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Learning the Enemy's Language: U.S. Navy Officer Language Students in Japan, 1920 – 1941

*Richard Bradford,
West Virginia University Institute of
Technology*

It could be a scene from a 1940s Humphrey Bogart or Jimmy Cagney film. A lone American naval officer stands at the ticket window of a steamship company in Japan, trying to book passage for himself and fellow officers out of Japan. But his efforts are stymied. Someone in the Japanese bureaucracy knows that the Americans have skills valuable to their country in the event of war. The American is frustrated, knowing time is running out. Then, from somewhere, a female voice says, Tex, what are you doing here? He turns and sees a beautiful Swedish girl, (it could be Ingrid Bergman) who is married to a German businessman considered one of the leading Nazi spies in the Far East. This scene is near the conclusion of the story. What is going on? To continue the movie analogy, we must flashback twenty years for the answer.

The men in question were American naval officers assigned to learn the Japanese language. The navy sent its first language officers to Tokyo in 1910, two 1906 Naval Academy graduates. Thereafter, except during the world war, a new officer was assigned each year. One of the first two language students resigned from the navy, but Lt. Fred Rogers completed the program and began a ripple effect of attracting men to Japanese language study for the next thirty years.

In 1913, Rogers was indirectly responsible for creating an interest in Japanese in a man who would become one of the Navy's key Japanese linguists and intelligence officers, Ellis P. Zacharias. As Zacharias remembered the event years later, he had been an ensign aboard the battleship Virginia. At lunch one day he heard Rogers, the mess treasurer, order a Japanese steward to hurry up and serve lunch. What impressed Zacharias was that he did it in Japanese. Later, in spite of his description of the difficulties of mastering the language, Rogers's stories of life in Japan fired the young ensign's desire to learn Japanese. But there seemed no chance of being assigned language duty.

Following the First World War priorities changed. The navy resumed sending men for language instruction, and Fred Rogers was on the selection committee. He must have

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remembered Zacharias's interest, for he sent his erstwhile shipmate a cable asking if he was still interested in the Tokyo assignment. The answer was affirmative. With that, a new era began in language instruction for U.S. Naval officers.^[1]

Zacharias's interest in the program was typical of the way many officers came to language duty, they met someone who had been in Tokyo, or some veteran of the program thought they showed promise as linguists. Zacharias not only was the inspiration for William J. Sebald requesting language duty, but he proposed Joseph Rochefort for the program after having served with him in Washington.^[2] Forrest R. Biard was influenced by his friend, William J. Finnegan, who was about to go on language duty.^[3] Henri Smith-Hutton became interested in learning Japanese due to rising international tensions in the Far East in the 1920s.^[4] Edwin Layton entered somewhat unintentionally. While serving on battleship duty, he was one of the hosts of a visiting delegation of Japanese midshipmen. Layton discovered most of them could speak English, while none of the Americans could speak Japanese. He sent a brash letter to the Navy Department arguing that the U.S. Navy needed translators, and offering to learn the language himself. An official reply pointed out the existence of such program, and in 1929, along with Rochefort, Layton was on his way to Japan.^[5]

Until the mid-1920s instruction was a hit or miss affair. One officer remembered that he asked the Chief Naval Attaché how to go about learning the language. The Attaché replied that it should be a cinch because, in Japan, everybody spoke Japanese, which brings to mind Mark Twain's remark that in France, even children spoke French.

Usually, an officer already in Tokyo made arrangements for a new man to begin study. In the early twenties Ellis Zacharias had two teachers, three or four hours a day. The course had a particularly difficult grammar written by a German. Language students at that time learned to read by using Japanese children's readers of the type used in public schools. Smith-Hutton, who was a comparatively experienced linguist, thought it a poor system because children could already speak Japanese, so the readers were ill suited for adults who did not know the language.^[6] But the method of instruction was about to change.

