

***MacArthur's Spies: The Soldier, The Singer, and the Spymaster
Who Defied the Japanese in World War II***

Peter Eisner (Viking, 2017), 335 pp., notes, sources, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

The Japanese juggernaut that struck Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, early on the morning of 7 December 1941 also overwhelmed other perceived threats to the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” notably the Philippine Islands, then a US Commonwealth Territory. The Japanese invasion came as a nasty surprise to those in the Philippines who either assumed that Japan would not go to war at all or, if it did, would never attack the islands. But on 12 December 1941, Japanese forces appeared before the Philippine capital of Manila and by 2 January 1942 had occupied the city, where they would remain for more than three years, creating an increasingly oppressive and dangerous environment for Filipinos and Westerners alike. The Japanese assault prompted Gen. Douglas MacArthur to implement War Plan Orange that, among other measures, declared Manila an open city. As US forces retreated to the Bataan Peninsula and the island of Corregidor, some Filipinos—as well as US military personnel cut off from their units—retreated to the hills to wage guerrilla war against the Japanese until 1945. *MacArthur's Spies* focuses on three individuals who, in various forms, took part in that struggle—American nightclub owner and amateur intelligence officer Claire Phillips; US Army Corporal John Boone, separated from his unit but one of the first to organize a resistance movement against the Japanese; and “businessman” Charles “Chick” Parsons, whose counterfeit documents affirmed his status as a Panamanian diplomat, but who was in reality a US Naval Reserve intelligence officer and spymaster.

The major character in *MacArthur's Spies* is clearly Claire Phillips, who had initially fled to the hills to be with her husband, who was serving in the US Army. Life in the hills was hard, however, especially for a woman who had adopted a Filipina child, whom she named Dian. She sought to provide food and clothing for the civilian internees at Santo Tomas University and for the US military members who had endured the Bataan “Death March” and were now in the Cabanatuan POW camp; but this goodwill gesture required money, and she had little. Always enterprising and determined, able to both adapt

and deceive, she decided to open a nightclub in Manila, catering to Japanese military officers and officials. Such an arrangement would provide her with enough income to live, make a slight profit, and share some with the civilian and military captives. Thus was born the “Tsubaki (chrysanthemum) Club,” appropriately run by “Madame Tsubaki”—Claire Phillips, or, as she called herself at the time, Dorothy Fuentes, a throwback to an earlier marriage. This subterfuge prompts the author’s comment that Claire was accustomed to “maintaining various versions of the truth about her life.” (97)

Claire soon found she had common cause with Corporal Boone, who desperately needed both supplies and intelligence from the capital. The two, who would work closely together for the next three years, were introduced by a priest, and their intelligence collaboration began. Safe for a time because of his doctored diplomatic documents, Parsons was ultimately sent without explanation to Santo Tomas as a civilian internee, although he was soon released—at least until the April 1942 Doolittle raid on Tokyo, when he was seized again and placed in Ft. Santiago, a civilian detention facility where the Japanese overlords routinely engaged in torture to extract information. Eisner notes that the Japanese may have waterboarded Parsons, adding the uncomfortable reminder that the United States had used the practice in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War nearly 50 years earlier. Ultimately deemed undesirable aliens, Parsons and his wife and son were deported and arrived in August 1942 in New York where Parsons was detained by the FBI, which only gradually conceded that Parsons was not a spy.

Within three months, Claire/Dorothy/Madame Tsubaki had established important connections to those within MacArthur’s intelligence circles, especially Boone, who appreciated the “take” from the Tsubaki Club’s loose-lipped customers. However, the information Claire was passing to him was not actionable, as no one on the island of Luzon, where Boone had his “headquarters,” had a working radio transmitter at the time. Furthermore,

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MacArthur did not even become aware of an active Filipino resistance movement until December 1942, after receiving a report from Parsons. The Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) commander then issued a by-name request for Parsons, who arrived in Brisbane, Australia, in January 1943. Assigned to the Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB), he returned to the Philippines by submarine in March on a supply mission, the beginning of a truly organized guerrilla war in the islands and the genesis of an intelligence link between the Philippines and MacArthur in Australia. As Parsons conveyed to MacArthur, Filipino resistance groups were growing increasingly restive as the Japanese tightened their grip on the uncooperative Philippine Islands, eager to strike back; MacArthur, however, concerned a bloodbath would ensue, was adamant that the guerrillas be patient and instead gather intelligence for his triumphal return as the head of an eventual US invasion force.

By February 1944, tensions were high in Manila. Food shortages were severe and prices for what little could be bought were exorbitant. From secret news reports, Claire and the others knew that the war was not going well, a conclusion confirmed by the air raid shelters Japanese soldiers were building around Manila. The increasing anxiety was also a result of the arrests of those close to Claire and other members of the resistance movement, prompting her to wonder when the Gestapo-like *Kempeit-ai* would come for her—a question answered on 23 May 1944 when she, as she confided to her diary, “went to school,” her code for being arrested. As Claire endured waterboarding sessions and other tortures, however, US invasion plans for the Philippines were moving swiftly—US air raids on Manila began in September 1944, and the invasion of the island of Leyte was set for 20 October.

