

AiKido Australia  
Spring Summer 2003- 4

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合気道

オーストラリア

Editor's note.

Apologies for the long delay between this and the last newsletter / magazine.

We were ready to publish in March when news of Sugano Sensei's medical crisis overwhelmed us, so the newsletter was put on hold while we waited anxiously for news about Sensei.

Subsequently several bulletins were circulated updating the news about Sugano Sensei and how remarkably he was recovering. (We were to see this for ourselves when he attended winter school at Collaroy, NSW).

Eventually that newsletter (Winter / Autumn 2003) was published on the Aiki-Kai Australia website in electronic form as a PDF file which can be downloaded to your own personal computer. It is not available in printed form.

A personal report by the editor about the winter school at Collaroy was published again on the Aiki-Kai Australia website, The Shinryukan Christchurch website Southern Aikido Connection newsletter, and by special request from David Halprin, on Aikido Online electronic magazine.

For those who haven't seen any of those reports because they don't have a computer or access to the web it is reprinted here. Some of the photos shown here may be different from those in the various electronic reports.

What follows then is a feature compiled by myself with Tony Smibert Sensei in discussions via telephone and email.

I hope you enjoy this very special issue dedicated to Seiichi Sugano Shihan (8<sup>th</sup> Dan).

## —A GOOD CHALLENGE—

### **A personal impression of a most important Winter School for Aiki-Kai Australia. Photographs and text by John Litchen**

There was a large group of us sitting in seiza waiting to welcome Sugano Shihan — not with trepidation, but with concerned anticipation. This was to be Sensei's first teaching seminar only three months after the life-saving operations that resulted in the amputation of his left foot, as well as part of the lower left leg in order to fit prosthesis.

Many of us were still coming to terms with the idea of Sensei being an amputee, and wondering what this would do to his Aikido. We had all followed his progress as reported on the New York Aikikai website, but none of us had any real idea of how he would be.

All we knew was that it had taken enormous courage to come on such a long journey (New York to Sydney) so soon after the trauma of an amputation.

The word was that he would be taking the morning class each day, and there was a lot of excited speculation as how he would do this. We had naturally assumed that he would supervise while other senior Shidosha took the classes, but to actually teach — could this be true?

It was cold outside on Monday, the first day of training, but the sun was shining, promising a lovely day. Sensei arrived wearing a long black overcoat which he took off and handed to one of the senior students who had accompanied him along the path to the dojo. They were there

to offer assistance if it was needed but Sensei had used a walking stick and calmly walked along the uphill path and up the steps entirely on his own.





He placed his walking stick against the wall beside the entrance and stepped backwards onto the mat leaving his sandals at the edge. He turned to face us and smiled.

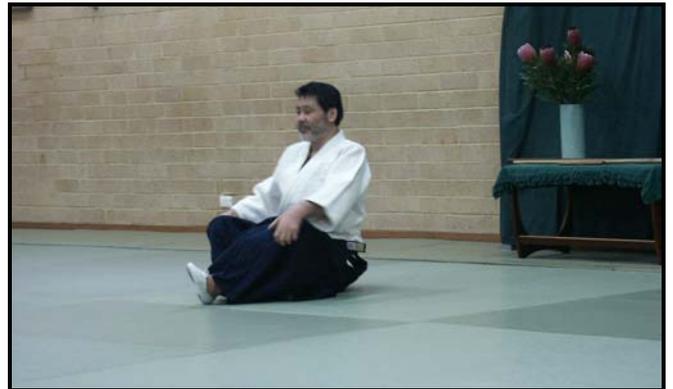
Tony Smibert Sensei, who is Vice President of Aiki-Kai Australia and a Vice Chairman of the International Aikido Federation, stepped onto the mat to welcome us all to Sensei's winter school and thanked Sensei for the enormous effort it took to get here. He finished his brief speech by saying: "At the end of the last summer school we thanked Sensei with a round of applause. I'd like to begin this school with a round of applause as a way of thanking Sensei in advance."

The enthusiasm of the applause almost lifted the roof off.

Sensei walked slowly towards the centre with only the slightest wobble betraying the fact that he was still getting used to walking with his new prosthesis.



He paused in front of the Kamiza and for a few seconds seemed pensive. Facing us he said: "I haven't quite worked out how to sit down yet."



Several senior students appeared ready to jump up and run over to assist him, but their help wasn't needed.

