

Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service during World War II

James C. McNaughton. Department of the Army: Washington, D.C., 2006. 514 pp., photos, maps, bibliography, index. Foreword by Jeffrey J. Clarke.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado

Victory in war and peace goes most often to those who know their enemies and themselves. A state that wages war without good intelligence is like a dim-sighted boxer who, even if he avoids losing, will suffer unseen blows a fighter with sure vision would likely have parried.¹ James C. McNaughton, a military historian whose career includes service as command historian for the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center and US Army Pacific, has written a history of Japanese Americans whose service as linguists of the US Army Military Intelligence Service (MIS) contributed greatly to the US victory over the Japanese Empire in the Second World War and to the lasting bilateral alliance that followed. As the US Army chief of military history wrote in his foreword to the book, the history of the MIS in World War II suggests lessons for Washington in the “sustained struggle ahead” in the Global War on Terrorism.

In 1941, when the United States faced the looming prospect of war with Japan, the War Department moved to develop linguists by directing the Fourth Army to open an intelligence school at the Presidio of San Francisco. Lt. Col. John Weckerling and Capt. Kai Rasmussen, both of whom had learned the language in Japan, proceeded to screen Japanese Americans as instructors and students, develop a curriculum, and otherwise build a school from scratch. The recruitment of John Aiso, a Harvard-educated lawyer famous among California’s Japanese Americans for his intellect and drive, as chief instructor was a major step to putting the enterprise in gear. The school, training second-generation Japanese Americans (Nisei), moved in 1942 to Camp Savage, Minnesota, as the Western Defense Command was removing over 100,000 Japanese immigrants (Issei) and their American children from their homes on the West Coast and interning them

¹ According to a classic military treatise, “Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning and losing are equal. If ignorant of both your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Samuel B. Griffith, translator (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 84.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of an article’s factual statements and interpretations.

in camps in the interior. In 1944, the growing school, by then designated the Military Intelligence Service Language School (MISLS), moved to Ft. Snelling, Minnesota. Comparing the graduating classes gives some idea of the school's impressive growth: 42 Nisei of the first class graduated on 1 May 1942; on 18 August 1945, 552 students graduated. Trained in interpreting, interrogation, and translation with materials ranging from standard textbooks to captured documents, thousands of Nisei and hundreds of Caucasian Americans left the school to serve as linguists in the war against Japan.

The US Army was far from alone in working to recruit, train, and deploy Japanese linguists, a situation the author brings to light by writing with some detail on developments in the US Navy as well as on an alphabet soup of intelligence organizations that included the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service (FBIS), and Office of War Information (OWI). In addition to such major training centers as the MISLS, the Army Intensive Japanese Language School at the University of Michigan and the Navy Japanese Language School at the University of Colorado/Boulder, the book touches on other wartime programs, from Japanese classes at the Military Intelligence Training Center at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, to the Navy School of Military Government and Administration at Columbia University. McNaughton even devotes some ink to describing the Japanese programs of the Allied forces of Britain, Australia, and Canada. Striking among the book's myriad details is the contrast between the Army's decision to recruit its linguists primarily from the pool of eligible Japanese Americans and the Navy's preference in selecting Caucasians with experience living in Japan, an outstanding academic record, or some demonstrated aptitude in learning foreign languages.

From the early campaign to oust the Japanese from their footholds in Alaska to the invasion of Okinawa near the war's end, Nisei graduates of the MISLS demonstrated their worth at the front lines time and again. Tactical intelligence gained from captured documents, prisoner interrogations, and enemy radio contributed greatly to US Army and Marine ground campaigns. Technical Sergeant Roy Uyehata, for example, learned in early March 1944 in a "routine interrogation" at XIV Corps headquarters on Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, that Japanese forces planned a major assault on American positions for 23 March, an auspicious imperial holiday. A tactical enemy map captured the day of the planned attack confirmed Uyehata's discovery in detail; prepared, XIV Corps began the annihilation of the enemy with a preemptive artillery barrage just as they were moving into assault positions that night. Nisei linguists also showed extraordinary bravery in saving thousands of civilian lives in the fierce fighting for Saipan and Okinawa. Sgt. Hoichi "Bob" Kubo saved over 100 civilians in Okinawa from involuntary mass suicide by crawling alone into a cave and convincing the Japanese soldiers there to let them go. In two hours of negotiations, he gained their trust by sharing his K-rations, letting them know that his grandfathers had served in the Russo-Japanese War in the Imperial Japanese Army's (IJA) famed 5th (Hiroshima) and 6th (Kumamoto) Divisions, and appealed to their sense of honor as warriors. For his bravery, Kubo won the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army's second highest award for combat valor.

