

R E S T R I C T E D

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SUGGESTIONS FOR JAPANESE INTERPRETERS  
BASED ON WORK IN THE FIELD

(Being selections from a letter to an interpreter just entering upon his work.)

First of all I wish to say that every interpreter (I like the word "interviewer" better, for any really efficient interpreter is first and last an interviewer) must be himself. He should not and cannot try to copy or imitate somebody else, or, in the words of the Japanese proverb, he will be like the crow trying to imitate the cormorant catching fish and drowning in the attempt ("U no mane suru karasu mizu ni oboreru"). But of course it goes without saying that the interpreter should be open to suggestions and should be a student of best methods. But his work will be based primarily upon his own character, his own experience, and his own temperament. These three things are of prime importance; strange as it may seem to say so, I think the first and the last are the most important of the three. Based on these three things, he will gradually work out a technique of his own, - his very own, just as a man does in making love to a woman! The comparison is not merely a flip bon mot; the interviewer should be a real wooer!

What I have to say concretely is divided into two sections: (1) The attitude of the interpreter towards his prisoner; (2) His knowledge and use of the language.

Let us take the first one, - his ATTITUDE. This is of prime importance, in many ways more important than his knowledge of the language. (Many people, I suppose, would on first thought think "attitude" had nothing to do with it; that all one needs is a knowledge of the language, then shoot out questions, and expect and demand a reply. Of course that is a very unthinking and naive point of view.)

I can simply tell you what my attitude is; I often tell a prisoner right at the start what my attitude is! I consider a prisoner (i.e. a man who has been captured and disarmed and in a perfectly safe place) as out of the war, out of the picture, and thus, in a way, not an enemy. (This is doubly so, psychologically and physically speaking, if he is wounded or starving.) Some self-appointed critics, self-styled "hard-boiled" people, will sneer that this is a sentimental attitude, and say, "Don't you know he will try to escape at first opportunity?" I reply, "Of course I do; wouldn't you?" But that is not the point. Notice that in the first part of this paragraph I used the word "safe". That is the point; get the prisoner to a safe place, where even he knows there is no hope of escape, that it is all over. Then forget, as it were, the "enemy" stuff, and the "prisoner" stuff. I tell them to forget it, telling them I am talking as a human being to a human being, (ningen to shite). And they respond to this.

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When it comes to the wounded, the sick, the tired, the sleepy, the starving, I consider that since they are out of the combat for good, they are simply needy human beings, needing our help, physical and spiritual. This is the standpoint of one human being thinking of another human being. But in addition, it is hard business common sense, and yields rich dividends from the Intelligence standpoint.

I consider that the Japanese soldier is a person to be pitied rather than hated. I consider (and I often tell them so) that they have been led around by the nose by their leaders; that they do not know, and have not been allowed to know for over 10 years what has really been going on in the world, etc. etc. The proverb "Ido no naka no kawazu taikai o shirazu" (The frog in the bottom of the well is not acquainted with the ocean) is sometimes a telling phrase to emphasize your point. But one must be careful not to antagonize them by such statements, by giving them the idea that you have a "superiority" standpoint, etc. etc.

But in relation to all the above, this is where "character" comes in, that I mentioned on the preceding page. One must be absolutely sincere. I mean that one must not just assume the above attitudes in order to gain the prisoner's confidence and get him to talk. He will know the difference. You must get him to know by the expression on your face, the glance of your eye, the tone of your voice, that you do think that "the men of the four seas are brothers," to quote a Japanese (and Chinese) proverb. (Shikai keitei.) One Japanese prisoner remarked to me that he thought I was a fine gentleman ("rippana shinshi"). I think that what he was meaning to convey was that he instinctively sensed that I was sincere, was trying to be fair, did not have it in for the Japanese as such. (My general attitude has already been brought out in the article "The Psychology of the Japanese.")