Sensei put his right leg back behind as if preparing to do a backwards roll. He lowered himself slowly, and supporting himself with his right hand, he sat down with his left foot forward, and his right leg crossed beneath it. He could not bend the left leg more than 90 degrees, and of course the foot part of the prosthesis could not bend either. Still he seemed perfectly relaxed with his back straight and his arms extended so the backs of his hands rested on his knees.

After a few moments he turned around to face the Kamiza and we all took formal bows.

Beyond the etiquette of the beginning Sensei then told us about his operation. He considered it "very interesting" that the doctors asked him to sign papers allowing them to amputate his left big toe but went on to amputate his foot. When he woke up they explained that the infection was spreading extremely rapidly and they had had no choice. They also informed him he would need a further operation when he was ready for the prosthesis which would be designed especially for him.

He found this interesting!

He joked about how surprised he was and that his first thought was: "This is going to be a good challenge." He went into some detail about the second operation needed for shaping the bones so they would fuse together to form a good base for fitting the prosthesis. It would take 6 months for them to fully fuse. He talked about the problems he had with loss of blood and high temperatures and other complications brought about by his diabetes. He asked us if we had any questions and was happy to answer them.

What was wonderful was the ease with which he spoke about what had happened. It made us all relax seeing how comfortable he was with his situation.

This went on for some 30 minutes or more when suddenly he told us to stand. While most people struggled to get up, shaking stiff legs to get the circulation flowing, he stood up with ease.

After the misogi breathing and the focus exercises he went on to start with Tai no henka from gyaku hanmi

katatetori. As he moved offline to lead Uke into a back stretch he was obviously feeling his way, adjusting balance with the odd small step at the finish of the movement. Uke was cautious also, not attacking too fast.



Once everyone was doing the exercise he moved about observing as he always does, correcting some, and just observing others.

Sensei then demonstrated kokyunage and iriminage which he managed with ease. The rest of that first class was built around exercises with bokken relating to and including his Ichi no ken pattern.



When the class was over and we had all bowed Sensei walked with ease to the edge of the mat. He told us who would be taking the next class, and also announced that a class would be taken by a surprise visitor, Phillip Lee of

Aikido Shinju-Kai Singapore, who was on holiday in Sydney with his family. He had unexpectedly dropped in to pay his respects.

The next day (Tuesday) Sensei again surprised everyone. We thought all his classes would follow the same pattern as Monday's, focussing on bokken, but right from the start he was more active, moving with more confidence. He had us doing iriminage and kokyunage and a number of variations. Only towards the end of the class did he call for bokken and we practiced his Ni no ken pattern.



On Wednesday Sensei entered the dojo without the slightest wobble, walking as well as he always did. This time he had us start by sitting cross legged with our hands palm up resting on our knees index finger and thumb just touching. He asked us to imagine a triangle connecting the forehead with each point where our fingers touched. "This is an exercise to teach awareness," he said, but he didn't explain more than that. He then told us he is learning to extend through his knee so that the prosthesis acts the same as his normal leg. He said he can feel the ground as if his foot was a normal foot.

When we stood up he demonstrated Tai no henka 2 different ways. His Uke was moving with more confidence and Sensei responded with such ease and fluidity that it was impossible to think of him as an amputee.

He then explained before we started practicing that he was taking it easy because the two bones in his leg have not yet properly fused together. This will take a few more months, after which a new and better designed prosthesis will be fitted.

By then there will be no holding him back!



It was astonishing how well he was moving by the third day of the school. If you watched from the side of the mat he appeared to be moving as he always had, with impeccable timing and absolute precision. It was truly hard to imagine that part of one leg was a prosthesis.



At the end of the class he sat on the side of the mat and showed a small group what the prosthesis actually looked like, pulling up his gi trouser leg so we could see it clearly. He even offered to lend it to one of the girls because she had twisted her ankle and for a few moments was unable to walk properly.



On Thursday and Friday it was more of the same with each of those classes studying 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> bokken patterns with variations. On Saturday morning we did the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of his bokken patterns to finish the complete set. After that, it was all over with Sensei thanking us for being attentive, and for maintaining the high standard exhibited during 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan grading tests on Friday afternoon.

