



EUGENE'S ORDER OF STEEL IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK

BY BEN RICKER - PHOTOS: TRASK BEDORTHA

You hear the rhythmic metal tick-tock of armor plates clapping against chainmail from a long way off.

The sun sinks in the west as three swordsmen reach the wide cement platform that covers the College Hill Reservoir.

Kurt Gerhard Studenroth lifts the steel helm from his cranium and offers his winded fellows hot tea from a half-gallon camping flask slung around his waist.

It's the neoprene thermos that looks uncannily out of place; all other signs indicate we're looking at Studenroth through a wormhole that connects South Eugene to medieval Europe.

The reality is much simpler than that, though. Think of it this way: Businessmen dress in suits and carry briefcases; police officers patrol the streets wearing guns on their hips and badges over their hearts; knights put on armor and swing swords.

Time travelers, medieval souls reincarnated, lay-historian sword nuts, antiquarian misfit militiamen, strangers in a strange land — one thing is certain, The Order of Steel isn't playing. As much as is practical, its constituents reject modern finery and distraction. Single combat ignites in them a sense of meaning that is otherwise lost in the Internet Age, they say.

If they can't claw their way back several hundred years through time, they content themselves to bring the Dark Ages with them wherever they go.

After a minute, Studenroth and a flush-faced Tucker James set their teacups on the ground, don heavy gauntlets and helms once more and square off in the center of the concrete expanse high above the city.

Meanwhile, David "Ronin" Herzog drops to the ground and pounds out a series of pushups while dressed in a suit of Japanese armor that weighs about as much as a sack full of bowling balls.

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Ronin were wandering samurai in feudal Japan — men without masters.

Herzog took up Japanese sword fighting roughly ten years ago. He set aside all formal kenjutsu training after moving to Eugene a few years back because he couldn't find an instructor who specializes in his particular discipline. Herzog sees himself as a swordsman without a master.

Herzog rounds out his warm-up exercises as James yields to Studenroth.

James staggers off to the edge of the dueling ground, removes his "sugarloaf" helmet and collapses flat on his back, exhausted.

The simple sugarloaf design resembles a shiny metal bucket that tapers to a point. You'll see helmets like it in movies set during the Crusades.

The unventilated sugarloaf heats up fast, like a tiny sauna; sweat pours down James' face.

With James out for the count, Herzog cycles into battle.

Nothing like Hollywood, the action here is methodical and anticlimactic. The swordsmen circle-stalk one another and stutter-step test enemy reflexes.

Sparks fly in the gloaming light when steel collides with steel. The tip of Studenroth's blade punches against the scales of Herzog's breastplate and raises bystander concern for his health and well-being.

The duelists first met on battlefields outside Lebanon, Oregon, many summers ago during the annual fantasy festival SeaDog Nights and Gypsy Carnival. Herzog and Studenroth joined forces and began calling themselves The Order of Steel only about a year ago.

"We grok," Studenroth says.

Since forming The Order, Herzog and Studenroth have allowed in only two or three recruits. Depending how generous its core members feel at the moment, The Order says it's four or five swords strong.

Herzog hesitated to return calls from *EW*, fearing any exposure might lure flocks of LARPing amateurs to his doorstep.

"We're not LARPers," James interjects. "We get that a lot." The difference being: Live Action Role Players only pretend.

Combined, The Order boasts more than four decades of classical weapons training.

To join, hopefuls must know their shit and come correct with years of martial arts instruction already on their curriculums vitae.

As well, The Order requires members to gather together a pricey list of safety equipment: steel gloves, helmet (or at least a heavy-duty fencing mask), as well as some kind of thick underlayering and, of course, a sword.

Those willing to invest in the right materials still have to wonder whether they've got the biscuits to venture out wearing such conspicuous gear.