Fortunately, a new instructor, Naoe Naganuma, became the *sensi*, or teacher, and head of the program. He was a graduate of Tokyo Commercial University, married to an American, and an experienced linguist. He had been the assistant to a British language expert whom the Ministry of Education had invited to Japan.^[7] Naganuma, like Smith-Hutton, was dissatisfied with the method of language instruction. He liked the Berlitz method of learning by speaking and decided to apply it to the teaching of Japanese. He asked Smith-Hutton if he would be his Guinea pig for the course and the American agreed.^[8]

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In Smith-Hutton, Naganuma had the ideal pupil for this type of instruction. The Lieutenant's mother was French Canadian and he had grown up speaking French. He mastered Spanish at the Naval Academy. In short, he had a flair for languages and learned rapidly. Naganuma later told another language officer that Smith-Hutton was the best student he ever had.^[9]

Naganuma's method was to teach in what Smith-Hutton considered the natural way. . . a child uses to learn to talk to always explain the entire lesson in Japanese, to never use English, to introduce two or three new words and phrases in a paragraph and then to repeat them over and over again until the pronunciation as well as the use was easily recognized. He would prepare a series of questions, very similar, but with one or two words changes so that the questions, and the changes, were repeated time and again, so there would be ten new words in each lesson. The students would talk for half an hour, like children when they learn or hear words for the first time. Writing Japanese was a combination of learning those sentences and then every day learning how to write them using a new series of characters. Smith-Hutton thought the whole process was a natural method that avoids long grammatical explanations.¹⁰ Smith-Hutton considered Naganuma a very severe and critical of any mistakes. But the result was that Smith-Hutton became as expert as an American could be in pronunciation and usage. A few years later Edwin T. Layton found Naganuma's method relatively painless, since Japanese is one of the easier languages to comprehend in simple spoken form, although none is more difficult to read and write.¹¹

Secretary Eugene Dooman and the other embassy experts were astonished at the progress. As a result of Smith-Hutton's success Naganuma's courses were in great demand. He hired several assistants to teach Japanese to Navy, State Department and Army language officers. With the Naval Attaché's permission, since the Americans had paid for them, he used his materials in other courses.

Naganuma also recognized the value of motion pictures for language study. After his pupils understood enough conversational Japanese, Naganuma took them to the theater. By the time Edwin Layton arrived in Japan in 1929, Hollywood was undergoing a sound revolution, but the Japanese were still showing American silent films. Each motion picture house had a *benshi*, a movie interpreter, on a dais beside the screen. They served as human subtitles, giving the gist of the action in colloquial Japanese. After watching the same film time and again, Layton believed, conversation came easier to the American students.¹²

Some students tried living outside Tokyo, where they could avoid contact with fellow Americans, and immerse themselves in Japanese. The Chief Attaché gave permission to live where they wished, so long as the embassy knew their address. Ellis Zacharias may

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have been the first to do this, removing to the seaside town of Zushi. Later officers continued the custom. The army's language students, like Lt. Sidney Mashbir, Zacharias's friend, followed suit. Edwin Layton went to the isolated coastal town of Beppu, four hundred miles from the capital. He hired one of Naganuma's instructors to go with him to Odawara, a coastal village two hours south of Tokyo. About the time he was settling in, the U.S. Hydrographic Office learned that the *Japanese Coast Pilot*, had been completely revised. This was detailed description of the entire seacoast, including lighthouses, buoys, harbors, piers, and superb directions for ships to navigate the coast and enter ports safely. The Hydrographic office asked the U.S. Naval Attaché in Tokyo to have the *Pilot* translated into English and they turned to Smith-Hutton. ¹³

At first he was reluctant to undertake the work because of the length of time it would require. His language instructor worked out a system whereby he would read the book sentence by sentence. Incredibly, the Japanese Navy not only knew he was working on the *Pilot*, but offered to help him. Soon the American was making the translation into English as fast as he could. Writing three hours a day, seven days a week, he finished the project in six months. ¹⁴

Smith-Hutton was not the last language student to use the *Pilot*. It became something of a student textbook for practical Japanese. For the remainder of the Tokyo language programs life, officers continued working on the *Pilot* up to the final group in 1941.

