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AMERICA'S SECRET WEAPON IN WORLD WAR II

The history of Japanese Americans who resolutely served the United States in World War II to bring about the Allied victory over Japan is a magnificent story.

6,000 Nisei (Japanese Americans) served in the U.S. Military Intelligence Service (MIS) during World War II and fought covertly against the land of their ancestry, contributing tremendously to the Allied victory. They were literally, America's superb secret human weapon then, and what they did has been one of the best-kept secrets of the war.

Their role was truly indispensable and unique, for they employed a devastatingly effective weapon, their knowledge of the enemy's complex and difficult language, which very few persons beside them on the Allied side could understand or use. They were superbly resourceful, courageous and loyal soldiers who served without fanfare in all campaigns and all fronts of the far-flung war throughout the Pacific, in China, India and Burma, and even in Europe where they secretly intercepted the enemy's diplomatic communications.

Yet, despite the contributions and sacrifices made by them, their role in that war had to remain an untold military secret all these years until only very recently. It is a remarkable story without parallel.

The Role and Accomplishments of the Nisei Military Intelligence Soldiers

The "Go For Broke" exploits of the Nisei 442nd Infantry Regiment have been well publicized and recognized, and rightfully so, as the unsurpassed combat record of Japanese-Americans who fought as an integral military unit in Italy and France. The MIS story, on the other hand, is one of numerous small units of Nisei soldiers who operated in detachments of ten to twenty men assigned to every combat division, army corp and every campaign in the war against Japan.

It is also the story of much larger groups who served at intelligence centers at army and area headquarters level. Three main intelligence centers were operated, in the Southwest Pacific Area under General Douglas MacArthur, the Central Pacific Ocean Area under Admiral Chester Nimitz, and the China-Burma-India Area (CBI) under General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell. The largest of these centers was at MacArthur's headquarters and known as ATIS (Allied Translator Interpreter Section), which had as many as 3,000 Nisei at its peak. The other centers were JICPOA (Joint Intelligence Center, Pacific Ocean Area) and SATIC (Southeast Asia Translation and Interrogation Center).

Through it all, as indispensable translators of captured enemy documents, interrogators of enemy POWs and persuaders of enemy surrender, they were superbly effective. They also worked laboriously over tons of enemy documents -- maps, battle plans, diaries, letters, records, manuals -- at area headquarters, producing voluminous intelligence of all sorts that affected Allied strategy and operations. The men of ATIS, for example, produced 20-million pages of translations.

In the Solomon Islands they translated an intercepted enemy radio message which revealed that Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander-in-chief of Japan's naval forces, was to arrive at a certain time at Rabaul in a flight of two Betty bombers from Truk. Rabaul was at an extreme flying range of U.S. P-38 fighters, allowing only 15 minutes flight over the target area, but the Admiral's arrival was successfully ambushed and the planes were destroyed. General MacArthur referred to this as the one most singularly significant action of the war.

Prior to U.S. landings in the Philippines in October, 1944, thanks to translation done by MIS men, the Japanese Navy's master plan for defending the Philippines was known to Allied forces. As enemy fleets responded to U.S. landings on Leyte, the U.S. navy was able to thwart the counter attacks and annihilate the enemy forces.

Another major coup was capture and translation in 1944 of the enemy's Z-Plan, the Imperial Navy's strategy for defending the Marianas Islands against the U.S. Navy's carrier forces. As the U.S. invasion of the Marianas (Guam and Saipan) unfolded, Admiral Raymond Spruance's carrier fleet and submarines dealt a death blow to the counter-attacking Japanese carrier forces. The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot resulted, a complete debacle for the enemy. Hundreds of enemy planes were swept from the skies, and Japanese aircraft carriers were never again able to fight the war. The MIS Nisei made all this possible.

On Okinawa in 1945, the last and bloodiest battle of the war, lasting over two months, the enemy's fate was sealed by two vital pieces of intelligence translated by the Nisei. One was the enemy's final main defense plan, issued a month before the U.S. landings, that was captured early in the fighting. It was a brilliant plan which accurately predicted the date and site of the U.S. landings and the strategy of the U.S. forces. The enemy's intentions and strategy were made clear through the translation.

