

## NISEI—EARS FOR THE GOVERNMENT

STEPHEN GREENE

A GROUP of young Japanese Americans working as radio monitors for the United States government was probably the most productive single source of information on Japan during the war.

For bravery and devotion to duty, the Nisei who fought through the bitter campaigns of North Africa, Italy, and the Pacific Islands have received a measure of the recognition due them. Unpublicized to date, however, has been the contribution of those fellow Americans of Japanese ancestry who worked for the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service in the "enemy territory" of the Pacific Northwest and kept official Washington posted on Japan's internal affairs for four years.

FBIIS was set up under the Federal Communications Commission early in 1941 to tap the radio news broadcasts of foreign nations. Germany and England already had such services, providing their governments with up-to-the-minute information on what other nations were saying and doing. It was at the suggestion of the State Department that the United States got a monitoring outfit of its own.

Information pipelines from Europe before the war were comparatively adequate. Not so much was known about what was going on in the Far East. Therefore, three months before Pearl Harbor, FBIIS sent to Portland, Oregon, its first field unit to listen to Radio Tokyo. Three young Japanese Americans, two of them sisters, became the government's first official ears on Tokyo.

When war broke out, this small staff, soon augmented by three more translators

and a skeleton staff of editors and clerical help, worked night and day to keep Washington apprised of developments within the enemy homeland. Bent over typewriters, earphones over their heads, they took notes in English on the news as it was broadcast in Japanese. Simultaneous recordings made it possible later on to get verbatim English texts of the most important material.

It was from these youngsters that America first learned, in translations of exulting Imperial Headquarters communiques, the details of successive allied defeats at Wake, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, Java.

When, early in 1942, the Army ordered the evacuation of the 110,000 persons of Japanese descent from the block of states on the Pacific seaboard that comprised the Western Defense Command, these half dozen Nisei translators were the only ones allowed to remain at large. They had no vacations for many months. They worked twelve-hour shifts, day and night, seven days a week. Their heaviest load was from 11 p.m. to 6:30 a.m., the period covering the cream of Japan's broadcasting day. When government executives gave a series of speeches, the translators would work for fourteen or sixteen hours, struggle home for a few hours' sleep, then return to the office for another stint. A lot of speeches were being given in Tokyo those days.

As monitors, these young men and women had to have good ears and a thorough knowledge of the several grades of the Japanese language, admittedly one of

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the most difficult spoken languages today. With one exception they all had had the much-needed experience of living in Japan and knowing the background of its customs.

Satoru Sugimura, less than thirty, had earned a college degree in Japan, another in Honolulu, had worked for our embassy in Tokyo, and knew Japanese law. For his pioneer work with an FBIS unit which serviced CINCPAC on Guam, he was later recommended by FBIS to be the recipient of the rare Navy citation for distinguished civilian service.

Frank Nakayama had spent eighteen years in Japan. When he returned to America, he had to start grammar school in the first grade because of his lack of English. In six years he had been graduated from the University of Washington and had started work on his graduate thesis on the influence of Buddhism on the writings of Emerson. He was the literary expert on the FBIS team.

Another young man, Jun Okazaki, had been in business in Japan, knew something of the devious nature of Japanese economy. One Nisei girl, Kazuko Higuchi, had gone to Oberlin and Bryn Mawr, had edited an encyclopedia of art in Japan, and handled items dealing with Oriental culture. Because of their varied backgrounds, these translators were among those constantly turned to by government offices for clarification and interpretation of what was happening in the mysterious land of the enemy.

"But how can they be trusted not to falsify their translations?" was a question asked by outsiders.

In the first place these government employees were subjected to a fivefold loyalty check, undergoing scrutiny by the Civil Service Commission, Army and Navy Intelligence, the FBI, and, in the case of the later arrivals in Portland, the War Relocation Authority. Then, from the me-

chanical standpoint, as many as three translators would work on the same broadcast, voluntarily checking one another's work for accuracy.

