

Deciphering the Rising Sun: Navy and Marine Corps Codebreakers, Translators, and Interpreters in the Pacific War

Roger Dingman. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009. xx, 340 pp., photos, maps, bibliography, index.

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Men and women who studied what seemed an impenetrable language in Colorado and Oklahoma contributed to victory over the Japanese Empire in the Second World War and to alliance with Japan during the Cold War. Roger Dingman, professor emeritus of history at the University of Southern California, tells in this book the story of the naval and Marine intelligence officers from the US Navy Japanese Language School at the University of Colorado at Boulder and at Oklahoma A&M College in Stillwater.¹ Dingman, who served for a time in the Navy before embarking on an academic career in Japanese history, describes with enthusiasm and in detail the lives of these language officers.

The heroes of Dingman's story at its outset are Lt. Cmdr. Arthur McCollum, chief of the Far East Section in the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI); ONI's Lt. Cmdr. Albert Hindmarsh; and Berkeley professor Florence Walne. McCollum early experienced what Dingman describes as a "divorce" with Harvard and a "honeymoon" at the University of California, Berkeley, in his first attempts in 1941—even before Pearl Harbor—to start crash programs to develop language officers for a Navy and Marine Corps that had no such specialists. The adept administration of Dr. Walne, the recruitment of such teachers as Berkeley's Dr. Chitoshi Yanaga, and the enrollment of top students made for a good start in California.² Washington's removal of Japanese immigrants and their families from the West Coast in 1942 forced the Berkeley program to relocate that year to Boulder.

¹ Students began studying at Boulder in 1942. The Navy opened the Stillwater campus shortly before the war's end, in 1945. By then, with the addition of Chinese, Malay, and Russian, the school was renamed the Navy School of Oriental Languages.

² Dr. Yanaga also served in the war at the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). See Mercado, "FBIS Against the Axis, 1941-1945," *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall-Winter 2001. As for Boulder's students, whereas the US Army recruited mostly Japanese Americans as language students for military intelligence, the Navy enrolled only European American students with top grades, many of whom were also born and raised in Japan. See Mercado's review of James C. McNaughton's *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service During World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2006), *Studies in Intelligence* 52, no. 4 (December 2008).

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In Colorado hundreds of men and women in waves struggled together week after week for a year or more over Japanese grammar and vocabulary in morning classes, then on their own during afternoons and evenings in preparation for dreaded Saturday examinations and the war looming beyond graduation. Leaving Boulder, the young language officers served in combat on Pacific islands and in the alphabet soup of intelligence offices in Honolulu and Washington. They interrogated prisoners, exploited captured documents, and deciphered coded communications. On Saipan, Griffith Way came across the complete order of battle for Japanese forces on the island, which Marine artillerymen used to pound enemy positions. In Washington, Boulder men broke codes at the Navy's Op-20-GY and Op-20-GZ units; Frank Mallory, for example, used a captured code book to recover and read cables of the Japanese naval attaché office in Berlin. Many Boulder women in Washington culled intelligence from captured material at ONI's translation section (OP-16-FE).

Challenged to prove their worth in the war's first years, Boulder's language officers hit their stride in the final actions against Japan. Increasingly numerous graduates gleaned ever more intelligence as Japanese combatants and civilians on the outskirts of the empire began surrendering in greater numbers and the early piles of captured documents grew to mountains as the US Navy advanced ever closer to the home islands. During April–June 1945, over 100 Boulder men served in the battle for Okinawa, the final major campaign against the Japanese Empire. Frank Gibney was one of the intelligence officers who interrogated the captured Colonel Yahara Hiromichi,³ chief of staff of the Japanese 32nd Army tasked with holding Okinawa.⁴ Other officers risked their lives, crawling into caves to coax frightened civilians and armed soldiers to surrender rather than kill themselves.