Nisei linguists also proved their worth in organizations far from the front lines. In such organizations as the Allied Translator and Interpreter Service (ATIS) in Australia, the Southeast Asia Translator and Interrogation Center (SEATIC) in India, and the Signal Security Agency monitoring station at Vint Hill Farms, Virginia, Japanese Americans interpreted, interrogated, and translated. ATIS Nisei translated the captured Japanese Army List, producing in May 1943 a 683-page translation that proved a gold mine for detailed intelligence on the IJA order of battle. Nisei linguists also participated in the ATIS translation of a captured copy of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) "Z Plan" of 8 March 1944. The IJN, unaware, executed their compromised plan to disastrous loss in June at the decisive Battle of the Philippine Sea where, in history's largest carrier battle, the IJN in effect lost its air arm.

McNaughton relates not only Nisei triumphs but their hardships and handicaps as well. Many were recruited or conscripted for military service from behind the barbed wire of internment camps where their families remained confined. Japanese Americans with outstanding command of Japanese, even those who had gone to school or university in Japan (a Nisei subset known as Kibei), generally served under Caucasian officers less gifted in the language yet more likely to earn officer commissions. On the other hand, many Nisei linguists suffered from such handicaps as a rudimentary grasp of their parents' language, limited formal education, and poor proficiency in English. Beyond the sting of racism, Nisei linguists at the front often had bodyguards with them and ran the risk of friendly fire from fellow soldiers mistaking them for the enemy. Technical Sgt. Fred Tanakatsubo was only one of those linguists who felt it necessary to tell his Caucasian comrades, "Take a good look, and *remember me*, because I'm going in with you!" The fight against Japan was for them, in a sense, a civil war. Many Nisei going into Okinawa, for example, worried that family and friends would die in the invasion. Second Lt. Harry Fukuhara was far from the only Nisei shaken at news of the atomic obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; his mother and siblings were residents of Hiroshima.²

Having contributed to victory in the war, Nisei linguists continued serving with distinction in the peace that followed. Lt. Ralph Yempuku parachuted on 27 August 1945, before the formal Japanese surrender, with an OSS team under Capt. John K. Singlaub onto the Chinese island of Hainan to rescue from a Japanese camp several hundred Australian and Dutch POWs in danger of execution. Nearly 100 Nisei went to Japan in the early weeks of the occupation to search for Japanese intelligence pertaining to the Soviet Union. Others sifted for documents relating to Japanese programs for weapons of mass destruction as well as conventional military and naval technology. Japanese Americans participated in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and other war crimes trials; some prepared defenses, others gathered evidence for the prosecution. Japanese Americans in ATIS, which took over the

² Fukuhara left his native Seattle as a teen when his mother took him and his siblings to her hometown of Hiroshima following his father's death in 1933. He returned to the United States for college; his three brothers remained in Japan. He served in the US Army; they served in the Japanese Army. His mother and oldest brother suffered radiation sickness, with his brother dying before the end of 1945. "Futatsu no sokoku' hazama ni ikite" [Living Between "Two Fatherlands,'], *Tokyo Shimbum*, 11 June 1996, p. 28.

NYK Building across from the Imperial Palace, translated Japanese letters and petitions to General MacArthur and monitored the media. Still other Nisei served in occupied Japan (1945–52) in such intelligence organs as the Civilian Censorship Detachment and Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC).

McNaughton's history of Japanese American linguists is so engrossing that his ending the story in 1946, on page 456, feels abrupt. The author does define his subject as Nisei linguists in World War II, but writing even an epilogue of "what happened next" would have been illuminating. Left untold are tales of Nisei veterans of the Second World War interrogating North Korean prisoners in Japanese in the Korean War, executing CIC operations against the Japanese Communist Party and other targets during the occupation, and serving down through the years of the Cold War in various components of the military and CIA.³ Chiyoki "Chick" Ikeda, who earned a star on the CIA Memorial Wall, is one good example. Ikeda became an important officer in the latter half of the 1950s in the Directorate of Operations and served in a variety of positions, including in Japan, until his death in 1960. Ikeda managed a counterintelligence program that detected and turned Soviet agents among the tens of thousands of Japanese prisoners of war repatriated from the Soviet Union during 1947–48.