In regard to all the above, a person who has lived in Japan for a number of years has a big advantage. One can tell the prisoner how pleasant his life in Japan was; how many fine Japanese he knew, even mentioning names and places, students and their schools, how he had Japanese in his home, and vice versa, etc. etc. That alone will make a Japanese homesick. This line has infinite possibilities. If you know anything about Japanese history, art, politics, athletics, famous places, department stores, eating places, etc. etc. a conversation may be relatively interminable. I could write two or three pages on this alone. (I personally have had to break off conversations with Japanese prisoners, so willing were they to talk on and on.) I remember how I had quite a talk with one of our prisoners whom I had asked what his hobbies (shumi) etc. were. He mentioned swimming. (He had swum four miles to shore before we captured him.) We talked about the crawl stroke and about the Olympics. Right here all this goes to prove that being an "interpreter" is not simply being a Cook's tourist type of interpreter. He should be a man of culture, insight, resourcefulness, and with real conversational ability. He must have "gags"; he must have a "line". He must be alive; he must be warm; he must be vivid. But above all he must have integrity, sympathy; yet he must be firm, wise ("Wise as serpents but harmless as doves".) He must have dignity and a proper sense of values, but withal friendly, open and frank. Two characteristics I have not specifically mentioned: patience and tact.

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From the above, you will realize that most of these ideas are based on common sense. I might sum it all up by saying that a man should have sympathetic common sense. There may be some who read the above paragraphs (or rather just glance through them) who say it is just sentiment. But careful reading will show it is enlightened hard-boiled-ness.

Now in regard to the second point I have mentioned (on p 1), the knowledge and the use of the language. Notice that I say "knowledge" and "use". They are different. A man may have a perfect knowledge, as a linguist, of a language, and yet not be skillful and resourceful in its use. Questioning people, even in one's own language, is an art in itself, just as is selling goods. In fact, the good interpreter must, in essence, be a salesman, and a good one.

But first in regard to the knowledge of the language itself. Technical terms are important, but I do not feel they are nearly as important as a large general vocabulary, and freedom in the real idiomatic language of the Japanese. Even a person who knows little Japanese can memorize lists of technical phrases. After all, the first and most important victory for the interviewer to try to achieve is to get into the mind and into the heart of the person being interviewed. This is particularly so in the kind of work so typical of our Marine Corps, such as we experienced at Guadalcanal, - slam-bang methods, where, right in the midst of things we had what might be called "battle-field interpretation", where we snatched prisoners right off the battlefield while still bleeding, and the snipers were still sniping, and interviewed them as soon as they were able to talk. But even in the interviewing of prisoners later on, after they were removed from Guadalcanal, first at the advanced bases, and then at some central base far back. The fundamental thing would be to get an intellectual and spiritual en rapport with the prisoner. At the back bases you will doubtless have a specific assignment to question a prisoner (who has been questioned a number of times before) on some particular and highly technical problem; something about his submarine equipment, something about radar, range finders, bombsights, etc. etc. Of course at such a time, a man who does not know technical terms will be almost out of it. But he must have both: a large general vocabulary, with idiomatic phrases, compact and pithy phrases; and also technical words and phrases.

Now in regard to the use of the language. Often it is not advisable to get right down to business with the prisoner at the start. I seldom do. To begin right away in a business-like and statistical way to ask him his name, age, etc., and then pump him for military information, is neither good psychology nor very interesting for him or for you. Begin by asking him things about himself. Make him and his troubles the center of the stage, not you and your questions of war problems. If he is not wounded or tired out, you can ask him if he has been getting enough to eat; if he likes Western-style food. You can go on to say, musingly, as it were, "This war is a mess, isn't it! It's too bad we had to go to war, isn't it! Aren't people funny, scrapping the way they do! The world seems like a pack of dogs scrapping at each other." And so on. (Notice there is yet no word of condemnation or praise towards his or his country's attitude, simply a broad human approach.) You can ask if he has had cigarettes, if he is being treated all right, etc. If he is wounded you have a rare chance. Begin to talk about his wounds. Ask if the doctor or

