling in my private life. I realized that I must change and venture outside my comfort zone. I began to see his vision and started to implement the necessary changes with him always being there to help. Now, we have three clubs: Vlissingen, Bergen op Zoom, and Hoogerheide. It doesn't seem much, but throughout the years I have had the fortunate opportunity to instruct approximately a thousand students, reaching many more people who are related with those students. With the changes implemented, we are growing stronger and better each day thanks to Kuksanim.

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Hwa Rang Do in my life:

I have trained in many different martial arts, falling in love with it since childhood. However, I was never able to find a martial art which satisfied me completely until I was introduced to Hwa Rang Do. When I discovered it and met Dojoonim, I knew that I have found my home. The satisfaction I get from the training, practicing, from teaching and helping others, are priceless, it's me, it's what I have always wanted.

Hwa Rang Do has changed my life and transformed me into a better human being. I am more confident and empowered, but more importantly I can open up and share my vulnerability with others without fear, allowing others to share their personal problems and issues, inviting my council and giving me the opportunity to help them with compassion, empathy, and wisdom from my masters. My students not only ask me for corrections on their techniques, but also seek for life advice; not only do they ask about Hwa Rang Do, but ask for advice in dealing with their well-being, their struggles and fears in their daily lives. This has given me immense joy and satisfaction that I am able to help others in facing the hardships of life.

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All this and much more has made me realize what I was missing in all the martial arts that I had practiced in the past. A true martial arts instructor is not only someone who teaches you how to fight, or push you to your physical limits; no, a true martial art instructor (master) is a teacher who can show you the way to realize your potentials and to get the most out of life. He shows you the possibilities ahead of you, instills you the courage to seize the opportunities, and the strength to endure the consequences, overcoming the fears and doubts to fully explore life. All aspects of life, always with humility and gratitude to God.

I am forever grateful to my Hwa Rang Do Masters who have helped me to realize my full potential, inspiring me with their selfless acts of devotion, love, and caring. For without them I would not be the person I am today. Hwa Rang Do has made me better in every way, as a man, a father, a husband, and a better leader in my profession.

At my work I am a SAP KeyUser of an oil refinery in charge of approximately 150-175 coworkers who come to me with questions concerning all aspects of our work. However, they frequently ask for advice on personal

matters and I challenge them not by answering their questions directly, but to let them think of what they already know, seeking for the answers within rather than forming quick questions for others. This doesn't always work and requires a lot of patience, but in doing this, I hope their eyes will be opened by showing them a different perspective, a new approach (just like my master did to me and still do.)

I want to end with my sincere gratitude to my Hwa Rang Do Masters:

Supreme Grandmaster Dr.Joo Bang Lee

Grandmaster Taejoon Lee

My First Philippine Instructor

And to all the other masters and instructors with whom our paths have crossed.

Hwarang Forever,

Susuk SaBumNim Krijger

4th Dan Hwa Rang Do Chief Instructor

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