

(The following is an account of the famous duel between Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojiro on the island Ganryu-jima, an excerpt from the convention panel, 'Biography of Miyamoto Musashi')

Funa-jima Island was the site of the greatest sword fight in history.

Funa-jima isn't a particularly spectacular island. About the size of a modern baseball field, it has long held trees and enough land for maybe a small farm plot. It is easily flooded if the ocean tides rise too high in the small strait it is nestled within between what are now known as the Honshu and Kyushu islands in western Japan. It would otherwise be a rather forgettable little island were it not to be the sight of two legendary sword masters testing their skills against one another.

The duel was arranged by the samurai-turned-general Hosokawa Tadaoki, a loyal servant to both Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu. Lord of the Kokura fiefdom in Buzen Province in western Japan, he had proclaimed the duel would be against his esteemed weapon master, Sasaki Kojiro, the famous wielder of the nodachi Monohoshi Zao, a giant katana. Sasaki was a warrior of great repute and he would face off against the master of Niten-ryu school, known for its use of two swords, whom was none other than the legendary Miyamoto Musashi.

On a crisp and clear afternoon on April 13rd, 1612 CE, Sasaki and his retinue showed up on the island of Funa-jima well in advance of the duel. Sasaki paced the entire island, beginning the moment he leapt off the boat. As his retinue of students and servants selected the ideal spot for the fight to take place, Sasaki walked along the edge of Funa-jima, circumnavigating it entirely. He watched the water lap against the shore and noted the fish that swam close to the land. He watched for any heron or other birds that might fly to or from the island.

Sasaki was an esteemed and venerated martial artist. He was well-known for his prowess and speed with his sword. He had long ago founded the Ganryu school of swordfighting. It was through this institution that he had become Hosokawa's weapon master. His mighty sword, the Monohoshi Zao – which translates as 'the Drying Pole' – was a grand sword which he had earned a reputation of excellence in its use. Despite the sword's great size, he was known to use it with speed and agility that rivaled smaller and lighter swords. He had even developed a special technique known as the Swallow's Cut.

A venerated warrior such as Sasaki was used to challenges. He had many duels in the past, and fought in many battles. As such, he was anxious to face off against the most recent in a long line of young up-and-

comers. Yet Sasaki knew that Musashi was different. The young warrior had already amassed a legend surrounding him and was known to every swordfighter. Still, confident in his abilities, Sasaki retreated beneath a tree just off from his retinue. He sat alone and meditated, waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

Hours later, on the distant mainland, Miyamoto Musashi arrived at the shore. He looked out over the bay at Funa-jima island and rubbed the overgrown stubble on his chin. The sun was well into its descent by this point and a slight unseasonable chill had set into the air.

His shadow growing long, Musashi walked alone down to the shore where the fishing boats were coming in from the day. He approached one such boat, just as it ran into the sand and he threw his sword into the boat, startling the solitary passenger. "Old man," Musashi told the boat's owner. "I need a ride out to the island. How about it?"

The boat's owner looked to protest but he saw the katana that Musashi had thrown into his boat and didn't want to argue. A man who carried a sword like that, reasoned the fisherman, was not a man to be trifled with. This was typical for Musashi. He tended to garner the scorn of most anyone who was around him for long.

"I've been out on the water all afternoon," the fisherman told Musashi, bowing his head apologetically. "I will take you out, but my arms are tired. I'll be slow." He hoped to dissuade Musashi with his whining.

Instead, Musashi hopped into the boat and told the man, "Slow will be fine. I'm in no rush." He laid out on the boat, taking up much of the space.

The old man sighed sadly. He pushed the boat into the water, requiring some strength now that it was weighed down with the swordsmen resting apathetically in it. The old fisherman took up an oar and began to row once again, this time towards the island.

The two traveled in silence, inching their way towards the island in the bay. After it seemed he'd fallen asleep, Musashi sat up and yawned and stretched his arms. He looked out to the island and seemed preoccupied for a moment. He picked up one of the spare oars in the man's boat and felt its weight. "These are heavy," he observed.

"Yes," said the fisherman. "But the weight makes rowing a bit easier."