Perhaps thanks to Smith-Hutton's success, and changing Japanese - American relations, beginning in 1927 the Navy began to show more interest in the program. It had been policy to send only one navy officer a year for language instruction. That increased to three naval officers and one marine officer each year for a three-year course. The State Department and Army continued sending officers, with the Army sending twice as many as the Navy. The Army permitted married men to go on language duty, while the navy sent only bachelors on the assumption they would have more time to devote to learning. Some navy men questioned the policy's wisdom, but there were only three exceptions (one of them being Joseph Rochefort) made to the rule during the inter-war period. In the 1920's, Japanese and American relations were strained over several issues: discrimination against Japanese citizens, restrictions on Japanese immigration, and the Washington Arms Limitation Conference. Japanese were openly resentful. One brand of cigarettes popular with the Japanese Navy was called Five-Five-Five. The numbers were the Japanese goal for the ratio of capital ships between themselves, the United States and Britain, rather than the 5-5-3. 5, their diplomats accepted.

Regardless of politics, the language students were not expected to moonlight as intelligence agents. Indeed, they were warned against doing anything that could be interpreted as spying. According to Edwin T. Layton, the Naval Attaché welcomed the 1929 students with a blunt message, Layton, I don't know anything about this language,

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but I understand its difficult. ... You only have two duties to perform: One, study and master the Japanese language; two, stay out of trouble. If you fail in either, I'll send you home in the next ship. You are not to engage in any spying or other espionage activity. Don't think of yourself as some Nathan Hale, or anything like that. Keep your nose clean. Oh, yes, payday is once a month. Other than that I don't want to see you. Goodbye. A similar warning, but with a friendlier voice came from the Assistant Attaché, Arthur H. McCollum, who advised that they should never engage in anything that could be construed as intelligence activity.¹⁵

It was good advice, particularly after 1937. Until that year, language officers were covered by diplomatic immunity. Then, a Japanese-language officer in the United States was apprehended for spying and both nations dropped the students' diplomatic status. The loss of this safeguard came just when the United States stood in need of more information about Japan. By 1939, although the embassy was still cautioned against espionage, the language officers were being told if they had any information, to bring it in.¹⁶

Japanese security forces tried to entrap foreigners. On occasion, an officer would be offered secret information regarding Japanese armed forces. They would soon find their opposite was an agent who was quick to make their actions known and to embarrass the United States. In the early 1920s the U.S. military attaché in Tokyo was one casualty of this intermittent spy game when he foolishly accepted sensitive papers from a Japanese national, and then did not report it.¹⁷

The Americans were not unaware that they needed to do more in the intelligence area. In 1921 Captain Edward Watson, the chief naval attaché, was concerned with establishing a network in Japan that, in case of war, would supply information to the United States. He enlisted the support of Lt. Zacharias, who in turn went to another language student Army Captain Sidney Mashbir, who had considerable experience in intelligence work during the First World War. According to Zacharias's memoirs Mashbir produced an exceptional plan for conducting intelligence in wartime. But the so-called AM-Plan would never be put into operation. Mashbir ran afoul of jealousy in his own area. As an army officer, he was responsible to the Military Attaché, but was now working for the Naval Attaché, which displeased his superior. That gentleman announced, I can't see anything new in this. Captain Watson, then sent the plan on to the Navy Department in Washington. Shortly afterward, Watson moved on to other duties, and the plan lost its most important booster. Zacharias and Mashbir were too junior to support the M-Plan, and both men returned to studying Japanese grammar.