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corpsman has attended to him. Have him show you his wounds or burns. (They will like to do this!) The bombardier of one of the Japanese bombing planes shot down over Guadalcanal had his whole backside burned and had difficulty in sitting down. He appreciated my genuine sympathy and desire to have him fundamentally made comfortable. He was most affable and friendly, though very sad at having been taken prisoner. We had a number of interviews with him. There was nothing he was not willing to talk about. And this was a man who had been dropping bombs on us just the day before! On another occasion a soldier was brought in. A considerable chunk of his shinbone had been shot away. In such bad shape was he that we broke off in the middle of the interview to have his leg redressed. We were all interested in the redressing, in his leg, it was almost a social affair! And the point to note is that we really were interested, and not pretending to be interested in order to get information out of him. This was the prisoner who called out to me when I was leaving after that first interview, "Won't you please come and talk to me every day". (And yet people are continually asking us, "Are the Japanese prisoners really willing to talk?")

A score of illustrations such as the preceding could be cited. However, all this is of course preliminary. But even later on when you have started on questioning him for strictly war information, it is well not to be too systematic. Wander off into delightful channels of things of interest to him and to you. But when I say it is well not to be too systematic, I mean in the outward approach and presentation from a conversational standpoint. But in the workings of your mind you must be a model of system. You must know exactly what information you want, and come back to it repeatedly. Don't let your warm human interest, your genuine interest in the prisoner, cause you to be side-tracked by him! You should be hard-boiled but not half-baked. Deep human sympathy can go with a business-like, systematic and ruthlessly persistent approach.

I now wish to take up an important matter concerning which there is some difference of opinion. At certain bases where prisoners are kept, when some visitor comes to look over the equipment and general layout, as he comes to each individual cell where a prisoner is kept, the prisoner is required to jump up and stand at attention; even if he is asleep, they prod him and make his stand stiffly at attention. Again, when a prisoner is being interviewed, as the interpreter or interpreters come into the room used for that purpose, the prisoner must stand at attention, and for the first part of the questioning he is not asked to sit down. Later on he is allowed to sit down as a gracious concession. He is treated well, and no attempt is made to threaten him or mistreat him, but the whole attitude, the whole emphasis, is that he is a prisoner and we are his to-be-respected and august enemies and conquerors.

Now for my own standpoint. I think all this is not only unnecessary, but that it acts exactly against what we are trying to do. To emphasize that we are enemies, to emphasize that he is in the presence of his conqueror, etc., puts him psychologically in the position of being on the defensive, and that because he is talking to a most-patient enemy and conqueror he has no right and desire to tell anything. That is most certainly the attitude I should take under similar circumstances, even if I had no especially patriotic scruples against giving information. Let me give a concrete illustration. One of our

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interpreters at a certain base was told that, when a prisoner is to be interviewed, he should be marched in, with military personnel on either side of him; the national flag of the conqueror should be on display, to give the prisoner a sense of the dignity and majesty of the conqueror's country, and that he should stand at attention, etc. In this atmosphere the interpreter, according to instructions, attempted to interrogate the prisoner. The prisoner replied courteously but firmly, "I am a citizen of Japan. As such I will tell you anything you wish to know about my own personal life and the like, but I cannot tell you anything about military matters." In other words, he was made so conscious of his present position and that he was a captured soldier vs. enemy Intelligence, that they played right into his hands! Well, that was zero in results. But later this same interpreter took this prisoner and talked with him in a friendly and informal manner, giving him cigarettes and some tea or coffee, with the result that he opened up perfectly naturally and told everything that was wanted, so far as his intelligence and knowledge made information available.

Of course all this dignity emphasis is based on the fear that the prisoner will take advantage of you and your friendship; the same idea as that a foreman must swear at his construction gang in order to get work out of them. Of course there always is the danger that some types will take advantage of your friendliness. This is true in any phase of life, whether you are a teacher, a judge, an athletic trainer, a parent. But there is some risk in any method. But this is where the interpreter's character comes in, that I have so emphasized earlier in this article. You can't fool with a man of real character without eventually getting your fingers burned.