The other was a minutely detailed full contour map of Okinawa, recovered from the body of an enemy artillery observation officer. The U.S. map of the island had been created from B-29 aerial reconnaissance photos, and it was highly inadequate, with most of the inland terrain only roughly shown and with many blank areas. The enemy map was translated overnight on an overlay, flown to Pearl Harbor for reproduction, and 72 hours later 12,000 copies were delivered back to Okinawa and distributed to all units. From then on it guided all the U.S. ground action and artillery fire.

Maj. General Charles Willoughby, G-2, intelligence chief of MacArthur's command, unequivocally stated, "The Nisei saved countless Allied lives and shortened the war by two years."

General MacArthur was able to state with pride, "Never in military history did an army know so much about the enemy prior to actual engagement."

Major General Frank D. Merrill in Burma said, "As for the value of the Nisei, I couldn't have gotten along without them." And he ordered his men, Merrill's Marauders, to protect with their lives the 14-man team of MIS Nisei under his command.

From the frozen tundra of Attu, to the coral atolls of the Pacific, the jungles of New Guinea, the Philippines and Burma, the lava terrain of Iwo Jima and the bloodied escarpments of Okinawa, the Nisei were everywhere, obtaining intelligence from enemy documents, POWs and enemy communications, and calling upon the enemy to surrender. When needed they operated behind enemy lines and parachuted on assignments without real parachute training. In Burma and elsewhere they crept to within hearing distance of enemy troops to learn their movements, at times tapping and listening to the enemy's telephone communications.

Although they were not trained MIS men, early in the war three Nisei, Arthur Komori, Thomas Sakakida and Clarence Yamagata operated secretly with U.S. Army Intelligence before the Philippines fell to the invading Japanese. Two were evacuated from Corregidor in the nick of time by light plane, avoiding capture by the enemy. There was no room on the plane for the third, Sakakida, who was captured and tortured, after he interpreted for General Jonathan Wainwright in the surrender of Corregidor. The enemy "converted" him to their use as a spy, but he fooled them and operated as a double agent, feeding intelligence to Filipino guerrillas which wound up at MacArthur's headquarters. These three men could be called the forerunners of the fantastic MIS operations that followed later.

Sergeant Kenji Yasui swam the Irawaddy River in Burma to an island held by enemy troops, and pretending to be a Japanese officer, commanded them to surrender. Barking orders like a genuine officer, he assembled them and put them through a close order drill as he did so. Of 17 men, three had to be killed by supporting GIs, and one committed suicide with a grenade, trying to take Yasui with him, but 13 surrendered, and Yasui had them push him on a raft to U.S. troops waiting on the river bank. He was aptly named, "The Little Sergeant York" and was awarded the Silver Star.

On Saipan, following the enemy's final demonic and suicidal Banzai attack, Sergeant Bob Hoichi Kubo entered a large cave with only a .45 pistol, laid it down before eight enemy soldiers and palavered with them for two hours, even eating a meal with them, and succeeded in getting them to surrender, along with 122 civilians. The enemy was about to kill him at first, but were smitten by his boldness. Kubo was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his unbelievably courageous feat.

In Burma with the Merrill's Marauders, Sergeant Roy Matsumoto crept to within yards of an enemy unit preparing to attack, learned what they were about to do and exactly when they would, then crawled back to the Marauders and enabled a trap to be set. As the enemy moved into position to attack, he shouted in Japanese the order to charge, to which they dutifully responded, attacking prematurely. When the action ended, 54 enemy were dead, with no casualties to the GIs. He was awarded the Legion of Merit.

On Iwo Jima, Corporal Terry Takeshi Doi earned the nickname "Guts Doi" by volunteering to flush the enemy from their caves. Armed with only a flashlight and a knife, and stripped to the waist to show he had no gun, he approached and crawled through cave after cave, urging the enemy to surrender. He brought them out, one to three at a time, and even up to a dozen. His courage was incredible, and he was awarded the Silver Star.