Musashi looked over the oar with increasing approval. He glanced at the island again, then drew from his side his short sword, the wakazashi. He took the fine blade to the oar and began to quickly whittle away at it. The old man exclaimed but managed to keep from raising a rukus. Halfway

through carving down the oar, Musashi turned around to the old man and, holding up the oar, "Hey, do you mind if I take this?" The old man had not the energy to argue. He simply waved Musashi's pale attempt at manners away.

As they neared the island, Musashi looked over the oar that he had carved into a suburito (an oversized wooden sword). Satisfied with the adequate job he'd done, he sat like a bored child, waiting until they arrived at the island.

Sasaki's retinue were incensed. Furious over Musashi's tardiness and insulted by his lack of provisions, they demanded he withdraw from the duel and apologize. "Not only have you not brought your two swords," yelled Sasaki's senior student, "you've brought a cudgel to face a master!" He gestured disdainfully at the crudely-fashioned suburito that Musashi carried off the boat, leaving both katana and wakazashi behind.

Musashi, the big wooden sword across his shoulders, sneered at the student and spat on his feet. The student roared in fury but the instant he made a move, Sasaki yelled "Hold!" The retinue parted, glaring angrily at Musashi. From beneath the tree, Sasaki rose and, the Drying Pole at his side, approached his opponent. "You dishonor me with your sloven behavior," Sasaki told Musashi. "Withdraw and we can have this duel at a more appropriate time, one that finds you ready."

Musashi said nothing, he only stared.

"Are you deaf?" Sasaki told the younger warrior. "You're a disgrace!" He thumped Musashi's chest. "If you wish duel, I'll allow it, but have the decency to die with your swords, not a practice bokken."

"This practice bokken," Musashi told Sasaki, "is what's going to cave your skull in, old man." Sasaki was too stunned to respond. "You aren't worthy to be cut apart by my swords," Musashi sneered. "You barely even deserve to be beaten to death by the corpse of a tree."

Sasaki had enough. Furious, he stepped back and gave Musashi space. Observing the rituals of formal combat, he said a prayer to the gods, and then faced his foe. Musashi had made no such preparations. He stood precisely where he had been, the sword still across his shoulders. "Will you not pray to prepare yourself for what comes after death? Will you wander the world as an angry ghost?"

Musashi spat. "I'm not the one who needs to prepare for death."

Amidst the roars of anger by his retinue, Sasaki drew his great nodachi. "Prepare yourself," he called to Musashi. For the first time since arriving at the island, Musashi seemed to grow serious. He pulled the wooden sword down from his shoulders and took a defensive stance. Sasaki

hoisted his great sword high and screamed powerfully. With a burst of motion, he launched at Musashi, intent to kill him with a single blow.

The fight was on.

The disheveled Musashi ducked under Sasaki's powerful blow and swung at him with his suburito, an overhead strike that would split a log if it had been with a metal sword. Instead, the heavy wooden weapon struck the sandy ground and kicked up a wave of debris as Sasaki maneuvered around the strike and pressed his attack.

Despite Musashi's taunting and seeming indifferent demeanor, he took the fight seriously. Sasaki had the reach advantage with his sword, even with Musashi using a repurposed boat oar. Worse, each strike from the Drying Pole threatened to deprive Musashi of his weapon of (dubious) choice.

Unlike many duels, the fight was not over in an instant. A handful of carefully selected moves did not decide the life-and-death matter. Instead, the two swordsmen met and engaged, tried at one another with a flurry of motion, then backed away. They gauged one another and would try again, alternating between a launch of motion, intending to strike before his opponent was ready, or letting their foe make the first move and, in turn, make the first mistake.

In no time, the heavy wood of Musashi's suburito sported numerous nicks and chips in its frame. The heavy weapon creaked as Musashi swung it, letting its weight guard him against the nodachi under Sasaki's command. Sasaki was cautious around Musashi, as well. Crude as the weapon was, his carved wooden sword was heavy and powerful. Blocks that would stop a metal sword were only partially effective against a weapon of its weight. And while the weapon was crude, its use was not.