The concrete question comes up, What is one to do with a prisoner who recognizes your friendliness and really appreciates it, yet won't give military information, through conscientious scruples? On Guadalcanal we had a very few like that. One prisoner said to me, "You have been in Japan a long time. You know the Japanese point of view. Therefore you know that I cannot give you any information of military value". (Inwardly I admired him for it, for he said what he should have said, and in the last analysis you cannot do anything about it; that is, if we are pretending to abide by the international regulations regarding prisoners of war, or even the dictates of human decency. I reported this conversation to the head of our MP, a man about as sentimental as a bulldozer machine. He said, much to my surprise, with admiration, "He gave just the right answer. He knows his stuff!")

But even granting all the above, there is something that can be done about this. In the case of a salesman selling goods from door to door, the emphatic "No" of the lady to whom he is trying to sell stockings, aluminum ware, or what-not, should not be the end of the conversation but the beginning ("I have not yet begun to fight!" as it were). As for myself, in such a situation with prisoners, I try to shame them, and have succeeded quite well. I tell them something like this, "You know, you are an interesting kind of person. I've lived in Japan many years. I like the Japanese very much. I have many good friends among the Japanese, men, women, boys, girls. Somehow or other the Japanese always open up to me. I have had most intimate conversations with them about all kinds of problems. I never quite met a person like you, so offish and on your guard." etc. etc. One prisoner seemed hurt. He said,

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with surprise and a little pain, "Do you really think I am offish?" Again, I sometimes say, "That is funny, you are not willing to talk to me about these things. Practically all the other prisoners, and we have hundreds of them, do talk. You seem different. I extend to you my friendship; we have treated you well, far better probably than we would be treated, and you don't respond." etc. etc. I tell him that we purposely try to be human. I say to him, "You know perfectly well that if I were a prisoner of the Japanese they wouldn't treat me the way I am treating you" (meaning my general attitude and approach). I then say, "I will show you the way they would act to me," and I stand up and imitate the stern, severe attitude of a Japanese military officer toward an inferior, and the prisoner smiles and even bursts out laughing at the "show" I am putting on, and agrees that that is actually the situation, and what I describe is the truth. Now in all this the interpreter back at one of the bases has a big advantage in one respect: He will have plenty of time for interrogations, and can interview them time and time again, while in many cases, we out at the front must interview them more or less rapidly, and oftentimes only once. But on the other hand, those of us right out at the front have what is sometimes a great advantage: we get absolutely first whack at them, and talk to them when they have not had time to develop a technique of "sales resistance" talk, as it were.

It may be advisable to give one illustration of how, concretely, to question, according to my point of view. Take a question such as this, "Why did you lose this battle?" (a question we asked on more than one occasion regarding some definite battle on Guadalcanal). A question presented in this bare way is a most wooden and uninteresting affair. The interpreter should be given leeway to phrase his own questions, and to elaborate them as he sees fit, as he sizes up the situation and the particular prisoner he may be interviewing. His superior officer should merely give him a statement of the information he wants. A man who is simply a word for word interpreter (in the literal sense) of a superior officer's questions, is, after all, nothing but a verbal cuspidor; the whole proceeding is a rather dreary affair for all concerned, including the prisoner. The conversation, the phrasing of the questions, should be interesting and should capture the prisoner's imagination. To come back to the question above, "Why did you lose this battle?" That was the question put to me to interpret (in the broad sense) to a prisoner who had been captured the day after one of the terrific defeats of the Japanese in the earlier days of the fighting on Guadalcanal. Here is the way I put the question: "We all know how brave the Japanese soldier is. All the world knows and has been startled at the remarkable progress of the Japanese armies in the Far East. Their fortitude, their skill, their bravery are famous all over the world. You captured the Philippines; you captured Hong Kong, you ran right through Malaya and captured the so-called impregnable Singapore; you took Java, and many other places. The success of the Imperial armies has been stupendous and remarkable. But you come to Guadalcanal and run into a stone wall, and are not only defeated but practically annihilated. Why is it?" You see that this is a really built-up question. I wish you could see the interest on the prisoner's face as I am dramatically asking such a question as that. It's like telling a story, and at the end he is interested in telling his part of it.

