



COMING HOME

Sixty years ago, “Saipan Ann” was the Allies’ answer to Tokyo Rose

SANDRA DINSMORE

Theodora and Stephen McCormick planned careers that would make good use of their fine voices and outgoing personalities. Theo had wanted to pursue a singing career. In the 1930s she received three voice scholarships, but had to leave Boston University after being hit by a car and missing a semester. Steve’s rich, resonant voice led to radio. In 1935 he moved to Washington, D.C., at his brother’s suggestion, where he landed a job at Mutual Broadcasting. Within a year he was introducing President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats” to an audience of several million listeners.

Today the McCormicks (he is 91; she is 88) spend much of the year on Swan’s Island, where the accomplishments of their lives make them “perfect examples of ‘The Greatest Generation,’” in the opinion of Myron (Sonny) Sprague, an accomplished islander himself.

In 1945 Theo McCormick was on the air for an hour a day as “Saipan Ann,” the Armed Forces Radio girl-next-door to American airmen flying missions over Japan.

Courtesy of Theo and Stephen McCormick



Today Theo and her husband, Steve, live much of the year on Swan’s Island.

Sandra Dinsmore



Steve McCormick (center, rear) in uniform

World War II was a defining event for the McCormicks. They met in 1945 in Hawaii, where Theo had been working for the Red Cross. Steve had been in the Western Pacific for nearly two years, involved in the invasion of Saipan. It was on Saipan, in fact, that Theo subsequently made a name for herself: as "Saipan Ann," the Red Cross broadcaster who was on the air an hour a day for six months, welcoming pilots back from their dangerous bombing runs over Japan.

Theo, then 27, had applied for staff positions with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the American Red Cross. Both accepted her and she chose the Red Cross. She took her training in Washington, D.C. "I had my choice of theater of war," she said. "My first was China-Burma-India because it was the farthest away and was challenging, actually."

The Red Cross sent her to Honolulu, where she did some radio work, mostly talking, which she still does well. Her primary job, though, was to work as a liaison between American families with husbands and sons in the service.

"I'd go to the post office and help track down boys who were not writing home," she recalled.

"I got orders to go to Saipan," she went on, "and the day after I arrived, I was asked if I could do an antidote to Tokyo Rose for Armed Forces Radio. I said, 'Sure.'"

American Armed Forces Radio had set up a 500,000-watt signal on Saipan that reached Australia and the Southwest Pacific. There were 400 to 500 planes involved in hostilities there at the time and, Steve said, "Theo would be heard by these flyers coming back." He recalled a saying the airmen had: "It was five hours of boredom on

the way to the target, five minutes of hell over the target, and five hours of boredom if we made it back to base."

Theo was on the air an hour a day for the eight or nine months of 1945 she was on Saipan. She did a "girl-next-door" kind of show during which she played records and chatted about and to the boys she visited in the hospital.

According to her husband, those few Red Cross women played an important role by encouraging the servicemen and keeping their morale up. Of course, with only six or eight of them compared to the thousands of servicemen on the island, Theo said, "We always had to have two armed men as an escort when we went anywhere."

Movie star and Marine pilot Tyrone Power, who also had a radio show on Saipan, told Theo she ought to save the many thank-you letters she received from the B-29 aviators. "They told me they felt as though they were coming home," she recalled. "So I felt I was doing something good for them." Theo kept some of the letters, but has no idea where they are—probably with a daughter in Virginia.

She'd start her show each day by saying, "This is Ann of the American Red Cross Music Canteen," and then she'd say, " 'Hi, fellas,' and go into requests. "It was ordinary, everyday, kind of plain talk." It must have been just what those lonely, scared young men wanted to hear from the girl next door.

A sprightly, sparkling, strong-minded and slightly eccentric 88-year-old, Theo refuses to shake hands because it spreads germs (she even lectures her physician about it).

Steve, a healthy, hearty 91, is a natural talker who never seems to run out of steam or words: a perfect choice for a career in radio. In

1936 he found himself in the enviable position of introducing President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" to a Mutual Network radio audience of several million people. As a newsman he covered Capitol Hill and the White House for press conferences.

"It was a wonderful experience," Steve said of the prewar years in Washington.

Roosevelt selected the first several hundred thousand men between the ages of 18 and 30 in the first draft drawing. Steve's number came up, and, on the air, he remembers blurting out, "That's my number!" An Associated Press headline the next day read: ON THE AIR CAUGHT IN THE DRAFT.

"I had what I called 'a new brown suit' and \$21 a month for a 12-month hitch," Steve recalled. "I came home five years later." Starting out as a private in the spring of 1941, he peeled potatoes and washed dishes. After a couple of days of that, he decided to pull strings. He called the White House, asked to speak to President Roosevelt's "right arm," Missy Le Hand, and asked her to write him any old thing, but to write it on White House stationery. A couple of days later the captain of the squadron called Steve in and asked him if he knew somebody in the White House. When Steve explained, his career took off.

