

AHEC Perspectives lecture shares transformation lessons from Japan's history

Staff Sgt. Corey Baltos, USAWC Public Affairs

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March 23, 2011 -- The U.S. Army is on the verge of completing its largest transformation since World War II, taking the Army from large division-based force of the Cold War to a brigade-oriented modular force. The Japanese Imperial Army went through a similar re-organization after World War I.

Shifting political trends coupled with Japan's weak industrial infrastructure forced a new generation of military officers to re-think how to fight and win the next war, according to the Dr. Edward Drea, historian with the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He offered his assessment of "Military Transformation: The Japanese Army during the 1920s and 1930s," during the March lecture in the Perspectives in Military History series, sponsored by the Army Heritage & Education Center.

The United States is advantaged in the current military transformation by the military's agreement about the direction for transformation -- especially about who, or what, represents the greatest threat to security. That wasn't the case for Japan.

After World War I ended in 1918, the Japanese military embarked on a 20-year struggle for the soul of the Army, said Drea. "While this struggle was fought largely internally between the generals who were still entrenched in the past, and field grade officers who realized that the next war would be a complexly different animal than any war prior, the consequences of this battle would be felt throughout the entire world.

"Armies have to transform to stay modern, how strategic planners do this, not only effects the Army, but the entire nation," said Drea. He offered five key lessons to learn from Japan's military transformation:

- Personnel reductions may pay for modernization but can handicap future military operations
- Change is personality dependent – and requires a leader to champion the change to the public
- There will be stubborn and resilient institutional resistance to change

- Transformational efforts will have to go through wasteful ‘first starts’
- An Army in an uncertain world must determine if it can depend on weapons that won't be available, or if it will be better off preparing for war with the the weapons of today.

“In Japan during the inter-war period, the drive for transformation came largely from mid-level officers,” said Drea. “These officers were all combat veterans, and many of them had been attached to European Armies as observers during World War I. They saw their superiors, the men on the Imperial General Staff as ignorant Samurai that were still trying to fight the Russo-Japanese War.

“One of the things that inhibited transformation was institutional arrogance,” said Drea. “It was fueled by the belief that the élan or spirit of the Japanese people would overcome any shortcomings, and the belief in the stereotypical shortcomings of their enemies.”

The biggest argument between the old guard of Japanese generals and the new field officers was about the opponent and duration of the next war. The generals argued that the next war would be a long war that would need lots of equipment, munitions and manpower. The General Staff believed that the next war would be fought against the United States, China and the Soviet Union. Younger officers argued that the next war would be short and fast -- against only China and the United States. As do today’s U.S. military leaders, they argued for a faster, leaner force with better equipment and less manpower, said Drea.