But the Japanese were not simply withering on the vine. They began sending able-bodied POWs to factories in Japan, leading to such tragedies as the “friendly fire” bombing and strafing of the *Oryoku Maru*, one of 156 “hell ships” sunk that resulted in the tragic deaths of 21,000 allied POWs at sea. It was also only a few days after the US invasion of Leyte that the first *kamikazes*—“divine wind” suicide planes—appeared, intent upon diving into US ships and causing numerous casualties, and the massacre of US POWs by immolation at the Palawan POW camp occurred, convincing MacArthur that the rescue of allied POWs was the most pressing priority. This concern prompted the 27 January 1945 raid by US Rang-

ers to free 513 startled US POWs from the Cabanatuan POW camp. Claire, meanwhile, had been transferred to a women’s prison, and her original death sentence had been commuted to one of 12 years hard labor, all made irrelevant when US troops liberated the camp on 10 February 1945. Yet dogged Japanese resistance meant that even as US troops were moving into Manila, casualties were staggering—between February and March 1945, 100,000 died in Manila alone, mostly Filipino civilians.

On 2 April 1945, Claire, her adopted daughter, and fellow resistance member and one-time friend Peggy Utinsky returned to the United States, where Claire began telling her fantastic story—fantastic in part because of her penchant for forgetting some details, blurring others, and sometimes simply making things up. Suspicions about Claire and what she had actually done during the war would rise sharply in the postwar years. Fellow resistance members consistently believed that she overemphasized her role while de-emphasizing theirs, and FBI agents on board her return voyage conducted a Hoover-authorized investigation of her for collaborating with the Japanese, as well as for fraud and lying to immigration officials. Nonetheless, when Claire arrived home, she was treated as a celebrity—she soon landed a book deal and by the end of 1945 was busily working on her memoirs, which appeared in 1947 as *Manila Espionage*.

That same year, the FBI investigation concluded that she had not been a collaborator, freeing her of legal suspicion. Particularly tense was the growing estrangement between Claire and Peggy—as the result of a private bill in Congress, Peggy received \$9,280 (\$87,000 in 2017 dollars) in restitution for funds expended to support resistance members from 1942 to 1944. She also received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and wrote her own book, though it never took off like Claire’s, was never made into a movie, and by all accounts was partly fictional. But it was Claire who ultimately claimed the limelight. At MacArthur’s behest, Gen. Mark Clark was directed to present Claire her Presidential Medal of Freedom, and in 1950 she was featured on the hit show, *This Is Your Life*, where she and her fifth (depending on how one counts) husband, Robert Clavier, were feted with a new house and furnishings, along with a full-ride college scholarship for Dian.

MacArthur’s Spies concludes with a “rest-of-the-story” look at the major characters in the book, devoting much

discussion to Claire's circumstances. She sold the film rights to *Manila Espionage*, which became the movie *I Was An American Spy*, that opened in May 1951 but played fast and loose with the facts. What occupied her attention for several years was the suit she brought in US Claims Court—the records of which were discovered in the archives, prompting the writing of this book—to be recompensed for the funds she had expended in supporting the POWs and resistance fighters. Although Boone testified that she had spent 30,000 pesos (then equivalent to \$15,000) to support the guerrillas and that the intelligence she provided had been excellent, the government's star witness was the embittered Peggy, who denigrated the accomplishments of her former friend. Claire's claims compensation case ended on 11 January 1957 with an award of only \$1,349.21 (\$11,000 in 2017 dollars) to her, leaving her embittered and increasingly reliant on alcohol. Claire, who, as Eisner notes, "did not fit the easy mold of a noble hero" (289), died in 1960 and was cremated; the main meeting room in the US embassy in Manila is named in her honor. Peggy died in 1970, and Boone 10 years later; he is buried alongside his wife and fellow resistance fighter Mellie in Arlington National Cemetery. Of the three major figures in the book, only Chuck Parsons lived to a ripe old age, dying in 1988 at age 88.

Although a number of recent books discuss the Filipino resistance movement during World War II, few focus on Claire Phillips's role as does *MacArthur's Spies*; the one exception would be Edna Binkowski's *Code Name: High Pockets: True Story of Claire Phillips, and the World War II Resistance Movement in the Philippines*,

which appeared in 2006. Peter Eisner has published two other World War II books, one on an American pilot shot down over Belgium and aided by a young people's group, and one on Pope Pius IX. He was inspired to research and write *MacArthur's Spies* by the discussion of the Filipino resistance movement in Hampton Sides's *Ghost Soldiers*, which focuses on the 1945 rescue mission that freed the Bataan Death March survivors; by his father's experiences as an officer on a Navy tank landing ship (LST) that was part of the Philippine invasion force; and particularly by the accidental discovery of Claire Phillips' diary hidden in a folder at the National Archives dealing with her US Claims Court case.

MacArthur's Spies is organized into short chapters, which makes it convenient to read in small bits and is enhanced by a sizable section of photographs. The writing is lively and engaging, and the "whatever-happened-to" section in Part Five, "Telling the Story," is especially welcome and a nice touch all authors should consider. However, the book's title is somewhat of a misnomer, for two reasons—first, it is hard to be acting as one of "MacArthur's spies" when he is not aware of your activities for the first year and unable to act upon them for six months thereafter, and second, because the clear focus of the book is on "the singer," with "the soldier" and "the spymaster" playing critical but clearly secondary roles. Nevertheless, *MacArthur's Spies* is a welcome addition to the genre, one that rightfully acknowledges Claire's selfless acts of compassion and intelligence gathering while simultaneously recognizing her as a flawed heroine.



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