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Nisei Linguists during World War II

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Nisei Linguists During WWII and the Occupation of Japan

By Kayoko Takeda

During World War II and the occupation of Japan, *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese Americans) played crucial roles as translators, interpreters, and interrogators, and served in other important language-related functions. Since they worked in military intelligence, their contributions were not discussed in much detail until the early 1970s, when a number of intelligence documents were declassified. This article presents an overview of the recruitment and activities of these *Nisei* linguists.

The U.S. Army's Japanese Language School: Before and After Pearl Harbor

Prior to Pearl Harbor, a division of the U.S. Army on the West Coast started a classified military intelligence training program for personnel with Japanese language skills in preparation for an anticipated war with Japan. This classified program, based in the Presidio of San Francisco, began operation on November 1, 1941, with four Japanese American teachers and 60 students (58

Given the proven value of Japanese linguists in various fields of operation, the U.S. government started recruiting hundreds of *Nisei* from the internment camps to train at MISLS.

Nisei and 2 Caucasians). After six months of intensive training, most of the 45 graduates were sent to various military fields of operation to work in intelligence.

Soon after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, all Japanese Americans were reclassified as 4-C (enemy aliens who were ineligible for military service). In February 1942, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which resulted in the forced relocation

of nearly 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans on the West Coast to internment camps. As a result, the U.S. Army's Japanese military intelligence training program moved to Minnesota in late May of 1942.

By that time, the valuable contributions being made by the first graduates of the program had been reported back from the war front. The Army was also becoming acutely aware of the need for more *Nisei* linguists for military intelligence. The program was reorganized under the direct supervision of the War Department, and reopened on June 1, 1942 as the Military Intelligence Service Language School (MISLS). Given the proven value of Japanese linguists in various fields of operation, the U.S. government started recruiting hundreds of *Nisei* from the internment camps to train at MISLS. Finding qualified *Nisei*, however, was a challenging task. According to Bill Hosokawa: "[o]f the first 3,700 men interviewed, only 3% proved to speak Japanese fluently. The next 4% could be considered fairly proficient in the language. Another 3% knew just enough so that they could be thrown into intensive training; only 1 *Nisei* in 10 understood a useful amount of his ancestral tongue. And even the best of them had to be taught military vocabulary and usage."¹

Translation and Interrogation

More than 6,000 *Nisei* received six months of rigorous training at MISLS, after which they were sent mainly to the Pacific military operational theater. They served in the Allied Translator and Interpreter Service (ATIS) and in other units as translators, interpreters, interrogators, code breakers, and "cave flushers." Some of these individuals were "loaned" to the U.S. Navy, since it did not accept *Nisei* enlistments. (The Navy had its own Japanese language

schools just for Caucasian officers, but they did not produce many competent linguists.)

men and to their families which it can never fully repay."³

Prior to Pearl Harbor, a division of the U.S. Army on the West Coast started a classified military intelligence training program for personnel with Japanese language skills in preparation for an anticipated war with Japan.

Nisei linguists translated captured enemy documents, interrogated Japanese prisoners of war, persuaded Japanese soldiers and civilians to surrender, and participated in propaganda activities. One of the most vital tasks they engaged in for the U.S. military was the translation of Japan's "Z Plan," which called for a Japanese counterattack in the Pacific. The knowledge obtained through the translation of these intercepted documents led to a significant victory for U.S. forces. This is considered by historians to be "one of the greatest single intelligence feats of the war in the Southwest Pacific Area."²

Nisei linguists earned much recognition for their valuable contributions to the war effort. Colonel Mashbir, the ATIS commander, wrote in his autobiography:

"Had it not been for the loyalty, fidelity, patriotism, and ability of these American *Nisei*, that part of the war in the Pacific, which was dependent upon intelligence gleaned from captured documents and prisoners of war, would have been a far more hazardous, long-drawn-out affair. The United States of America owes a debt to these

According to a 1945 report, the *Nisei* linguists had translated 20.5 million pages by the end of the war.

War Crimes Trials and Occupation

Nisei linguists were also indispensable during the occupation of Japan. The enrollment at MISLS actually peaked after the war in response to the need to address the language needs of various operations of the occupation. The focus of instruction shifted from military to civilian language and Japanese culture.

More than 5,000 *Nisei* linguists worked in occupied Japan, functioning as a "bridge" between the occupation forces and Japanese authorities and civilians. Their duties covered a variety of areas, including intelligence, disarmament, civil affairs, education, and finance. They even participated in the drafting of the Japanese Constitution and the formation of the National Police Reserve (which later became the Japanese Self-Defense Force).