He was soon ordered to Washington to the Intelligence Office of General "Hap" Arnold, commanding general of the Army Air Corps. A few months later, the commanding officer of the G-2 section [Intelligence] recommended he go to a new entity, an Officer Candidate School for the Signal Corps. "Ninety days later, just after Pearl Harbor," Steve said, "I graduated as a second lieutenant. I was then ordered to a new force on the East Coast called the Anti-Aircraft Artillery Command as an aide to General Sanderford Jarman."

ON THE BEACH

Steve, then Major McCormick—he ended his service as a lieutenant colonel—had been "out forward" in the Western Pacific action for a year when, in early 1945, he was sent back to Hawaii for two weeks. There he met Theo Henelt, who remembers someone from the Red Cross approaching her and saying, "We have this major coming for a couple of weeks. Could you get him a date?" Theo said, "I arranged a date with one of the Red Cross girls. I met him and thought he was very nice. He had different dates." Theo and Steve didn't have regular dates. They went for walks on the beach; they saw movies together; they ate some meals together. That was about it.

In early 1945, the Allies were getting ready for a big assault on the islands of Japan. "If the A-bomb hadn't been invented and brought over and dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and ended the war, we would have gone ahead with our plan, and it would have been pretty rough," he said.

Once the war ended, Steve proposed to Theo on the beach at Saipan. They both remember everyone rushing to get back home. Theo got a berth on a hospital ship; Steve reached Oahu a month later, then spent the next couple of weeks trying to get a flight to California. Once back in Washington and together again, they married in Alexandria, Virginia, and Steve went back to his job covering the White House for the Mutual Broadcasting System.

"Harry Truman was a wonderful man," he said. "I had occasion to thank him when I came home. He'd take a newsman or two with him when he went for his walk. When my turn came I said, 'Mr. President, I want to thank you, not only for myself, but for all of us. Thank you for your courage in dropping the A-bomb and ending the war.'"

"It really wasn't that difficult," Steve remembers the president telling him. "Remember, I was in World War I, and I'll never forget

how tough it was on the battlefield and the screaming and the mud. Until I was president, they didn't tell me they were working on a new weapon that could end the war. I told them, Push it. Drop it. Maybe we can end the war.'"

In addition to Steve's work in covering the news and politics, he later did two television shows for NBC, and he and Theo did a "Mr. and Mrs." radio program in which they'd invite people to submit questions. Theo recalled, "I would do the research at the Library of Congress, then one of us would answer the questions."

Her career stopped after she found she was going to have her first child. To this day she resents having had to give up her job, but that was the way things were done in the forties and fifties. After her two daughters grew up, she wrote a newspaper column and took up painting, returning to college in the 1960s to study art. In recent years her paintings have increasingly absorbed her interest.

Over the years they both thought they'd like to find a place in Maine. Steve said, "We both love New England; I was born here," and Theo added, "I spent vacations in Sanford and Old Orchard when I was a child."

"So we took a week off and came to Maine," Steve continued. "I said, 'Let's start halfway up.' So we came up to the general area of Bar Harbor. We spent about five days looking around, and one day we saw an ad [for a house] in the local paper. We called up, and it turned out to be [on] a place called Swan's Island. We found that there was a ferry, so we came over here and looked at the place, and it wasn't quite what we wanted, so while we were waiting for the ferry, we drove around and found an airstrip run by two delightful old ladies who had a lunch counter there. We had lunch and got talking to them and told them we had come over to look for a house, but didn't like it. And one of the ladies said, 'I have a house for sale—it's rented now, but you can tell the renter I said you could look at it.' So we came down. She had a real estate agent, but the sign was in the grass. The place was locked. Nobody was there. We looked through the windows, and it looked kind of interesting. Came back to the mainland, stopped and talked with the agent. Went home, discussed it, made an offer, and got word from the agent that she'd accepted it."

"We never entered the thing until the sale was completed," Theo said.

Steve picks up the story: "We went to Bar Harbor for the settlement [closing] and then we said, 'Let's go see our house.' So we went over to the ferry. And we're on the ferry, and the deckhand says, 'Mr. McCaamick?' and I says, 'Huh! How do you know my name? It's only the second time we've been here.'" He said, "Well, the word got around that you've had a settlement, and we thought you'd be coming over to see your house." I said, "Yeah, that's right." I said, "Who are you?" He said, "I'm John Martin, the tax collector."

They both love that story.

Theo's months of broadcasting as Saipan Ann continue to follow her. In 1995 the *Bangor Daily News* did a story on Theo's Saipan Ann radio shows. A photograph of her spinning records was part of an exhibit at the Army-Navy Club of Washington honoring those who flew the missions to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Someone pinned the BDN story up at the Swan's Island post office, where it was seen by islander James Gillespie, who died in 2005, but who, all those years ago, had listened to Saipan Ann in the Pacific whenever his submarine surfaced. When he read that Saipan Ann was his friend, Theo McCormick, he wept.

Sandra Dinsmore writes regularly for Island Institute publications.