
The Round Tablette

Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)

Thursday, 14 March 2013

26:08 Volume 21 Number 8

Published by WW II History Round Table

Edited by Dr. Joe Fitzharris

www.mn-ww2roundtable.org

Welcome to the first March meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight, our talk is by a team of historians and veterans. Colonel (Professor) Edwin Nakasone and historians Stephen Osman and Will Williams will discuss MISLS training at Camp Savage and Fort Snelling, and Nisei service in World War II. Nisei Veterans will discuss their experiences.

In the summer of 1941, with war clouds looming on the Pacific horizon, the Army had no corps of Japanese language translators or linguists. Being able to understand the enemy and to “read his mail” is critical to success in war.

Lt. Col. John Weckerling and Capt. Kai E. Rasmussen, both having served as Assistant Military Attaches with the US Embassy in Tokyo, proposed the creation of a language school to teach military Japanese. With some reluctance and little confidence in their success, the War Department authorized their project and allocated \$2,000 to fund it.

The Fourth Army Intelligence School opened in an abandoned hanger at Crissy Field, on the Presidio Post in San Francisco on 1 November. Their classrooms were wide open spaces with boxes and crates serving as the furniture. A month later, the attack on Pearl Harbor made the need for linguists critical but also made recruiting a faculty difficult. Rasmussen found his director of training serving as an army mechanic repairing trucks at a motor pool in Los Angeles. John F. Aiso, a Harvard-trained lawyer was reassigned to the school, and was joined by Shigeya Kihara, Akira Oshida, and Tetsuo Imagawa who formed the core of the faculty.

The initial presumption that the Nisei (the children of immigrants) would already know Japanese was found to be false. Very few actually understood their parents’ language. Enrollment in the school broadened from

Nisei to include Caucasian students.

Initially, the goal was to teach the students to read, and translate Japanese, write using the cursive (soshō), how to do interpretation and to assist in interrogation of prisoners. The sixty students who started the 6 month course learned Japanese history, culture, economic and political development, geography, military organization, and map reading. They used captured documents, mimeographed textbooks and scrounged materials. Despite the rigors and hardships, 45 students graduated in the first class in May of 1942.

The graduates deployed to Guadalcanal and the Aleutian Islands, translating documents seized from enemy soldiers and outposts, and interrogating the few prisoners taken. The graduates were proving the worth of the school, but the virulently nasty anti-Japanese racism on the West Coast, and the implementation of Executive Order 9066, the Japanese Relocation Order, forced the school to abandon its quarters at the Presidio and move into the interior.

When approached by the army, Minnesota’s boy governor, Harold Stassen, welcomed the school. Several other Midwestern governors had already refused to accept the school and its “Japanese” students. Relocated to Camp Savage in Savage, Minnesota, site of the State’s home for indigent men, in May of 1942, the school began to grow. Rasmussen selected the somewhat remote site because it was close to a major military post – Fort Snelling, and to St. Paul and Minneapolis, where citizens accepted the Nisei with relatively little racist discrimination. By 1944, over 1,000 students were enrolled, greatly overwhelming the facilities at Camp Savage.

The War Department took the school under its direct jurisdiction and renamed it the Military Intelligence Service Language School. The school was moved to Fort Snelling with its veil of secrecy finally removed. Space became available in the barracks at the Fort following the decline in recruit processing after the full mobilization of 1943. For the next two years, Fort

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Snelling assumed a distinctly Japanese-American flavor.

The *Fort Snelling Bulletin* records this change as Nisei names and news stories dominated each weekly issue. Students operated a short-wave radio tuned to Tokyo, and sent regular intelligence reports to Washington, and published an alumni newsletter for graduates in the field. The former post sergeant major reported that the language students were well disciplined and highly motivated soldiers, but that he had to field a few complaints from other soldiers' wives about the strange smells of Japanese cooking in the married quarters.

In 1945 Chinese and Korean language courses were added to the six month and nine month curriculums. Of more interest was the activation of Women's Army Corps sections at Fort Snelling and their full assimilation into the school and post life.

After the German surrender, emphasis shifted to spoken Japanese and class work was extended into evenings and weekends, recognizing the critical need for combat translators. After the Japanese surrender the school emphasis again shifted to civil affairs Japanese. Graduates of the school had served with every front-line unit in the Orient, and many of the last of the school's 6,000 graduates working in civil affairs now played an integral part in moving Japan to democracy.

In June of 1946, the school moved from Fort Snelling – which closed shortly thereafter as an active military post – to Monterey, California and was renamed the U.S. Army Language School. In July or 1963, the school was renamed the Defense Language Institute, now the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, an internationally respected language school teaching over 40 languages ranging from Arabic to Uzbek.

Further Reading:

Edwin Nakasone, *Nisei Soldier: Historical Essays on World War II* (J-Press, 1997)
 Edwin Nakasone, *Nisei Soldier: Historical Essays on World War II and the Korean War*, 2nd ed. (J-Press, 1999)
 Edwin Nakasone, *Japanese American Veterans of Minnesota* (J-Press, 2001)
 Bill Yenne, *Rising Sons: The Japanese American GIs Who Fought for the United States in World War II* (Thomas Dunne, 2007)
 James C. McNaughton, *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service during World War II* (Military Bookshop, 2007)
 C. Douglas Sterner, *Go For Broke: The Nisei*

Warriors of World War II Who Conquered Germany, Japan, and American Bigotry (American Legacy, 2007)
 Minoru Masuda, Hana Masuda, and Dianne Bridgman, *Letters from the 442nd* (Univ. of Washington, 2008)
 Robert Asahina, *Just Americans: How Japanese Americans Won a War at Home and Abroad* (Gotham, 2006)
 Franklin S. Odo, *No Sword to Bury: Japanese Americans in Hawai'i During World War II* (Temple Univ. Press, 2004)

Announcements:

- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table** - March 19, 2013 Red River Campaign of 1864 - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
- St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table** - March. 25, 2013 Adm. Semmes & CSS Alabama - Steve Anderson - 715-386-1268 – rossandhaines@comcast.net
- Rochester WWII History Round Table** –507-280-9970; www.wv2roundtable-rochester.org
- Fort Snelling Civil War Symposium** 13 April 2013, <http://www.tccwrt.com/symposium.html> or tccwrt@yahoo.com

- Minnesota Military Museum**, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050, <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
- Air Show - Eden Prairie** - July, 13-14, 2013; <http://www.airexpo-mn.org/> - 952-746-6100
- Honor Flight** - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force** - www.cafmn.org or Bill at 952-201-8400
- Minnesota Air Guard Museum** - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523
- Friends of Ft. Snelling**, www.fortsnelling.com
- Fagen Museum** in Granite Falls, www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org. 320-564-6644
- World War II Weekend**, Historic Fort Snelling, 8-9 June 2013, <http://events.mnhs.org/calendar/index.cfm>
- Civil War Weekend**, Historic Fort Snelling, 17-18 August 2013, <http://events.mnhs.org/calendar/index.cfm>

Round Table Schedule 2013

- 28 Mar. WW2 in the Middle East
- 11 Apr. Mobilizing the National Guard in WW2
- 9 May Kampfgruppe Peiper at Malmedy

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Left, Japanese Translators, MHS 38957 <http://www.nps.gov/miss/historyculture/langschool.htm>
 Right, Edwin Nakasone at Ft. Snelling



Japanese-American Troops at Camp Savage, MHS 105048