The heroic and resourceful actions of the MIS Nisei were simply myriad. As the war progressed closer to Japan, they further performed an unequalled, compassionate role on Saipan and Okinawa, saving the lives of thousands upon thousands of non-combatant enemy civilians by flushing them from caves, often at the risk of their own lives.

Some were killed in action, in New Guinea, Leyte, Luzon and Okinawa. The names of three of them, Sergeants Frank Hachiya of Oregon, George Nakamura of California and Yukitaka Mizutani of Hawaii, appear on three major buildings named after them at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey. Mits Shibata died on Ie Shima, near Okinawa, shot in error by a BAR-wielding GI as he sought to rescue some civilians. Eddie Fukui perished in a kamikaze attack on his ship at the Kerama Islands off Okinawa as he intercepted enemy radio communications. Bill Imoto, Sholchi Nakahara and Satoshi Kurokawa are others who died in different places. And over twenty ATIS men were killed in a plane crash on Okinawa. Their names were Japanese, but they all served and died as American soldiers.

As General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell said, "The Nisei bought an awfully big hunk of America with their blood."

Reviewing the exploits of the MIS men, Major General Clayton Bissell, Chief of the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department, told a graduating MIS class: "If you Japanese-Americans are ever questioned as to your loyalty, don't even bother to reply....Your gallant deeds under fire will speak so loudly that you need not answer."

When the war ended in August of 1945, their work was not over, for now they were needed to bridge the language gap in the Allied Occupation of Japan. This they did, performing again an indispensable role.

Most of them were volunteers. Many were Kibei, or "returnees to America," who had been sent to Japan by their parents to be educated there before the war. Not all were bilingually expert, for the Japanese language was exceedingly hard to learn and use. But they teamed up with the Kibei whose Japanese was stronger to do their job.

At home in the U.S., many of their families were in relocation centers, behind barbed wire and guarded by armed soldiers, since all persons of Japanese ancestry had been evacuated from the West Coast in 1942 by the U.S. government and placed in these camps in isolated locations. Yet, they responded to the Army's call for volunteers for MIS duty.

Like the Nisei who served with the 442nd Regiment in Europe, these MIS Nisei fought two wars -- one against the military enemy and the other against racial prejudice and distrust toward their kind at home. By fighting the first, they would overcome the other.

The first MIS language school

Surprisingly, even before Pearl Harbor in the summer of 1941, several U.S. Army officers, with admirable prescience and faith in the loyalty of the Nisei, set about establishing a secret school to train them in military intelligence. These officers, including John Weckerling and Kai E. Rasmussen, had been American military attaches in Japan in the 30's and were acquainted with the difficulty of mastering the Japanese language. They foresaw a dire need for American soldiers capable of deciphering the language in the event of war with Japan.

The officers succeeded in obtaining the War Department's approval to proceed, and with a meager budget of \$2,000 for supplies, they launched the school on November 1 in a small hangar, which still stands today, at Crissy Field in the Presidio. There were four civilian Nisei instructors and 60 students (58 Nisei and 2 Caucasians) assembled from various army units. Teaching materials had to be developed, and the first seats were orange crates. A special military language dictionary in Japanese and English had to be created, all hand-written.

From this sparse beginning, when war came the school was rapidly expanded as the need and demand for its graduates mushroomed. The total relocation of Japanese persons from the West Coast in June, 1942, and the rampant war hysteria and racial hate prevailing there, also caused the school to be moved at that time to racially more hospitable Minnesota -- to Camp Savage, a former Civil Conservation Corps log-cabin camp 20 miles south of Minneapolis. There the school underwent great expansion as combat units in the Pacific demanded more and more MIS soldiers. In 1944 the school was moved to more comfortable quarters at Fort Snelling in St. Paul.

By the war's end, the school had trained and sent afield 6,000 men. Then after the war it was moved back to the West Coast in 1946, to the Presidio of Monterey, where it became the now permanent and extensive U.S. Defense Language Institute, which has trained through the years since then more than 70,000 valuable military linguists in various strategic languages.

The Presidio Army Museum