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# The Round Tablette

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## Welcome to the second April session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speaker is Dr. James McNaughton, the author of *Nisei Linguists*. He will discuss the contributions the Military Intelligence Language School and its graduates to the war effort.

In the summer of 1941, with war clouds looming on the Pacific horizon, the Army had no 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 1941. 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 six-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 and a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, 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 Snelling assumed a distinctly Japanese-American flavor.

The *Fort Snelling Bulletin* recorded 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 command 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 if brief assimilation into the school and post life.

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**If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

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 played an integral part in moving Japan to democracy.

In June of 1946, the school moved from Fort Snelling – which shortly thereafter closed as an active military post – to Monterey, California and was renamed the U.S. Army Language School. In July of 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 READINGS:**





- 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)
- Scott McGaugh, *Honor Before Glory: The Epic World War II Story of the Japanese American GIs Who Rescued the Lost Battalion* (Grand Central Pub., 2016).
- Lyn Crost, *Honor by Fire: Japanese Americans at War in Europe and the Pacific* (Presidio Press, 1994).
- Masayo Duus and Peter Duus, *Unlikely Liberators: The Men of the 100th and 442<sup>nd</sup>* (University of Hawaii Press, 1987).
- Daniel James Brown, *Facing the Mountain: An Inspiring Story of Japanese American Patriots in World War II* (Viking, 2021).

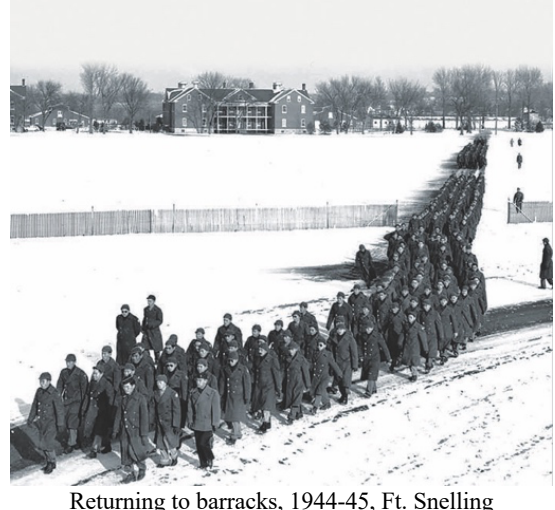
**Announcements:**

- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 19 May 2026– *Post-war Ordeals of Veterans*– [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) – e-mail: [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)
- Minnesota Military Museum**, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345. 320-616-6050. <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>.
- 8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, 2nd & 4th Wednesdays at 1100. <https://www.8thmn.org>.
- Friends of Ft. Snelling - [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)
- Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - [www.afmsp.org](http://www.afmsp.org)
- Friends of the National WW II Memorial – <http://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org.US>
- Pittsburg Veterans Breakfast Club - <http://www.vbcphg.org>.
- Western Naval Historical Association –[info@wnha.net](mailto:info@wnha.net)
- WWII Discussion Forum – [www.wwiidf.org](http://www.wwiidf.org)
- History Happy Hour - Sundays, 3 pm - [www.historyhappyhour.com](http://www.historyhappyhour.com)
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - [www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org)
- Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - [jkyser45@gmail.com](mailto:jkyser45@gmail.com)

**We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

**Round Table Schedule 2026**  
 12 May Eisenhower's Leadership  
**The Round Table is a 501(c)3 nonprofit.**  
**We would greatly appreciate your supporting the HCDWW2HRT.**

	
Col. John Weckerling	Col. Kai Rasmussen in IJA vehicle 1945
	
Pvts. Irene Tamigaki (left) and Akiko Mikami, 1945	Class entering Feb. 44



Returning to barracks, 1944-45, Ft. Snelling



Translator, War Crimes Trials, Tokyo

In Memoriam  
 Gary Heath,  
 18 April 1940-21 April 2026  
 Staff and Board Member,  
 2000 – 2026