

Claire Maybelle Phillips (1907-1960)

By Sig Unander

Claire Phillips was a Portland stage actress and singer noted for heroism as a spy and humanitarian during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in World War II. An author and activist, she was the recipient of the Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian wartime decoration.

Claire Maybelle Snyder was born in Michigan in 1907 and moved to Portland as a child with her mother, stepfather, and two sisters. She graduated from Arleta Grade School and attended Franklin High until 1923, when she left to pursue her passion for performing. After working and touring with the Baker Stock Company, she traveled to Southeast Asia with a musical stock unit and decided to remain in Manila.

When the Japanese Imperial Army invaded the Philippines in December 1941, Phillips and her fiancé Sgt. John V. Phillips retreated with the United States Army Forces in the Far East to Bataan peninsula. There they married in a jungle ceremony but became separated in the fighting. After a four-month siege, the Filipino-American army surrendered on April 9, 1942. Sergeant Phillips was captured and held in Cabanatuan Prison Camp.

A witness to the brutalization of American prisoners on the Bataan Death March, Phillips joined the resistance in Manila. Impersonating a Filipina-Italian *mestiza*, she established a glamorous nightclub for Japanese officers and occupation intelligentsia. After Sergeant Phillips died in Cabanatuan, Claire Phillips began smuggling medicines, food, money, and morale-building news to prisoners of war, saving many and giving hope to others. The contraband was paid for unknowingly by those who patronized her nightclub, Club Tsubaki.

Located near the Manila waterfront, Club Tsubaki provided an ideal location for surveilling Japanese ships and became a collection point for military intelligence. Patrons included Japanese army and navy officers who were plied with liquor and flattery by attractive hostesses who elicited information on troop deployments and sailing schedules. Phillips, code name High-Pockets (after her habit of carrying valuables in her brassiere), couriered the intelligence to Bataan guerrillas, who radioed the information to Gen. Douglas MacArthur's headquarters. The underground smuggling operation was exposed in May 1944, and Phillips was arrested.

Held at Bilibid Prison in Manila, Phillips endured waterboarding, cigarette burns, beatings, and a mock beheading. She refused to give useful information, divulging only names of guerrillas who had died or were out of the area. She was sentenced to death in November 1944. On February 10, 1945, American Rangers stormed the prison and liberated the prisoners, including Phillips, who then weighed only eighty-five pounds.

Phillips returned to Portland, where she wrote a memoir, *Manila Espionage*, published in 1947. The next year, Gen. Mark Clark presented her with the Medal of Freedom at Fort Lewis in Washington State. She was also honored by Oregon Governor Douglas McKay and Portland Mayor Dorothy McCullough Lee at the presentation to her of a new home in Beaverton in April 1950. Her book was the basis of a Hollywood feature film, *I Was an American Spy*, released in 1951 and starring Anne Dvorak as Phillips.

An advocate for and supporter of liberated military prisoners, Phillips suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. She died unexpectedly of meningitis in May 1960 at the age of fifty-two.

Sources

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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