As they neared the western edge of the island, fighting across the field and in between the trees, Sasaki risked his signature move; the Swallow's Cut. He jabbed at Musashi with his long blade, setting up his foe at the optimum distance. As Musashi moved laterally from the attacks, Sasaki slashed at him. Downward, the strike came with amazing force and Musashi leapt to avoid it. This was the feint, however. Just as the blade came down, Sasaki reversed the sword and brought it slicing up like a bird soaring up after a furious dive. The blade of the sword whistled through the air and came within a hair's breadth of Musashi's face, but the swordsman had leaned just barely out of the way.

As the sword passed over his eyes, Musashi saw into the horizon and smiled.

Sasaki pressed his attack. After the failure of his Swallow's Cut, he was even more determined to end Musashi's boastful life. Against this

attack, Musashi went into a defensive posture. He let Sasaki press him towards the edge of the island and drive him towards the water.

As they reached the edge of the island, a sudden shift by Musashi and the light of the setting sun suddenly struck Sasaki in the eyes. The swordmaster winced and turned away, only to be struck in the chest by Musashi's great and hefty suburito. The blow broke Sasaki's ribs, including his lower floating ribs that would puncture his lung. Sasaki collapsed to his knees, clutching his chest as he fought to breathe. He fell into the sand, his retinue too stunned to help.

Musashi did not wait for the inevitable death that was coming for the breathless Sasaki. He walked briskly and cautiously back across the island, checking as the retinue finally went to their master's aid, wailing in sorrow. Musashi threw the suburito thoughtlessly away and hopped back into the fishing boat. "Let's go," he told the old man. The fisherman said nothing as he pushed the boat back into the water, letting the current take them away.

Many of the actual details of this fight are disputed to this day. In fact, little more than the participants and the outcome are known as documented fact. Despite tremendous historical records in Japan, we actually know very little of what transpired on Funa-jima, which would be renamed Ganryu-jima shortly after. This is not because there are a lack of details but because there are so many conflicting details. The commonly held account, based off the most consistently cited versions of the story, is that Musashi showed up over three hours late. This is a tactic he used in previous fights, to enrage and psych out his opponents. We know Musashi allegedly fell asleep on the boat ride to the island, though this may be an act or exaggeration, or simple embellishment.

Likewise, we have little confirmation of him famously carving a suburito out of a spare boat oar. Given that he was on his way to a serious duel, it seems unlikely that he would have come unprepared, but a display of extreme arrogance by using a primitive, borderline improvised weapon, would not be out of character with other accounts of Musashi's general behavior and demeanor. It seems odd that he would carve the wooden weapon on the boat, potentially exhausting him before he even arrived at the island, but even this is speculation.

Upon arriving at the island, most accounts agree that he was rude to Sasaki, but there are conflicting accounts as to whether this was simply his tardiness, a general rudeness (for which Musashi is often attributed), or

even active taunting. Still, few accounts of Musashi in general ever describe proper behavior from the man (though some assert that Sasaki was just as belligerent). Given that they were about to have a battle to the death, that might not have been unexpected.

We know next to nothing of how the fight went. We don't know if it was a hotly contested battle, or if it was over fairly quickly. Some versions of the battle assert that Sasaki employed his Swallow's Cut technique, with Musashi falling victim to the strike but surviving or maybe avoiding the attack, or even pre-empting it with a clever counter.

We don't even know for certain that Musashi won cleanly. Most accounts tell of him using 'cheap' tactics (like the often-cited sun-in-the-eyes victory), or if he even cheated (as some do assert). All we know is that at the end of the day, Musashi was declared the winner.

To lend credence to the idea that Musashi's victory was less-than-reputable is the reality that the island was renamed for Sasaki's school (the Ganryu school of swordfighting), an odd honor for a man who lost a duel of honor. There are even some, though admittedly rare and unsubstantiated accounts, that assert Musashi did not duel Sasaki but ambushed him and his retinue in an assassination attempt.

All of this uncertainty is the nature of legends, especially among folk heroes like Miyamoto Musashi. He was most certainly a real man, who did incredible things. But between a combination of his fame prompting fans to exaggerate his already amazing exploits and the conflicting accounts, as well as the erosion of facts by way of the retelling of the story over time, there's little we know for certain about his deeds.

Except the outcome.

Musashi did, irrefutably, walk away from this island the winner.