

OREGON CHAPTER NEWS

By Clint Gruber (93rdBG)

Although there is no scheduled activity for our Chapter quarterly meetings until 11:30 AM, we encourage our members and guests to arrive early. And, by 10 o'clock, the meeting room at the Beaverton Elks Lodge is usually a busy place. The February 7, '09 meeting followed the same schedule, with our members checking in with old buddies, re-telling war stories (sometimes adding "newly remembered" details), and getting acquainted with new members and guests. An annual February meeting occasion was the handing over of the gavel from immediate past President Tom Davis to our new leader, Bert Campbell. While not a WW2 vet, Bert is well grounded in history of the Eighth, having grown up with hearing his father's wartime experiences. A long time member of the Portland Chapter, Al Campbell, now deceased, flew 29 missions as ball turret gunner while serving in B24s of both the 389th and 453rd Bomb Groups. New President Bert served in the Oregon Army National Guard, beginning as a "cannon cocker" in a howitzer unit, and finishing his military service as a Sergeant in an elite Ranger unit.

Our program for the meeting was the story of one of America's true heroes of World War Two, a woman born in Portland, Oregon in 1908. She attended Franklin High School, then dropped out to join a circus and begin a career as a stage actress and singer. Just before the outbreak of WW2, she went to The Philippines to work as an actress and singer in a Manila nightclub.

Her story, sadly, is almost unremembered and unknown, even to long time residents of our area. This is the situation that Sid Unander, our program presenter and an Oregon writer and filmmaker, has set out to correct.

It is the story of Claire Phillips who, while living and working in Manila during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, carried on a double life as an American spy. Using forged papers, she was known as Clara Fuentes, an Italian citizen born in the Philippines. She, and a partner Fely Corcuera, managed the "Tsubaki Club", catering mostly to top Japanese Army and Navy officers. Here, she organized and managed an extensive spy ring, harvesting important intelligence information from conversations of the club's visiting high ranking Japanese officers. In the beginning of her mission, her main interest was in aiding the guerrilla movement, and by smuggling badly needed food and medicines to American prisoners in the infamous Cabanatuan POW camp. Here, because of her technique of hiding those supplies in her brassiere, she became known to the grateful prisoners as "High Pockets". Her effort originally was intended mostly to aid the Philippines resistance fighters as well as the POWs, but much of the information she gathered on the movements of Japanese Army, Navy, and Air units was also effectively utilized by American forces in the Pacific

Eventually Claire's luck ran out when one of her messengers was captured by the Japanese, tortured, interrogated and finally killed. Claire was arrested and taken to prison where she also was brutally tortured for information, but managed to hold out without condemning others in her espionage group. She was then held in solitary confinement for half a year, scheduled to be executed for spying. Luckily, however, she was liberated by the invading Americans before the execution could be carried out.

Returning to Portland after the liberation, Claire wrote the story of her wartime experiences, "Manila Espionage". The book became a best seller, and was made into a movie "I Was An American Spy", with actress Ann Dvorak as Claire. In 1951, endorsed by General McArthur, Claire Phillips received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In May, 1961, having suffered physically and emotionally from her treatment by the Japanese in prison, she died at age 52.

Sig Unander, who presented this riveting story, is on a mission to not let the heroic service of Claire Phillips be forgotten. Apparently, there is only one formal memorial to her, that one in the Philippines. Unander is now working on the production of a book and a documentary movie, plus a memorial dedicated to "our" hero, Claire Phillips.