In fact, the story of the Nisei linguists extends from before the Second World War until the end of the Cold War. As McNaughton notes, the CIC had sent two Nisei officers, Arthur Komori and Richard Sakakida, under cover into Manila in the spring of 1941 to gather intelligence on Japanese fifth-column activity in the US colony.⁴ Perhaps the central figure of such a post-

**DCI George Tenet
on Chiyoki Ikeda, 14 May 1998**

It is also our tradition on Memorial Day to recognize the addition of a new star to the Memorial Wall. The star was engraved last October 15. It belongs to Chiyoki "Chick" Ikeda. He was killed in the line of duty four decades ago in an air accident. Chick Ikeda knew the price of patriotism. He paid it willingly and dearly. In September 1940, Chick, who possessed dual citizenship, chose to pledge his full allegiance to the United States and renounced his Japanese citizenship, even at a time when our Nisei were shamefully declared "enemy aliens." In 1943, when President Roosevelt established an all Nisei combat team, Chick joined the famous 442nd. He was selected for behind-the-lines duty in China [with the OSS] and was decorated with a Bronze Star. After the war, he fulfilled various military assignments, then joined the Agency in 1954, where he served with distinction until his death in 1960. The work Chick Ikeda did building strategic liaison relationships for the Agency must still remain unspoken, for it continues to yield valuable dividends today. We are honored to have Mrs. Ikeda, their sons George and John, and Senator Akaka here today.

³ McNaughton did touch on the role of Nisei serving in the Korean War with the 500th Military Intelligence Support Group Far East and other organizations in his paper "Nisei Linguists and New Perspectives on the Pacific War: Intelligence, Race, and Continuity," presented at the 1994 Conference of Army Historians and available on line at <http://www.history.army.mil/topics/apam/Nisei.htm>.

⁴ Sakakida related his wartime exploits to his brother-in-law, Wayne Kiyosaki, who wrote *A Spy in Their Midst: The World War II Struggle of a Japanese-American Hero* (1995). An unclassified review of this book appeared in *Studies in Intelligence* 40, no. 2 (1996).

war epilogue would be Harry Fukuhara, a counterintelligence officer who retired from active military service in 1971 with the rank of colonel after governing an island in the occupied Ryukyu archipelago, became a Department of the Army civilian (DAC), then retired in 1990 as chief of the 500th MI's Foreign Liaison Detachment (FLD). His decorations from President George H. W. Bush, DCI William Webster, and Emperor Akihito hint at the valuable role, far from the lime-light, that Nisei played in US-Japan relations from the beginning of the occupation to the end of the Cold War.⁵ Former Administrative Vice Minister for Defense Maruyama Ko,⁶ a key military official of postwar Japan once explained, "What I would like to stress is that it was really fortunate for Japanese to have many Nisei working for Japan the way that Fukuhara did after the war."⁷

McNaughton's *Nisei Linguists* is a wide-ranging work whose 12 chapters cover both the development of the language programs and the growth of the Nisei contribution over the course of the war. The numerous footnotes and long bibliography attest to the years of research devoted to this book, although the absence of Japanese sources is regrettable.⁸ This is an excellent history. Moreover, many readers will agree with the chief of military history that the book offers "valuable lessons to US Army officers both present and future" seeking to understand present foes in the Global War on Terrorism. As one example, McNaughton relates how MISLS taught harsh interrogation techniques at Camp Savage until "reports from the field indicated that compassion and kind treatment tended to work better." A military that holds true to the legacy of its Nisei linguists by facing its enemies with fluent, literate, and compassionate intelligence officers will likely prevail.



⁵ Fukuhara received the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service, the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, and the Order of the Rising Sun, 3rd Class. See "Colonel Harry Fukuhara to Speak at Reed High School On Friday, May 9th," *JACL News*, May 2003: 1-2 (<http://wolfweb.unr.edu/homepage/vjohnson/jacl/jaclMAY03.PDF>).

⁶ Names of Japanese in this review appear in their traditional order, surname preceding given name.

⁷ Toshikawa Takao, "Nikkei nisei, Beigun joho shoko ga hajimete shogen shita: 'Futatsu no sokoku' rimen-shi," ["Nisei, U.S. Military Officer Testifies for First Time: The Inside Story of 'Two Fatherlands'"], *Shukan Posuto*, 3 March 1995: 219.

⁸ Many Japanese histories, memoirs, and media reports tell the stories of Nisei in service to one country or the other. One history of Japanese Americans is Kikuchi Yuki's *Hawai Nikkei nisei no Taieheiyo Senso* [The Pacific War of Hawaiian Nisei] (Tokyo: Sanichi Shobo, 1995). A story of Japanese Americans on the other side is Tachibana Yuzuru's *Teikoku Kaigun shikan ni natta Nikkei Nisei* [The Nisei Who Became an Officer of the Imperial Navy] (Tokyo: Tsukiji Shokan, 1994). As Nisei who were living in the United States at the start of the war joined the US military and intelligence organs, so many of those in Japan at that time served as linguists in the IJA and IJN, the Foreign Ministry, and the official Domei News Agency which, like the BBC, monitored foreign media broadcasts.