

**T**he second reason I doubted the assertion was that I have neither the body nor the soul of a warrior – the aforementioned fantasy notwithstanding. I’ve never been very strong; my reflexes are average, at best, and I’ve always had a low pain threshold. Add to these handicaps the baggage that I’ve acquired in middle age – a beer belly, stiffening joints and recognition that I don’t heal as quickly as I used to – and you’ve got the makings of...well, what? A bookish writer-editor, perhaps, or just your average-Joe – but not a modern-day samurai, certainly, nor anything close to it.

I probably would have tossed the flier in the trash were it not for the fact that I’d already met the man making the promise and had come to like and respect him. Bill Odom, a retired Army colonel, had opened Norfolk Karate Academy in Ghent’s Palace Shops 18 months earlier, and for the last six months, my 12-year-old son had been studying there. In the course of a few conversations, I had taken note of Odom’s impressive credentials: A sixth degree black belt, he had been studying the martial arts since the age of 10 – and throughout his 25-year career as an Army Ranger, which included a stint as an infantry brigade



**Bill Odom, a retired Army Ranger, is a sixth degree black belt, as the six yellow stripes indicate.**

commander in Korea, his practice had remained a high personal priority. Along the way, he had also earned a Ph.D. in history from Ohio State University and had taught at West Point.

Credentials mean only so much, of course. I’ve met many individuals who had stellar resumes but nevertheless seemed like snake-oil salesmen. When Odom talked about the martial arts, however, there was no hint

of salesman-ship in the negative sense of the word – no sense that he was trying to rope you into something or that he was the sort of person who would over promise and under deliver. Everything he said, it seemed to me, was imbued with sincerity, authenticity and humility. Moreover, it was hard not to notice his almost boyish enthusiasm for the enterprise.

Myself-doubt remained but so did my preoccupation with the subject. Throughout the fall, I found myself reading more about it. At the same time, I recognized that books can take you only so far. The theories are fascinating and important; but in the end, karate and related disciplines are applied arts. By late October, with my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday a mere eight months off, I came to the conclusion that the only way to erase those self doubts and get to the bottom of my growing curiosity was to climb into the ring, so to speak. The next time I dropped my son off at class, I told Odom I was ready to join. And on Halloween night, as children across the Seven Cities dressed in their costumes, I donned my crisp white *gi*, cinched the white cotton belt around my waist, and went off to the studio.

**THE CLASS** I attended that evening was held not at the Palace Shops but in a renovated warehouse on 45<sup>th</sup> Street, just west of Colley Avenue. Odom had purchased the building a few months earlier, having quickly outgrown his space in Ghent. The phenomenal growth of the school suggested that Odom had filled a void – there’s a program at ODU, but there aren’t any full-fledged martial arts schools on Norfolk’s west side – and that the Ghent/ODU/Larchmont area is a natural location for such a school.

Odom recalls one specific evening when this dawned on him, not long after he moved here to take an assignment with Joint Forces Command.

“I was sitting down there on Colley outside San Antonio Sam’s watching the people go by,” he recalls, “and I said, ‘These are karate people; these are martial arts kind of folks.’” By that he means that the martial arts tend to appeal to educated people who value cultural diversity. That’s especially true, he says, with his way of teaching, which is a little bit more cerebral than most.

“This is not a fighting gym per se,” he says. “We don’t bang at each other and say, ‘OK, the least bloodiest is the best.’”

The apparent opportunity notwithstanding, the decision to open the school did not come easily. Odom, an “Army brat” as a child, fell in love with military life while enrolled in an ROTC program at Purdue University back in the late