

On a Walkabout with the Duchess of Kent



I saw in the news that the Duchess of Kent has passed away at age 92. For many years she was an active member of the Royal Family with her husband being a cousin of the late Queen. She is probably most well known for her role at Wimbledon where she would present the Championship Trophies. Some time back she retired from Royal Duties and pursued an interest in teaching music, which is pretty cool.

I'd hardly consider myself a Monarchist, and this site is concerned with Budo or Martial Arts. So you might question my interest in the late Duchess.

During my police career, back in 1992 I did a stint at the Counter Terrorist Section which had responsibility for ViP Protection. During this time, the Duchess of Kent came to Queensland on an official visit. I wasn't part of the A Team so missed out being in the

motorcade, eating restaurant meals and getting heaps of overtime. Instead, I got a few jobs assigned as a part of the Advance, where we would attend a venue ahead of the Principal, and ensure it was secure.

I have to say that I never got to meet or speak to the Duchess.

But, as you would expect as a representative of the Royal family she was dignified, immaculately dressed, and interacted pleasantly with her hosts and invited guests at various functions.

One of the events was a visit to Ipswich, a city about an hour up the road from Brisbane. It has picked up in recent years but back then it had seen better days and was known perhaps unfairly, as Two Head City.

The schedule included a walkabout from the car along a mall before entering a reception. This was a bit different from her other functions because it involved the general public.

We arrived about an hour before the scheduled arrival. It wasn't a full on Royal Visit but a respectable crowd was already there and slowly building. As you'd expect, it consisted almost entirely of women and kids with a smattering of husbands who had been dragged along. All well dressed, waving the odd flag and quite a few having secured prime positions, seated in folding chairs.

This job was going to be a piece of cake.

The Duchess was about 10 or 15 minutes away from arrival, when to my dismay a couple of young blokes came wandering along. They'd best be described as Bogan, wearing thongs, packets of smokes under the sleeves of their T shirts and a smattering of tattoos.

I've got no idea where they were supposed to be going, but they realised something was happening and decided to hang around.

They pushed their way to a prominent position and after a while started making smart arse comments, much to the discomfort of the people around them. They weren't actually aggressive, but potentially up to no good, none the less.

I positioned myself a closer to them in case I needed to have a word. They were pretty much oblivious to my presence which was strange seeing I was also an odd man out, dressed in a suit.

The Duchess arrived and started doing her thing. Doing the walkabout thing, waving to the crowd, occasionally saying hello and sometimes accepting a bunch of flowers. I became more concerned when it looked like she would come right by us. I got myself closer to those two clowns, worried that they might cause a scene.

Alarming, the Duchess propped directly in front of them. Turned, singled them out and with a smile thanked them for coming. The change in their demeanour was dramatic. They seemed to shrink, blush, and then happily tried to find the polite words to reply. They were rescued to a degree by some ladies next to them and a momentary light hearted conversation between them and the Duchess ensued before she continued on her way.

With her departure, everyone happily dispersed.

During 40 years in the cops, I experienced my share of dramatic events but this innocuous little episode remained with me for some reason.

As for the Duchess, I'm pretty sure she wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary. But in a world that seems increasingly full of conflict, it showed that a bit of dignity, humility, showing respect, and just being nice has a power all of its own.

I can't speculate on the background of those guys in the crowd and I can't imagine that this day had any significant impact on them. They might not have even given it more than a passing thought, but for a few moments there was a connection. A middle aged aristocratic lady created a positive and respectful interaction with a couple of young blokes with whom she would seem to have nothing much in common, apart from momentarily sharing a piece of time and place.

There's a saying that Budo or Martial Arts begins and ends with Rei.

In basic terms Rei or Reiho is the physical ritual of bowing to the training area and one's teacher and training partners at the start and end of training. The actual format will depend on each individual tradition which may be more or less elaborate, as the case may be. It reflects basic norms in which showing deference to one's seniors is part and parcel of Japanese culture.

However, our late teacher, Shimamoto Katsuyuki Sensei often emphasised his concept behind Rei.

I remember several years ago during a seminar at Shosenji Dojo where he spoke about it. He recounted his experience when working as a counsellor at a local High School, part of his job was to meet students as they arrived, checking their uniforms and the like. In such a situation, the students would be expected to bow to the teacher first. He started to flip this about and made a point of being first to bow as he greeted the students. His experience was that this dramatically changed the nature of the interaction and improved his relationship with students.

He also often spoke of his relationship with the members of his dojo. The common view would be that students would have a sense of obligation for having the opportunity to study from the Master. His perspective was that he was privileged that people would make themselves available to come to practice and sacrifice time that they could

otherwise spend with their families. His language and attitude constantly reflected that feeling.

Similarly In teaching aikido, one of his themes was to advise us to imagine our training partners as guests. Offering an opening to invite them into the technique and then seeing them on their way as if bidding them farewell.

On reflection, the late Duchess and Shimamoto Shihan had something in common, both masters of Rei in their own ways.

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