The final and most obvious answer by those who worked alongside the Nisei— if not the most convincing to the skeptic—was to cite the quality of their work, their consistent willingness to do just a little more when more was needed despite splitting headaches and jangled nerves, the occupational ills of the monitor. In my four years' experience with FBIS, I did not meet any civilians who could top these members of the Japanese-language staff for patriotism and good citizenship in day-in, day-out service to the country.

As the United States forces took the offensive in the Pacific, the demand for news from within Japan increased. An instantaneous wire teletype system carried the translated material from Portland to the Washington office of FBIS, and thence to the State, War, and Navy departments, the Office of Strategic Services, the Office of War Information (which was the outlet for FBIS material to press and radio), and a dozen other government offices that wanted what these youngsters had to offer and wanted it quickly. Admiral Nimitz ordered a special service set up to get immediate Japanese radio reaction to his naval operations. Tops in speed was achieved when a flash announcement from Tokyo—Tojo's resignation as premier, say—would appear in bulletin form on the FBIS ticker in the Pentagon building in Washington four minutes after the Japanese announcer had first made the news public in Tokyo.

The most valuable of this information was not what Tokyo was telling its listeners overseas; it was the broadcasts addressed directly to the people of Japan: announcements of new regulations cur-

tailing homefront privileges, pleas with labor to work harder and to the Japanese housewife to buy less and save more. This material, beamed mediumwave by the Broadcasting Corporation of Japan to the people in the nation's larger cities, was simultaneously sent shortwave to Japanese satellite stations on the Asiatic mainland for local rebroadcast to Japanese listeners there. These shortwave point-to-point broadcasts provided the most meaty of the FBI's intercepted radio intelligence.

This monitored material was put to a thousand uses. OWI, for example, was primarily interested in it for its counter-propaganda value. If it knew from other sources that a prominent Japanese puppet leader in China had been assassinated, and it learned from the FBI's monitors that Tokyo had made no mention of this to its own people, then OWI would broadcast this fact back to the Japanese, pointing out that their own government had not seen fit to release the information. The Foreign Economic Administration, whose secret reports helped the Chiefs of Staff to choose strategic bomber targets, wanted all information pointing to bottlenecks in production or exploitable weaknesses in Japanese economy. The Office of Censorship followed Tokyo broadcasts closely to discover how Tokyo got information from America when it did. If our Secretary of State made an announcement at noon, and the Japanese radio was commenting on it an hour later, Censorship would check up to see how the information reached Japan so quickly. Or perhaps Radio Tokyo, one evening, praised the heroism of a certain Colonel Masao Watanabe during a U.S. raid on Okinawa. If the Army knew that Colonel Watanabe was an officer of an infantry regiment last heard from in Manchuria, this little item, monitored by the Japanese Americans in Portland, provided the final piece in the jigsaw puzzle which

enabled intelligence officers to locate a missing enemy division.

The boys in Portland monitored the Japanese announcement in May, 1943, of the death of Admiral Yamamoto, when the Tokyo announcer broke down and wept. They monitored detailed reports of Japanese Diet proceedings in January, 1944, which pointed to transportation, industrial production, and food as Japan's greatest weaknesses at home, an early bit of useful intelligence borne out by developments in later months. From the Portland station came the first news of Japan's acceptance of the allied surrender terms.

What kind of life did these Japanese Americans live outside the office in a community fundamentally anti-Japanese? They had to undergo privations, of course. They were restricted to a zone extending six miles from the center of the city of Portland. They had to wear at all times badges provided by the Army explaining their presence. They were several times reported by jittery citizens and one was once picked up by the police.

But for the most part they lived fairly normal lives. Portland is no cosmopolitan San Francisco, but neither is it a hotbed of racial feeling like Hood River, Oregon, or some California communities. The Portlanders knew they were in a badly defended coastal area, and it made them nervous. Many who had not had friends among the Japanese Americans before the war probably agreed with General John L. DeWitt, then ranking Army man on the West Coast, when he proclaimed that "a Jap's a Jap" regardless of nationality or loyalties. The monitors were subjected to a good deal of talk about "the dirty Japs," particularly following the periodic releases of atrocity stories. None enjoyed living in Portland.