I think everyone testing was determined to show Sensei their very best. In fact everyone throughout every day's training performed at the highest level possible in an effort to show Sensei that if he could come all the way from New York so soon after having a foot amputated, they were going to make his trip worthwhile by doing the very best they could at every training session. I might also add that there were some wonderful classes taken by other senior instructors, especially the female instructors who Sensei asked to teach, and who are often not given the respect or credit due to them. All the instructors showed by their examples how inspired they are by Sugano Sensei.

A gift from everyone was presented to Sensei by the "newest student at the seminar" then it was all over — Mats to be taken back to their respective dojos, students to return far and wide across Australia. Sensei would stay in Sydney with his family for a while before returning to New York.

**We would all go away thinking: "what a remarkable person Sugano Shihan is."**

**He has rapidly transcended a difficulty that would flatten anyone else and is doing better Aikido than ever. It seems to me he has moved into a higher plane and by his example has shown us that nothing can stop you if you have the desire and capacity. This was a truly inspirational Winter School and one that will be talked about for years to come.**

**Thank you Sensei.**





Winter school action.

**“AIKIDO IS BOUNDLESS, A WAY OF SEEING LIFE,”**



Sugano Sensei described Aikido as “**boundless**”, and as “**a way of seeing life**” in an interview with Mike Clarke in 1988. He also responded to a question about what Aikido is by defining it as “**One big question mark.**”

He said that Aikido is fluid and individual and that: “We must all continue to search and develop our answers to that question.”

**“As a teacher,” Sensei said, “I am trying to help people discover and develop feelings from within themselves.”**

Clearly Sugano Sensei still finds Aikido fascinating and continues to study and teach in spite of the recent medical crisis. His dedication and his personal search for the deeper meaning to be found in Aikido no doubt contributed to his rapid and remarkable recovery.

Sensei has said he needs to teach in a way that will help people to understand what O-Sensei was trying to achieve, believing that the student should *follow the master’s desire to pursue knowledge* rather than trying to copy what the master does.

“There is no need for the student to perpetuate the exact manner in which O-Sensei performed a technique. O-Sensei didn’t want to perpetuate forms through the use of Kata. He didn’t teach that way. O-Sensei said nothing was fixed. Every time he showed a technique it was different. No one could ever do Aikido exactly as O-Sensei did, so each uchideshi gained his understanding of Aikido through his own perception and understanding. O-Sensei believed Kata training was only transmission and didn’t allow for the student to develop individually so he stepped aside from tradition and taught in a manner much closer to modern sports training. It was only his use of old terminology and religious concepts to explain what he was doing that disguised the modernity of his methods.”

An extract from one of O-Sensei’s many written thoughts and poems states: “Don’t get caught up with form and appearance of a challenge. The art of Peace has no form. Ultimately you must forget about technique.”

I have heard Sugano Sensei say on various occasions that he believes O-Sensei most likely meant that one should not fix the mind on the physical form itself. No Aikido technique is a precise movement. No repetition of a technique is exactly the same. “Perhaps O-Sensei was trying to get people to grasp the idea of not becoming attached to one way of doing something. O-Sensei broke free from the predetermination of kata. His techniques were different each time, as was his way of teaching. All his uchideshi and sotodeshi developed an individual Aikido which is why there are so many variations in style around the world.”

Sensei emphatically explained that he believes Aikido is a process through which we learn to use our bodies skilfully and to work with timing and distance - and that repetition is the way to improve. This is not unlike today’s methods of sports training. Repetition is the key to developing a natural and fluid response.

**“Training itself is a purpose. It is not goal-oriented.”**

*That O-Sensei broke away from a traditional way of teaching was important to Sugano Sensei and his decision to begin studying Aikido. This is also reflected in the way he teaches.* He does not direct people but, rather, guides them in a direction where each individual can find out things for themselves. O-Sensei did this, making each uchideshi aware there was something that they had to search for individually, which is the reason each Shihan that was an uchideshi to O-Sensei is so different.

How you, as a student, approach training in Aikido is dependant on what you want to get from it, rather than Aikido giving something to you. Long time students who are

still training after 30 or more years, who keep coming year after year to National Schools are obviously finding whatever it is they as individuals are searching for.

Aikido, as we see it demonstrated by our Shihan, Sugano Sensei, emphasises the dynamics of movement and harmony, and perhaps because of this it changes people's attitudes. In my experience he has always focussed on distance and timing. Regardless of how you do a technique you must have a clear concept of distance, direction and of course timing to make it work.



Above: Sensei demonstrating absolute precision at Summer school in Melbourne 2003.  
Below: Winter school Collaroy.