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There is a problem of what questions to ask a prisoner. What kinds of questions? Of course there are many questions one would like to ask if he had the time, simply for curiosity, such as, What do you think of the war? Do you want to go back to Japan? Can you ever go back to Japan? I have asked these questions more than once when we had time, and discoursed at great length on the philosophy of the Japanese soldier; also on the sneak-punch at Pearl Harbor, getting their point of view of this and that. But of course questions such as these are not often asked by us, for they are more or less what I might term curiosity questions, i.e. questions the answers to which we should like to know just to satisfy our own curiosity, as it were. But usually we do not have time for such questions. A prisoner may be too tired or wounded to question him long, and only vital information is dealt with. Then, too, you can only question a prisoner for so long before he, and you, get stale and more or less tired, and you lose your brilliance and ingenuity. In the case of our own Marine Corps front line Intelligence, with which this particular discussion primarily deals, where we often had our interviews with prisoners out in the open under palm trees interrupted by a bombing raid and such side-shows, we must usually stick to questions dealing with imperative information. In our particular situation on Guadalcanal, here are some questions we nearly always asked, after getting the name, age, rank, and unit, where from in Japan, and previous occupation before entering the armed forces. (The six items mentioned above are more or less statistical. But by rank we can judge the value of the man's replies in many instances. The last question is of value in order to judge how much of a background the man has, which helps one to evaluate his answers. But of course though these questions are routine questions, each one is of value in its own particular way.)

After these six questions are disposed of (and often I do not ask them right away but amble along discussing other things, so that things won't be too stiff) we asked questions such as these: When did you arrive at Guadalcanal? Where did you land? (Very important) How many landed with you? What kind of a ship did you come in? (Don't ask leading questions; don't say, "Did you come on a warship?" Let him say.) Ask the name of the ship. How many troops were on the ship? If, for instance, he says he came on a destroyer, ask how many troops usually travel on a destroyer. (Of course you have many opportunities to check on such a question with other prisoners.) At this point you might ask him if he was sea-sick while on the destroyer. "Did you throw up?" "I've been terribly sea-sick myself a number of times; it's a rotten feeling isn't it?" you can add with deep feeling! (Be sure that you distinguish between crew and troops when you ask him how many troops the destroyer carried. Don't be "fuzzy" in your questions; be clear-cut.) How many other ships were with yours? What kind of ships? Where did you sail from and when? Were there many ships in that harbor? When did you leave Japan? Where were you between the time you left Japan and the time you landed on Guadalcanal? When you landed were any munitions landed? Artillery? Food supplies, medical supplies? After you landed where did you go? Where were you between the time you landed and the time you were captured? What experience in actual combat warfare have you had; your company, battalion or regiment? How is the present food supply in your unit? Sickness? What was the objective of your attack last night? How do you keep in contact with one another in the jungle at night? Of all our methods

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and weapons used against you, what has been the most efficient, the most terrific and deadly? (i.e. We want to know the effectiveness, for example, of our artillery, mortars, trench mortars, machine guns, airplane bombing, airplane strafing, shell fire from the sea, etc. etc. We found out that what we had thought was probably the most devastating and most feared was not what they thought, in some instances.) Of course we always asked about numbers of troops, and in our particular situation we always asked most eagerly about number of artillery pieces and their caliber. We had personal reasons!

Well, many more such questions could be cited, but these are enough to illustrate the immediate nature of the questions and the information desired in the case of our Marine Corps amphibious forces. If the prisoner is an aviator, and we had many such, of course the questions would be quite different. If the prisoner is one of the destroyer crew, for example, the questions would be still different. Our experience was that soldiers seemed far more ready to talk than sailors; aviators talked very readily.

/s/

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