



THE ISLAND

MURDERER

1 x 60 HD



PBS

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CONTACT

Tom Koch, Vice President
PBS International
10 Guest Street
Boston, MA 02135 USA

TEL: +1.617.208.0735

jtkoch@pbs.org
pbsinternational.org

In the waning days of summer 1931, Honolulu's tropical tranquility was shattered when a young Navy wife made a drastic allegation of rape against five nonwhite islanders. What unfolded in the following days and weeks was a racially charged murder case that would make headlines across the nation, enrage Hawai'i's native population, and galvanize the island's law enforcers and the nation's social elite.

In the 1930s, Hawai'i was an American territory, and thought of by many as a paradise in the Pacific. But beneath the peaceful veneer, tensions were building. The workforce was struggling with a depression-era job market. And racial tensions were about to erupt. The population of white mainlanders, or haoles as they were called, was growing rapidly. The Navy bases on the island also created tension, as the military men showed little respect for nonwhites.

Tensions hit the boiling point on September 12, 1931, when Lieutenant Thomas Massie and his 20-year-old wife Thalia joined a Navy crowd at the Ala Wai Inn, a Honolulu nightspot. Well known for their volatile relationship, the couple had an argument, and Thalia stormed out. Hours later she reported that she had been assaulted. But she could not identify the men who attacked her, nor the car they were driving.

Despite lack of evidence, five islanders were quickly rounded up and charged with the crime. The accused included two native Hawai'ians, one Hawai'ian-Chinese man, and two Japanese men. The driving forces behind the trumped up charges, it turned out, were high-ranking Naval officials, including the admiral in charge at Pearl Harbor, Yates Stirling.

At the November trial of the five defendants, Thalia offered graphic testimony, even identifying her assailants by name. However, there was scant evidence to corroborate her story, and the jury could not agree on a verdict. Forced to declare a mistrial, the judge set the defendants free.

Grace Fortescue and Thomas Massie took matters into their own hands, setting out to force a confession from one of the suspects, Joseph Kahahawai. When coercion turned to violence, Kahahawai was shot and killed. Papers across the nation eagerly carried reports of the "honor killing."

Despite a passionate defense by Clarence Darrow, Grace and Thomas were convicted of man-slaughter, and sentenced to ten years in prison, a sentence that would not stand. Under pressure from the Hoover Administration, Congress, and the Navy, Governor Lawrence Judd caved, reducing the sentence to just one hour.

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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CREDITS

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