In the mid 1960's O-Sensei "despatched" a number of his Uchideshi overseas to teach Aikido. Sugano Sensei chose to come to Sydney Australia because he was married to an Australian. He had with him a certificate from O-Sensei to be responsible for Aikido in Australia and Australasia. Tony Smibert Sensei, 6<sup>th</sup> Dan, the National Area Representative of Aiki-Kai Australia has actually seen this despatch. "I was absolutely fascinated to see the original document by O-Sensei," he told me said in a recent telephone conversation.

The Shihan from the last group of uchideshi hold a special place in the Aikido world because each of them was personally sent out into the world by O-Sensei to teach

Aikido, and no doubt each of them carries a similar written despatch.

Sugano Sensei began his training or apprenticeship with O-Sensei in 1957 and came to Australia in 1965 as a young 5<sup>th</sup> Dan. He taught in Sydney at first then started travelling to other parts of the country. In terms of the growth of Aiki-Kai (Australia) one of the most important of these was a teaching course organised by the late Peter Yost Sensei in Tasmania.

When Sugano Sensei came to Melbourne to meet a Judo instructor who was also teaching Aikido he made a lasting impression on a young Tony Smibert who was at that time studying Judo, Aikido and Karate. The friendship and master-student relationship that grew from that meeting has endured ever since. Smibert Sensei was the main driving force in establishing Aikido in Melbourne - founding Aikido Victoria and many of the clubs still in existence today.

"Training with Sensei was absolutely hands on. His English was limited. He didn't explain anything, he just did it, and then you had to do it back to him. Generally you couldn't do it. He would just stop you in the middle of the technique until you did it the right way. So you learned by what was correct by a sort of bio-feedback. You were dealing with a person possessed of an enormous amount of skill; someone with incredible energy and Ki, a unique individual who would work you hard, but was always gentle and considerate. I also believe Sensei had no ego attachment to what he was doing, no ego attachment either to impressing you or making you impress him. He was just a wonderful teacher, and that's one of the reasons why so many people have been impressed for so long by him."

Sugano Sensei stayed in Australia for 13 years departing for Belgium in 1978.

About 1969 or 70 he began the tradition of National Schools, starting with a Monash Summer School. Sensei always said that National schools were important because they brought all the students together. Smibert Sensei said that the first National schools were virtually run from his parent's home. "Sugano Sensei and the senior people from each state came and stayed at Eltham. It was probably the closest some of us got to the uchideshi type of contact. It was a special time, an inspirational time. We were young. Sensei was young. There was a great intensity to the training, keyed as it was to the age level of the people who were there."

"The training was so intense that I often wondered how we were going to get through the rest of the day. Many courses began with continuous iriminage. And it was not unknown for a day's training to be just hours and hours of continuous throwing to the point where we were truly exhausted. This is the type of training we grew from.

"It's also our tradition and the proper way to train because talking about techniques (and as we now know) asking questions about them, chatting and comparing notes on the mat is not the way to train in Aikido."

"That's one of the things about the National schools. There's no point in you talking or asking each other what you both think it's about. You've got a very clear opportunity and the obligation to just concentrate on what you are shown by the Shihan, and to get on with practicing it."

“The joy in Aikido doesn’t come from intellectual activity. It comes from training which is physical and spiritual.”

Smibert Sensei is certain that Sugano Shihan is always mindful of his responsibilities to everybody here as his personal students, and that it is important that students train together. The way Sensei teaches, asks people to observe carefully what he does, then to try it with different students to work it out for themselves, to develop their understanding is a unique facet of Aikido. It is also fundamental in developing the sempai/kohai senior/junior relationship. Juniors must get together with seniors, people must train together even at the same level.

Smibert Sensei says that young people learn more through their body, that they are dependant on physical learning, whereas older people have different intellectual and physical equipment, different experiences and the training for them is necessarily different.

The national schools have grown to become more important from this perspective because there is now such a wide-ranging level of skill and experience. “Many on the mat now have had a much longer experience than Sensei himself had when he first came here, although he had experienced an entirely different and more profound study with O-sensei.”

“The thing about National schools is someone who has just started has the chance to train with lots of high ranking people, some of whom may have been training for 30 or 40 years and who are also themselves senior teachers. My generation had to go to Japan for such an opportunity. National schools will always be a greater opportunity from that perspective than they ever were before.”