The students knew that they were under surveillance in Tokyo, although they were seldom interfered with. When they left the city, plain-clothes detective would follow, and occasionally harass them. If the officers' recollections are correct, it would seem the Japanese police needed better training in tailing people, because the Americans invariably

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spotted them. Some students made a game out of being followed. Edwin Layton had his personal spy when he was living in Beppu, who became a particular nuisance, trailing Layton and questioning his servant. Layton retaliated by going into bars, then leaving before his shadow had finished his drink. Finally Layton offered a deal. He confronted him and said, stop pestering me, and I'll not leave the bar until you finish your beer. But don't hang around my house. The policeman was a beer lover who decided it was an offer he could not refuse.¹⁸

Americans could be useful to the Japanese in their internal struggles. Edwin T. Layton was in his last year of language study when the Japanese Premier Inukai was assassinated. Layton was drinking in Tokyo's Florida Dance Hall when a Japanese deliberately knocked over his glass of beer. The other customers watched the Americans reaction. Layton kept his temper, and simply ordered another beer. The tough repeated his performance and this time Layton knocked him down and challenged him to a fight. The man did not reply, he was unconscious. Layton dropped his calling card on his body and left.

The purpose of the incident became clear when the Japanese police visited him next morning. They showed the American a photo of the man he had knocked down and questioned him about the affair. Layton confirmed it took place in the dance hall the previous night. To his surprise he later received a letter of thanks from the thug. The police were trying to connect the man with the assassination. Unwittingly, Layton had served as his alibi. Layton thought the man could be used as an intelligence source but he took no action. Instead, given the frequent warnings against spying he concentrated on language study and stayed away from Japanese politics.

That was an increasingly wise decision in the 1930s, given the deterioration in U.S.-Japanese relations. In the mid-1930s, a wave of spy scares began in Japan which continued up to the outbreak of war. Newspapers carried sensational reports of spies of a certain foreign power being arrested. Often the stories spoke of them being aided by Japanese women who often, if the papers can be believed, were given warnings and let go out of consideration for women being susceptible to temptation. That must be listed as among the few breaks Japanese women received in the decade.¹⁹

The worsening relations and increased danger of spying, paradoxically, seemed to make the effort all the more worthwhile. Although they did not know it, the men who arrived in Tokyo in 1939 would be the last language class of the pre-war years. In that group was the Texan Forrest R. Biard had just completed duty in small boat development that had nearly cost him his life. Japan did not seem too hazardous by comparison.

Biard arrived in Japan on September 27, 1939. War in Europe was less than a month old. He soon met Mr. Naganuma, and like his predecessors was impressed by the man

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and his teaching methods. As soon as Biard mastered enough grammar, he went to work updating the *Pilot*.²⁰

The young lieutenant was an interested observer of the foreign communities mores. The British, American and French in Tokyo were close, at least prior to fall of France in June 1940. The American Embassy in Tokyo continued to employ Japanese civilians. Biard once had to go there after hours to get something from a restricted room. The Japanese night guard was suspicious of him, but after seeing his credentials let him in.

There, Biard saw lots of secret messages, codes, etc. lying around. He reported it the next day and all hell broke loose. Biard received the standard warning against spying, but that did not preclude trying to gain information that was in the public domain. When the Japanese were ready to launch a new class battleship in Nagasaki, Biard decided to attend.²¹

Outside Tokyo he knew he was followed by plain-clothes police, but he thought they were easy to spot. When they reached a town where they had to change trains Biard saw that his shadows had not only lost him, but could not find their replacements, who he had already noticed. He went up to them and, in essence, introduced one group to the other. They, of course, denied they were following him. When they reached Nagasaki they asked if he intended to stay in town. When he responded yes, they told him all the hotels were full. He asked them if they would just clean out a cell in one of their jails, he would spend the night there. They responded negatively. Instead, they left him at a Japanese Inn on the outskirts of the town. After the helpful policemen left, Biard went out for a time. When he got back the inn keeper came to him holding a small boy by the ear, saying, this stupid boy picked up your brief case by the small things, meaning one of the zippers, which was broken. Biard knew the police had been tampering with his case while he was out, had broken one of the zippers and were now trying to disguise it by blaming it on the child.

Next day Biard tried to attend the battleship launching. Again, he was foiled when the Japanese erected a sheet in front of the ship so he could not get a look at it. But he would have his turn.

By the summer of 1941 everyone expected war between Japan and the United States. Representatives of Hollywood motion picture companies left Japan that spring, as did Hugh Byas, a foreign correspondent in Japan for over twenty years. The army pulled out its language students. By August 1941 the Navy Department was ready to do the same.

