



## *Bridge to the Sun: The Secret Role of the Japanese Americans Who Fought in the Pacific in World War II* by Bruce Henderson.

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Bruce Henderson's book on the Nisei soldiers who served in the Pacific is an example of popular military history at its best. *Bridge to the Sun* tells the story of the thousands of Nisei—second-generation Japanese-American—men who served in the Pacific theater during World War II. While some aspects of the Japanese-American experience in the war have been amply covered in recent years, the work of these translators and interrogators has been largely overlooked. There are now many books on the internment of the 120,000 Japanese-Americans residents of the West Coast, two-thirds of them citizens, and tourists can visit the site of one camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. The exploits of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, an all Japanese-American unit that fought in Europe, have also been well documented. But over three thousand Nisei served in the Pacific, from the landing on Guadalcanal to the occupation of Japan. Fifty-five of them died in service.

Henderson makes this history accessible to a general audience by personalizing it. He focuses on six men, telling their life stories from birth to death, with a concentration on their wartime experiences. The book flows both chronologically from Executive Order 9066, which decreed the rounding up of the Japanese-Americans—including some of the men in the book, but not those already in uniform—to the Japanese surrender on the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay (2 Sept. 1945). It also moves across the ocean, from Guadalcanal to the final, bitter, struggle on Okinawa.

Even before the war, the US military, knowing it needed hundreds, if not thousands, of people able to read and speak Japanese, had set up a Japanese language school in San Francisco. The first students were Nisei who had been drafted into the Army. But the most valuable of these students, and almost all of the individuals portrayed in the book, were men had either grown up in Japan, or been sent back as adolescents to attend high school there. The latter were *kibei*, people born in the United States but educated in Japan. One of them, Thomas Sakamoto, ended up on the *Missouri* during the surrender ceremony:

After his four years in Japan (1934–38), which ended with his turning down an appointment as a probationary officer in the Imperial Japanese Army before his return to America (his parents had sent him a boat ticket and a new suit for the journey home), Tom read, wrote and spoke Japanese like a native, yet he had not been away so long as to forget his English. Linguistically, he was the best of both worlds, fluent in Japanese but able to write cogent reports in English, the perfect combination sought by the Military Intelligence Service, which was why he was assigned to teach the top language section at Camp Savage. Even so, once classes started he was surprised that some of the soldiers he was teaching were even more fluent than he was in reading and writing kanji, which gives a Japanese definition to nearly half of the some fifty thousand Chinese ideographs. Other than scholars, few people in Japan had memorized the approximately twenty thousand characters in use. In fact, knowing the three thousand or so most common ideographs ensured that a person could read a newspaper without referring to a dictionary. Tom's best students were *kibei* who had spent

more years in Japan than he had. However, some of them had been away from the U.S. for so long that they struggled with English. (85)

The kibe were crucial to their intelligence mission because they possessed skills not even the best European-American graduates of the Camp Savage school could match. For instance, they could read *sosho* (cursive handwriting). While Nisei and other graduates of the school could read military documents American troops captured by the ton, Americans also found thousands of diaries on the corpses of Japanese soldiers. These often contained useful intelligence. Kibe could also recognize regional dialects, and one anecdote in *Bridge to the Sun* recounts how a kibe was able to determine that he was facing Japanese soldiers from a particular unit recruited in one region of Japan.

Henderson includes long accounts of exciting combat: Roy Matsumoto fighting on the frontlines in Burma with Merrill's Marauders, and the two Higa cousins serving in Okinawa, where they had spent their childhood. He stresses the irony of men whose parents, siblings, and fiancées were being held behind barbed wire, guarded by troops wearing the same uniforms they were, as they helped defeat Japan. He tells the story of the internment camps well and includes the racism these families suffered before and during the war at the hands of everyone from state governors down to fellow soldiers.

A welcome feature of the writing is the author's frequent use of quotes from the six men. Though all of them lived long lives after the war, they had all died before Henderson started writing. Fortunately, they had recorded extensive oral histories. The author has made good use of these, having interviewed their children and backgrounded each chapter with thorough, accurate histories of the events. This work is reflected in the material at the end of the book: though there are few footnotes, sources are listed for each chapter. There is a bibliography and a complete Roster of Nisei Veterans.

The many photos in *Bridge* come from the Army and the men's families. One unusual shot shows Grant Hirabayashi interrogating Korean "comfort women," "captured" in Burma. Their ordeal in the Japanese army is explained in detail. Another surprising passage concerned Hirabayashi: just months before the end of the war, the author interrogated a Japanese army officer who boasted of having worked on an "atomic bomb." None of the other American officers the Nisei consulted knew what he was talking about, nor was "cyclotron" in his dictionaries.

*Bridge to the Sun* is not a perfect book. It lacks an overall assessment of how important the Nisei's work—translating documents, interrogating prisoners, alerting their comrades—was to American success. On the other hand, there is no effort to exaggerate their significance, a common problem in popular works of military history. In short, Bruce Henderson has produced an engaging, accurate book that respects both the Japanese-Americans, and their foe.