“And then there is the chance and need for everybody to learn directly from Sugano Sensei with nobody in-between, and for him to be able to observe the way everybody is developing. I don’t think many trainees really have any idea of how closely and seriously Sensei takes his view of all of us as students for whom he is responsible: that he observes them, notes their progress, and conducts the training to take each person forward.”

“I feel there is a unique element to training with a great teacher that comes from your attentiveness to him or her and then his or her awareness and attentiveness to you.”

Senior students have often commented that they could be sitting there in a group of maybe 100 people and feel that Sugano Sensei is talking to them personally.

“We have to remember that the person teaching us now, at 64, is not the same man who was teaching here at 25. He’s now an internationally very senior, mature master, who carries with him a very strong inheritance and a responsibility to his lineage, the Aikido lineage, and I don’t think we fully appreciate that.”

“In the early days our training with Sensei was hands on. He often taught by taking the ukemi for your technique - which you then had to do very well, because it was a bit like throwing a tank.... he only went when you did a reasonable job of the technique and were fully extending. He had the disconcerting habit of standing up again just when I thought I had achieved shihonage, or standing there immobile in the middle of iriminage. At this point he might exhort you to

more effort with the phrase “Moooooore! (“More!”). He was always treated with great respect – though certainly much less formality than he would have been used to in Japan. For me the best training was after class if you asked him if he would like to do some training himself, and then he would just throw you around. The student would attack him as best they could, and he would do techniques until he was ready to stop. That was the best personal training available to anybody.”

“The numbers in Sensei’s classes were often small while the numbers at the classes in the Universities were usually much larger. This was during the Bruce Lee era when there was a booming interest in martial arts. I used to wonder about it, because Sensei was doing the real Aikido while other very; very junior branch-instructors like me and others were only trying to copy him as best we could. At that stage, Sensei made an oft quoted statement about “quality, not quantity”. Sensei was very modest he never tried to impress anyone with spectacular technique. I also think you had to be a certain kind of person to really see what he was teaching.”

“I don’t think training today is always quite as intensive and high energy as it used to be. The world is a different place and we just have to accept it. This is not to say that great things aren’t happening in Aikido but, sadly, there is the awareness that Aikido is losing some elements of its inner-art the further it gets away from the original teachings of O-Sensei and his direct students.”

“I think it’s important to recognise that one of the aims of Aikido is to have it absorbed into yourself by repetition to the point where you don’t have to think about the technique, and at that point you can say that you and the technique are one. That you are Aikido and Aikido is you. The same way that you breathe without thinking, the same way you decide where and how to walk, what you eat, you can decide what Aikido technique you will do and you do it.”

“In Aikido the things that really matter you can’t be verbalised in the normal sense. Its like humour - if you have to explain it the observer hasn’t understood it. My experience from studying under Sensei is that Aikido teachers can only open doors for the student to enter by their own effort.”

“The Sugano Shihan who talks freely to reporters and will explain all sorts of things to them that his students never hear him talk about is a different person to the one who teaches beginners, different again at the middle level, and then different again with the senior students. In believe he is constantly refining his thinking, and that I can rely on the fact that he won’t teach or explain anything until he understands it. This is why I always feel so confident of his teaching. I understand that my responsibility as a senior shidojin is, therefore, to pass on the teaching.”

“The day I met Sensei I saw that he was a unique person in terms of my experience. This conviction has remained over a very long time, during which I have also met most of the great international Aikido teachers. These meetings have generally reminded me how fortunate you are if a really outstanding teacher crosses your path.”

“The other great element in my own training has been the terrific group of people from my own generation who I’ve been studying along with. These people are among my closest friends and have become as much of my life as

Sensei himself. I think that Aikido should be a path worth travelling with people worth travelling.”

“My ‘view’ of Sensei has, of course, continued to evolve, and seeing him go through this recent medical trauma with the loss of a foot, the incredible demonstration of Aikido he put on both on and off the mat— both physically and spiritually at the last winter school has reminded me why I’m still interested in Aikido after all these years, and again of how fortunate I’ve been to have this particular Shihan as my mentor.”

“I think we tend to undervalue what Sugano Sensei and the forty years of his students have achieved here in Australia. The responsibility now is to ensure that we protect and propagate what we have achieved together in order to provide for coming students of the future.”

A couple of final words from Smibert Sensei: “You also have to work hard to receive what the teacher has to offer.”



