

Thalia lied, Joe died

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

A decade before Pearl Harbor, the "Massie Affair" shook the Hawaiian Island like no other catastrophe. The reverberations were felt all the way to Washington. And at the center of the hailstorm was Thalia Massie, the lovely 20-year-old spoiled housewife from a wealthy and connected family.



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HISTORY

Married to Kentucky-bred Tommie Massie, a 22-year-old recent Naval Academy graduate, Thalia moved with him to his new assignment in Pearl Harbor. As a trendy socialite on the islands, Thalia considered herself superior to even her equally aristocratic friends. Her rocky marriage, fueled by drunkenness and pettiness, suffered. That

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she often openly flirted further angered her volatile husband.

The lives of the privileged couple tragically derailed on the night of Sept. 12, 1931, when they attended an alcohol-fueled party in Waikiki. Bickering Thalia grew more out of control and finally left in a huff.

The black void into which she traveled that evening is unknown to this day. When she emerged an hour or so later, she was badly beaten, a broken jaw highlighting a visibly bruised face.

She initially indicated that she had been abducted and beaten, but not sexually violated, by a group of five or six Hawaiian men. Upon arriving home and facing her husband, she changed her story. Now she claimed that, in fact, she had been gang-raped. Despite her protests, Tommie contacted the police. When they arrived, she was unable to give any substantive details about her attackers.

Meanwhile, across the island, 21-year-old Joe Kahahawai and his four friends were involved in a minor traffic altercation that involved the police. Armed with that information, Thalia was re-visited and rehearsed. Her memory suddenly jolted alive. She now vividly recalled the appearances of her attackers and even furnished a nearly complete license plate number of Joe's car.

The brushfire of accusations soon exploded into a raging forest fire. Young women were in peril. Thalia's mother raced to the scene to protect her daughter.

As the case proceeded to trial, the



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THALIA AND TOMMIE MASSIE

rock of duplicity was partially lifted. There was no physical evidence of rape on either Thalia or the defendants, who were a distance away when the crime was committed. Three witnesses claimed to have reported to the police that they saw Thalia followed by a white man shortly before the attack.

The response of the police was simple. Bury everything that was inconvenient, along with the rumors of a false claim of rape, to cover up marital infidelity and cheating — a lover who beat Thalia or perhaps even an enraged husband.

At trial, before a racially mixed jury, the case fell apart: The jury could not unanimously agree on a verdict and a mistrial was declared. The five remained free on bail.

Americans, far and wide, led by

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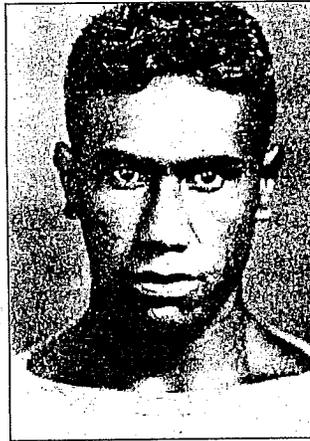
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Thalia's mother, Grace, were infuriated by the non-verdict. Locals lived under a cloud of violence. One defendant, Horace Ida, was beaten. Another was abducted in a vicious scheme hatched by Grace, who enlisted the help of Tommie and two fellow sailors. Joe Kahahawai was kidnapped and beaten. When he wouldn't confess, he was killed. En route to dumping his body, his kidnappers were discovered and arrested.

Charged with murder, the four received privileged treatment. Grace remained impervious and defiant, freely admitting the crime to the press and saying she had "slept better" for it. Her only regret was their bungling effort to discard the corpse.

With noted criminal defense attorney Clarence Darrow at their side, they were confident of victory. The sensational jammed-packed trial started on April 4, 1932.

The prosecution's overpowering case was countered by Darrow arguing temporary insanity: that while Tommie was indeed the killer, he blacked out and in a fit of blind rage shot, to the shock of his co-defendants, the confessing rapist.



JOE KAHAHAWAI

Two psychiatrists supported the claim. His final witness, Thalia Massie, emotionally told of her ordeal and of the loving care she received from her supportive husband. Some spectators wept at her tale.

On cross-examination, the prosecutor confronted her with a purloined psychiatric questionnaire that indicated marital discord. Instantly, Thalia's demeanor changed. She became enraged, turning from the sweet witness to a shrew. "Where did you get this?" she shrieked, ripping the paper to shreds.

Her supporters yelled their approval and applauded her actions.

The judge called for order. As she left the stand, she collapsed into the arms of her husband, crying: "What right has he got to say that I don't love you?"

The theatrics were followed by equally impassioned closing arguments. The verdict was announced on April 29: guilty of manslaughter. The killing was not premeditated. The defendants were stunned. The sentence was 10 years.

Darrow set to rendering the verdict a momentary setback. With pressure building to douse the incendiary incident, he marshaled his powerful supporters. Caving, the governor commuted the sentences from 10 years to one hour, to be served in the governor's office.

Epilogue

The defendants and Darrow left the island to a hero's welcome on the mainland. The rape charges were dropped. Thalia and Tommie soon divorced, both suffering mental health issues, the cause for Tommie's military discharge. Thalia committed suicide in 1963. Her mother, the stately Grace, continued her luxurious lifestyle, dying at 95.

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