Bridge to the Sun: The Secret Role of the Japanese Americans Who Fought in the Pacific in World War II

Bruce Henderson (Knopf, 2022) 480 pages, maps, photographs, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado

The ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu in his classic treatise *The Art of War* famously pointed to the importance of intelligence in warfare: "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril." Knowing the enemy is difficult enough for a kingdom or country that goes to war with a neighbor, as with China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979. Intelligence becomes a more formidable challenge when the adversary is distant and unfamiliar. Such was the case when the United States and Japan went to war in 1941 across the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Neither side knew much about the other. Each side faced the challenge of coming to grips with an alien enemy language in order to gain intelligence. Few in Japan, other than those born and raised in the United States, had a good grasp of English. Few Americans, other than those of Japanese heritage, had ever studied Japanese. These few thousand, mostly young, Japanese Americans thus became a key resource for both Washington and Tokyo in seeking to "know the enemy" and win the war.[a]

In the 1930s, many Japanese immigrants (the first generation, or *Issei*, in Japanese) in the United States sent their children (the second generation, or *Nisei*) to Japan for their education, often having them stay with relatives, or the parents took their American children to Japan when they left the United States for one reason or another to go home. Japanese Americans who "returned" to Japan were known as *kikoku shita Nikkei Nisei* (帰国した日系二世). Those who later returned to the United States after having lived some years in Japan were known as *kibei shita Nikkei Nisei* (帰米した日系二世). These *Kibei* Nisei (Kibei, for short) were an elite group within the Japanese-American community, their fluency and literacy distinguishing them from the majority of Nisei who had grown up entirely within the United States.

Like other groups in the United States, most Nisei had grown up hearing their immigrant parents speak their native language at home. Weekend language classes for some Nisei supplemented this "kitchen Japanese," but the children were far from fluent or literate in their parents' language. Kibei, particularly those who had attended high school and in some cases college in Japan, could function at a high level in both languages and in both societies. In effect, they constituted a bridge between the United States and Japan.

Bruce Henderson, who has penned many popular works of nonfiction on his own and in cooperation with others, has written a highly readable history of the Kibei contribution as Japanese linguists in the United States Army's Military Intelligence Service (MIS) in the fight against Japan in World War II. In *Bridge to the Sun*, the author settles on six Kibei as his main characters. Henderson divides the book into two main parts. The story's prologue and the five chapters of Part One set out the background of the main characters: the stories of their Issei parents in America and their own lives growing up and attending school in the United States and Japan. Two of the Kibei—Tom Sakamoto and Nobuo Furuiye—attended Kyushu Gakuin, a prominent Lutheran high school in Kumamoto Prefecture on Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands.

Many Kibei in Japan excelled in their studies. Both Sakamoto and Grant Hirabayashi, who attended high school in Nagano Prefecture on the main island of Honshu, were outstanding students who received offers to join the Japanese army as officers; Hirabayashi received an invitation to the Imperial Military Academy. (33) Part Two's chapters relate different episodes of the war, from language training at the Military Intelligence Service Language School (MISLS) to various campaigns in Asia and the Pacific.

The Kibei encountered prejudice in their lives at every turn. In Japan, they were expected to act as loyal imperial subjects, no matter the passport they held. When

a. For a discussion of Great Britain's approach to filling the language gap, see my review of *Eavesdropping on the Emperor; Interrogators and Codebreakers in Britain's War With Japan* by Peter Kornicki, *Studies in Intelligence* 66, no. 1 (*Extracts* – March 2022).

Sakamoto explained to the Japanese major who extended to him the honor of an officer's position that he was an American citizen and was returning home to the United States after high school, the major "angrily berated" the young man as a traitor to the emperor before dismissing him. (xix–xx) After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Washington ordered the army to oversee the forced relocation of ethnic Japanese—both immigrant Issei and their American Nisei children—from the West Coast states to camps in the interior. The army then called on Nisei to leave their parents behind in the camps and serve in the war as Japanese linguists. The navy, for its part, simply refused to recruit Japanese Americans. When Nobuo Furuiye and other Nisei army linguists went to work in Hawaii at the US Navy Joint Intelligence Center Pacific Ocean Area (JICPOA), they were relegated to a "JICPOA Annex" located outside the base. (242–43) In Burma, a captured Japanese platoon leader in his interrogation denounced his military interrogator, Grant Hirabayashi, as a "traitor." (209)

The US Army's own program for training Japanese linguists was built on a prejudice of a kind: that the Japanese language was so difficult that only Japanese Americans and a handful of European Americans born and raised in Japan were suited for a crash course. Yet growing up with "kitchen" Japanese was no guarantee that a student could master standard written Japanese, let alone arcane Japanese military vocabulary (*heigo*) or the intricacies of Japanese shorthand "grass script" (*sosho*). Kazuo Komoto, a Kibei who had attended high school in Japan, in 1942 became valedictorian of the first MISLS Japanese class at Camp Savage, Minnesota, from which 117 Nisei and 12 white students graduated; nearly one in five students failed the course.