**A very happy Sugano Sensei at winter school 2003.**



## A reminder about Summer School

### Summer School 2004 is to be held in Canberra.

Please mark these dates on your calendar so that you can arrange time to be there.

**Mon 12<sup>th</sup> January 2004 to the 17<sup>th</sup> January 2004.**

**Registration is on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January (Sunday).**

**There will be a special instructor's course on the 18<sup>th</sup> January.**

Those who attended the last Canberra Summer School will remember how successful it was. Perhaps they will also remember the modern air conditioned Gym, and the beautiful walk from the accommodation through the gardens to the Gym. They will also remember that the standard of the accommodation was very good.

**Sugano Sensei's** Summer Training School is to be hosted at the **Australian National University**, located in the heart of **Canberra**.

Tentatively costs are as follows: For all the eastern states, that is Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, and of course the ACT itself, the training fee will be approximately \$405-00, or \$85-00 per day. The hardship rate for these states (which requires authorisation from your State Area Representative) will be \$275-00, or \$60-00 per day.

West Australia and Northern Territory costs will be \$200-00. No hardship rate is applicable here. \$50-00 is the per day cost.

Accommodation will be at the Burton/Garran College (the same location as the previous Canberra Summer school). It appears that it will be about \$55-00 per day most likely including breakfast, but no lunches or dinners.

Final costs, registration forms and additional information will be announced shortly and circulated. Please ask your Area Representative for these forms.

Remember! Training under the direct supervision of Shihan Sugano and having the chance to practice with many senior students from around the country is an opportunity not to be missed.

Please contact your Area Representative or Dojo representative for more up to date details. Or if possible contact Hanan Janiv Sensei. (See contact details in next column.)

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### **President & Technical Director**

**S. Sugano 8<sup>th</sup> Dan Shihan**

### **Vice President and National Area Representative**

**Tony Smibert Sensei, 6<sup>th</sup> Dan** 179 Mole Creek Rd., Deloraine, TAS, 7304  
Tel: (W) 03 6362 3326 (H) 03 6362 2474

### **Technical Teaching Committee**

**Tony Smibert Sensei, 6<sup>th</sup> Dan**

**Hanan Janiv Sensei, 6<sup>th</sup> Dan**

**Robert Botterill Sensei, 6<sup>th</sup> Dan**

**John Watson Sensei, 5<sup>th</sup> Dan**

Contact address: c/o R. Botterill. 2/10 Dawe Rd. Mitcham, Vic. 3132. Tel. 03 9873 5164

### **Area Representatives**

#### **ACT**

**Hanan Janiv, 6<sup>th</sup> Dan.** 23 Crest Rd., Queenbeyan, ACT 2620.  
Tel/Fax: 02 6297 8258

#### **NSW**

**Andrew Dzedzic, 5<sup>th</sup> Dan** 5 Bertram St. Eastwood, NSW, 2122.  
Tel: 02 9858 5241

#### **NT**

**Richard Barnes, 6<sup>th</sup> Dan.** PO Box 254. Darwin, NT, 0801 Tel: 089 816 964

#### **QLD**

**Graham Morris 5<sup>th</sup> Dan.** 1 Inala Ave. Tugun, QLD, 4224. Tel: 07 5559 5483

#### **SA**

**David Scott 5<sup>th</sup> Dan.** PO Box 81. Norton Summit, SA, 5136. Tel: 08 8390 3322

#### **TAS**

**John Karas 4<sup>th</sup> Dan.** 43 David St. East Launceston, TAS, 7250.  
Tel: 03 6334 6144 Mob: 0418 585 702

#### **VIC**

**Geoff Savage 5<sup>th</sup> Dan.** 72 Mansfield St. Thornbury, Vic. 3071. Tel: 03 9484 5483

#### **WA**

**Hugh Derham 5<sup>th</sup> Dan.** PO Box 1274. East Victoria Park, WA, 6981. Tel: 08 9472 6407. Fax 08 9472 6408  
Mobile. 0417 927 800

### **Chairman of Administration:**

**Austin James.** 75 Highgate St. Bexley, NSW, 2207  
Tel. 02 9502 1413

### **Editorial Address**

**John Litchen.** PO Box 3503. Robina Town Ctre, QLD, 4230  
Tel: fax: 07 5578 8748  
E-mail: [jlitchen@ausinfo.com.au](mailto:jlitchen@ausinfo.com.au)