The navy language students were in their summer retreat at Karuizawa. The embassy sent word they were all to return to Tokyo to prepare to leave the country. Officers were assigned different tasks and Biards was to stand in line at the shipping office to procure

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tickets. But the Japanese, apparently, were having second thoughts about these men returning to America. For three days Biard stood in line, only to hear again and again that there was nothing available.

Then he heard a woman's voice say Tex, what are you doing here? It was a Swedish woman, who was married to a representative of a German company, who Biard considered the number one German spy in the Far East. As luck would have it, however, the lady hated both her husband, and the Nazis. But, her position as wife to an important agent of Japan's ally gave her considerable influence.

Biard told her his troubles. She replied that she had a suite booked on a ship leaving for Shanghai, but she had come to cancel. He could have it. They went up to the window and she told the ticket seller the Americans could have her suite. Immediately the window came down and the office closed for thirty minutes. Behind the closed window there must have been frantic phone calls taking place, but they knew who the lady was. Finally, they reopened, and gave Biard the tickets he had been after for three days. Even so, some of the navy men were virtually smuggled aboard that night. They had a relatively uneventful trip to Shanghai, and from there to the United States.

The previous twenty years of language training was put to good use by the Americans in the war years. Biard believed that had the last contingent failed to get out of Japan the United States would have had a severe shortage of qualified Japanese linguists. Those men would take charge of interrogation, radio interception and many other duties in the course of the war. Certainly without the Navy, Army and State Department linguists, the conduct of the war would have been more difficult. The United States had a few Japanese speakers, mainly ex-missionaries, and of course, the Neisi, second generation Japanese. Their valuable services, however, were not fully used due to wartime distrust. There is also the claim that the Neisi spoke a Japanese diluted by a generation in America, less pure than the language officers learned in Tokyo.

Certainly, one need consider only a few of the names of former language students to note their impact in the war. Rochefort at Midway, Layton in intelligence, Forrest Biard, who particularly skilled at interrogation, Zacharias, the Army's Mashbir, who became chief of translators under General MacArthur, to recognize that the twenty year experience in Japan paid off. And to that list, one must add the name of the master teacher, Naeo Naganuma, who Smith-Hutton, Biard and other said, did as much as any American to win the war for the United States.

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^[1]. Captain Ellis M. Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1946), 16–20.

^[2]. The Reminiscences of Captain Joseph J. Rochefort, U.S. Navy (retired). U.S. Naval Institute Archives (USNI), 57–58.

^[3] Author interview with Captain Forrest R. Biard, U. S. N. Navy (Retired), July 12, 1999.

^[4]. The Reminiscences of Captain Henri Smith–Hutton, US. Navy (Ret.) USNI, 58–60.

^[5]. Rear–Admiral Edwin T. Layton, U.S.N. (Ret.), *And I Was There: Pearl Harbor and Midway – Breaking the Secrets* (NY: William Morrow 1985), 25.

^[6] Smith–Hutton, 57.

⁷ The Reminiscences of Ambassador William J. Sebald. USNI 90; Biard Interview, July 12, 1999.

^[8] Smith–Hutton Reminiscences, 58.

^[9] Biard Interview, July 12, 1999.

¹⁰ Smith–Hutton, 59.

¹¹ Layton, 40

¹² Layton, 40.

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¹³ Smith–Hutton, 67.

¹⁴ Smith–Hutton, 68.

¹⁵ Layton, 39.

¹⁶ Biard Interview, July 12, 1999.

¹⁷ Zacharias, *Secret Missions*, 37–38.

¹⁸ Layton, 40.

¹⁹. For the spy scare of the 1930s, see the papers of the British foreign correspondent Hugh Byas, Manuscript Division, Sterling Library, Yale University.

²⁰. Author interview with Captain Forrest R. Biard, November 13, 1999.

²¹. All of the following material is from my interview with Captain Biard on July 12, 1999.