In the field, army linguist teams performed best in combinations that paired a Kibei with a Nisei raised and schooled entirely in the United States or a linguist strong in Japanese with a partner who excelled in English. On the Red Combat Team in Merrill's Marauders in Burma, for example, Grant Hirabayashi partnered with Hawaiian Nisei Eddie Mitsukado who, having never been to Japan, was only a "passable linguist." (181) The Higa brothers—Takejiro and Warren—also worked together for a similar reason. Takejiro was a top linguist, a Kibei who had attended school for years in Okinawa; brother Warren had only taken some Japanese lessons in Hawaii. (266)

On the front lines and in rear echelons, the Army's Nisei linguists went to work translating captured documents, interrogating prisoners, and otherwise proving useful. In Burma, Roy Matsumoto, serving with Merrill's Marauders deep behind enemy lines, intercepted Japanese military communications that led to the demolition of an enemy division's ammunition dump. In another case, he overhead Japanese soldiers discussing plans for a dawn raid on his platoon. Not only did Matsumoto warn his unit in time for a successful ambush but, at one point in the fight, he barked the military command to charge, which he remembered from his military training as a student in Japan, prompting the Japanese soldiers to rise to the attack and expose themselves to deadly American fire. (201) Before the Battle of Okinawa (April–June 1945), Takejiro Higa informed photo interpreters that what they took to be fortifications were in fact tombs. The only linguist in MIS fluent in the Okinawan language, Higa went on to save a number of civilian lives in the course of the battle by coaxing them in Japanese and Okinawan to abandon the caves where they were preparing to commit mass suicide and surrender. (340)

In an otherwise engaging and informative book, Henderson errs in writing that the several thousand Nisei who served on the Japanese side in the war did so with their language skills "largely unappreciated and unused." (83) In fact, Nisei who were studying and working in Japan played roles similar to those of the Kibei in MIS. Nisei in Japanese service interrogated Allied prisoners of war, translated documents, monitored radio broadcasts, intercepted pilot voice communications, and produced propaganda.[abc] James Wada, for example, like Tom Sakamoto and Nobuo Furuiye, attended Kyushu Gakuin. Unlike them, however, Wada stayed in Japan to attend

a. For the story of two Japanese-American voice interceptors on board the *Yamato*, see Tachibana Yuzuru. *Teikoku Kaigun shikan ni natta Nikkei Nisei* [*A Second-Generation Japanese-American Who Became an Officer of the Imperial Japanese Navy*] (Tsujiki Shokan, 1994).
b. Several Japanese Americans who monitored US radio broadcasts for the Japanese Foreign Ministry played leading roles after the war in establishing Japan's Radio Press monitoring service. See Tachibana, *Teikoku Kaigun*, 230.
c. For the Japanese-American role in Japan's communication intelligence efforts, see Torii Hideharu, *Nihon Rikugun no tsushin chohosen: Kitatama Tsushinjo no bojutashatachi* [*Communications Intelligence War of the Japanese Army: The Interceptors of the Kitatama Communications Station*]. Keyaki Booklet series (Keyaki Shuppan, 2011).

Meiji University. When war erupted, he volunteered for service in the Japanese navy, where he worked on communications intelligence.[a] *Bridge to the Sun* tells only one side of the Nisei intelligence contributions during the war.[b]

Bruce Henderson has written less a detailed intelligence history than an engaging story of six Kibei who in difficult times applied their exceptional talents in the war against Japan. He has mined everything from military histories to personal memoirs to provide intimate portraits of these six Japanese Americans as individuals. The numerous photographs of the Kibei as children and soldiers, of other Nisei linguists, and of senior Army officers complement the text and add value to the book. The story's epilogue, a moving account of Takejiro Higa meeting in Okinawa in 1995 a woman who had survived the horrible battle there thanks to him, ends the story on a high note. This is a book well worth reading.

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a. Takeda Kayoko. *Taiheiyo Senso. Nihongo choho senso. Gengokan no katsuyasku to shiren*, 17–20.

b. For another story of later Nisei contributions during the Korean War, see Yong Suk Lee's review of *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History* (Princeton University Press, 2019), by Monica Kim, in *Studies Intelligence* 66, no. 3 (*Extracts* – September 2022)