On the other hand, the monitors'

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neighbors were usually friendly once they had learned these Nisei were engaged in government work: the little Sensei (third generation youngsters) played with the neighbors' children, the housewives visited over the back fence, the men consulted one another about their gardens.

None of the monitors was involved in an "incident" of any consequence. They kept pretty much to themselves, and when noticed at all on the street they were usually taken for Chinese or Filipinos. When asked if they were of Japanese extraction they readily admitted it. One young translator got tired of being taken for what he was not and made a practice of eating at Chinese restaurants, where he was most sure to be recognized as a Nisei.

"So what if my parents came from Japan?" he would say. "I'm a good American."

In the office they were the *raison d'être* and of course knew it, but they gave an exquisite exhibition of taste and good office manners: no swank or side, nor on the other hand any attempt to placate. They worked like fiends at their jobs. They gave their blood to the Red Cross, bought quantities of government bonds. Monitor Lois Nanbara even collected used staples and was able to send a ten-pound box of them to the scrap metal drive. They were proving their patriotism at a time when part of the U.S. population would have denied them citizenship.

Countless small things were constant indications of their partisanship. It was "We sank a Japanese carrier"—or, more frequently, a "Jap" carrier. They considered the press cartoons of hissing Japanese very funny and went around the office, for a time, saying "So sorry, please" when they made a mistake. Even the rallying cry of all Nipponese radio speakers—that more planes or guns or food should be turned out "in order to set the

mind of his Imperial Majesty at ease"—lent itself to endless, and not always polite, office burlesque.

As the war progressed and U.S. troops neared Tokyo, FBIS units moved up behind them as quickly as communications facilities could be made available. For the nearer the monitors were to the stations they were listening to, the better the reception. Late in 1942, a station was set up in San Francisco to relieve Portland of most of its non-Japanese-language Asiatic coverage. Press code dispatches, intercepted in Portland, were transmitted in the original Japanese to Washington, D.C., where a crack Nisei crew translated them. A large monitoring post was set up in Kauai, in the Hawaiian Islands, and a smaller one on Guam. By the end of the war, FBIS Nisei monitors heard the Emperor announce the capitulation to his people from desolate Iwo Jima, not five hundred miles from the enemy capital.

The three who had been the nucleus of the first monitoring unit had increased to more than fifty; the small trickle of information relayed in the first days of war grew to a flood of thousands of words daily. Nisei, first used by FBIS only as translators and monitors, were later hired, on their record, as stenographers, copy-readers, editors, and analysts.

A hard-bitten FBIS division chief in Washington summed up the government attitude: "If all the men I hired could do as good work in three months as these Nisei kids did in their first three weeks, we could let half of the staff go."

A newspaper man with experience in Japan, Paris, and London, Stephen Greene was in charge of the Portland office of the FBIS from December '42 through June '44, and at various times in charge of FBIS bureaus in Denver, Guam, and (at war's end) Iwo Jima.

## SO TO SPEAK

CHRISTOPHER KILMER

Now that we (God Bless America with expression of lofty but unfelt  
sentiment)  
have rescued the European minorities,  
have driven oppression from the face of Asia  
(to a certain and very limited extent),  
have destroyed forever (in remote localities)  
the idea of race supremacy,  
have "guaranteed" the safety of foreign Jews,  
have driven fearful monsters from the earth,  
now let us look around.

Let us cluckingly regard the Indian  
(God, no, not the American—the other one)  
and see how he is mistreated;  
let us weep copiously for the Arab  
(and again for his tattooed women)  
and say this condition should not be tolerated;  
let us look at these pictures  
and let us assure ourselves that these things must be rectified.

But let us not (forever let us not)  
through inadvertence  
through accident  
through carelessness  
through silliness  
through wantonness  
through decency—  
let us never see our Negro,  
let us never see our Jew.

"Ah, I thought so. I knew it was some damned radical."

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