Nisei linguists also provided translation services for Japanese war crimes trials. Some worked as interpreters at Class B/C war crimes trials, such as those in Manila and Yokohama. (There were three categories of war crimes: "Class A" ➡

for crimes against peace, “Class B” for war crimes, and “Class C” for crimes against humanity.) At the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE), a Class A trial, four *Nisei* linguists worked as monitors to check the performance of the interpreters (who were Japanese diplomats and other Japanese

internment camp to teach at MISLS, and later worked in military intelligence during the war. He broke coded conversations (spoken in the dialect of the region where he grew up) between Japanese government officials. For this and many other intelligence activities he received the Legion of Merit, the highest medal

IMTFE as one of the reasons for his suicide.

Even within the U.S. Army, *Nisei* linguists had to fight prejudice and suspicions of disloyalty while they served in the Pacific. Although a number of testimonials by *Nisei* linguists show their pride in having proved their loyalty to the U.S., they also discuss their complex feelings about being sent to internment camps by the same government that later took advantage of their language skills in the war against the country of their parents. During my research, one of those I interviewed talked about the resentment he felt when he was sent to the Pacific from MISLS with a dog tag bearing the address of the internment camp where his parents were detained.

While trying to overcome prejudice within the military they served, the *Nisei* linguists also struggled with issues of cultural identity as they worked to win a war against people of their own heritage. James McNaughton provides the following insight into how

According to a 1945 report, the *Nisei* linguists had translated 20.5 million pages by the end of the war.

nationals). These *Nisei* monitors also simultaneously read the translations of the closing statements, the judgment (verdict), and other prepared statements as they were delivered by the prosecutors, defense counsel, and the president of the tribunal.

Overcoming Prejudice

Along with many other Japanese Americans, *Nisei* linguists lived through the prejudice and discrimination directed toward them in the 1930s and 1940s. In the midst of the war hysteria and the fierce hatred against Japanese Americans, they were sent to internment camps as “enemy aliens.” Kibei (*Nisei* who received an education in Japan and returned to the U.S.) suffered even greater prejudice than other Japanese Americans, as they were suspected of being disloyal and “pro-Japanese.” Ironically, Kibei were the best source of military linguists because of their prior education and experience in Japan.

One of the most documented figures of all *Nisei* linguists, David Akira Itami, was Kibei. Itami served as the leader of the monitor team at the IMTFE. He volunteered from an

awarded to noncombatants. After the IMTFE, Itami stayed on at ATIS as a translator until 1950, when, at age 39, he shot and killed himself. His family and friends point to the prejudice Itami experienced as an Asian in American society and as Kibei in the *Nisei* community, and cite the emotional strains he suffered during the

Further Reading

Discover Nikkei. *Winning the Peace: Military Intelligence Service Veterans and the Occupation of Japan*. www.discovernikkei.org.

Military Intelligence Service Resource Center. www.njahs.org/misnorcal/resources/resources_videos.htm.

Otake, Tomoko. “Between Two Worlds: Tried to the Limit and Beyond.” *The Japan Times* (August 14, 2005).



Nisei interpreters assisting with an interrogation during World War II.
Images courtesy of the Hirasaki National Resource Center, Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, California.

the *Nisei* linguists may have viewed their opponents, the Japanese:

“At a deeper level of analysis, for those who joined the Military Intelligence Service to become linguists, the way they served was

guage was a major challenge involving six months of hard work, the knowledge and appreciation of Japanese culture and society they had absorbed from their parents and upbringing gave them a unique perspective on the enemy they

One of the most vital tasks they engaged in was the translation of Japan’s “Z Plan” for the U.S. Navy.

more specific to their heritage, and thus psychologically more complex. Whether translating captured diaries or radio messages, or interrogating prisoners of war, they had to confront issues of identity and heritage in ways that most other American soldiers could not even imagine. Although for most of them, learning the Japanese lan-

guage was a major challenge involving six months of hard work, the knowledge and appreciation of Japanese culture and society they had absorbed from their parents and upbringing gave them a unique perspective on the enemy they

This complex psychological aspect of military linguists fighting an enemy closely linked to their own heritage seems relevant in the context of today’s war on terrorism as well.

Today’s MISLS

In 1946, MISLS moved to the Presidio of Monterey, California, and was renamed the Army Language School. In the midst of the Cold War, the school mainly trained military linguists in Russian, Chinese, Korean, and German languages. In 1963, the school and the language programs in the U.S. Air Force and Navy were consolidated into the Defense Foreign Language Program under the supervision of the Defense Language Institute (DLI). Currently, the DLI Foreign Language Center in Monterey offers instruction in a number of languages to military personnel and members of other federal agencies. Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Persian Farsi are among the largest programs at the moment.

Notes

1. Hosokawa, Bill. *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1969/2002), 397.
2. Bradsher, Greg. 2005. “The ‘Z Plan’ Story.” *Prologue* 37-3 (The U.S. National Archives & Records Administration, 2005). www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/fall/z-plan-1.html.
3. Hosokawa, Bill. *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1969/2002), 399.
4. McNaughton, James, C. *Nisei Linguists and New Perspectives on the Pacific War: Intelligence, Race, and Continuity* (1994). www.army.mil/CMH-PG/topics/apam/Nisei.htm.

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