After 15 August 1945, when Tokyo broadcast its decision to cease fighting, language officers participated in surrender ceremonies throughout the Asia-Pacific region, worked in the repatriation of several million Japanese combatants and emigrants from Pacific islands and the Asian continent, joined in the investigation and prosecution of Japanese war crimes, and otherwise contributed to laying in occupied Japan the foundation for postwar ties between Washington and Tokyo. Their ability to communicate directly with the Japanese people helped to establish the occupation by easing local anxieties about the occupying forces. Many in turn found their battle-hardened images of their wartime enemy reversed. Edward Seidensticker found the behavior of Japanese in the rubble of Sasebo, where he served briefly in the occupation, so “beautiful” that he decided to put Japan at the center of his future career.

During the war and in the decades thereafter, Dingman explains, the US Navy's language officers constituted an extraordinary pool of talent in and out of government. Some continued careers in military intelligence. Others, “at least 20

³ Names of Japanese nationals in this review appear in their traditional order, surname preceding given name.

⁴ Gibney would later write an introduction and commentary for the translation of Colonel Yahara's account of the campaign, *The Battle for Okinawa* (New York: J. Wiley, 1995). Roger Pineau, one of the book's two translators, was another Boulder alumnus.

Boulder graduates,” worked in the Central Intelligence Agency or a predecessor organization. Roughly 60 served in the Department of State or one of its “ancillary organs.”⁵ Bryan Battey worked in the CIA before directing the American Cultural Center in Tokyo for the US Information Agency during most of the 1950s. Frank Gibney became a prominent journalist and writer, serving as vice president of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan and writing insightful books on Japan.⁶ Edward Seidensticker turned into a scholar and translator of Japanese literature, giving the world in 1976 a modern translation of the 11th century *The Tale of Genji* and influencing the awarding of the first Nobel Prize in Literature to a Japanese, the novelist Kawabata Yasunari.⁷ In history, political science, and sociology, too, former language students dominated their nascent fields to the point that Dingman calls them the “godfathers of Japanese studies.”⁸

As impressive as the text are the book’s photographs: a Boulder student up late at night, his copy of Ueda’s *Daijiten* dictionary before him; a Marine intelligence officer interrogating a prisoner on Guadalcanal; and Gibney and Seidensticker flanking Kawabata at a postwar party. Clear in these images is the contrast between the extraordinary talent developed in Boulder and its dearth before 1941. On the eve of Pearl Harbor, no American correspondent in Tokyo could read Japanese. Before the signing of the 1951 peace treaty in San Francisco, Gibney interviewed Prime Minister Yoshida in Japanese and drew on the insights to write a major article for *Life* magazine. Such talented alumni served the United States well in postwar relations with Japan until roughly the end of the Cold War, by which time most of their generation had passed away or retired.

Dingman’s intelligence history of the Second World War is a moving and relevant one for today’s readers. Today, to my knowledge, American correspondents in Tokyo cannot read Japanese. With the relative decline of language study in colleges since the late 1960s, Washington more than ever must maintain and expand programs similar to that of the Boulder school to meet the challenges of war and peace.⁹



⁵ Dingman counts six ambassadors and two assistant secretaries of state among the Navy’s former language students.

⁶ Among Gibney’s books are *Five Gentlemen of Japan* (1953) and *Japan: The Fragile Superpower* (1975).

⁷ Before awarding the prize to Kawabata in 1968, the jurists most likely read Seidensticker’s translations of three of the novelist’s works: *Snow Country* (1956), *Thousand Cranes* (1959), and *The Izu Dancer* (1965). Seidensticker then won a National Book Award in 1971 for his translation the previous year of Kawabata’s *The Sound of the Mountain*. Another giant in literary studies who graduated from Boulder was Donald Keene, who won recognition as arguably the foremost scholar of Japanese literature in the United States. Still another was Helen Craig McCullough, who became a prominent scholar of classical literature, known for such works as her 1988 translation of *The Tale of the Heike*.

⁸ Among such “godfathers” were John W. Hall, James Morley, Robert Scalapino, and Robert E. Ward.

⁹ Surveys of the Modern Language Association (www.mla.org) point to a fall in college language requirements after the 1960s. See also a recent study of the Center for Applied Linguists on the lagging efforts in US primary and secondary schools to teach foreign languages: http://www.cal.org/resources/pubs/fl_teaching.html