

Harry O'Hara

When discussing the history between Japan and Britain, many would mention the Second World War. Few know that Japan was allied with Britain during the First World War.

Harry O'Hara was born in Tokyo in 1891. Only preserved glimpses of his early life remain.

"In the winter there, when the rivers froze and the brothers wanted to swim, they threw him in to break the ice. He was toughened up at a young age."

Geraldine, O'Hara's daughter

"At university he began to get communist ideas. It became dangerous, and he ran away. I think he was 19. He was supposed to marry a daughter of a friendly family. He'd seen her once."

Geraldine

Little Chap

O'Hara left to work as a journalist in India. When the war broke out, he joined the 34th Sikh Pioneers.

"I don't know what prompted him. Perhaps adventure. He dared a lot, he wasn't afraid. Perhaps because they said, "Well, they're going over to France" and he wanted to fight, so he did that."

Geraldine

During an inspection of the regiment, a field marshal came across O'Hara, stood between two tall Sikh soldiers, and remarked:

"What's that little chap doing among these big fellows? Have him transferred to the Gurkhas!"

After serving with the Gurkhas, and suffering three injuries, he was transferred to the Middlesex Regiment.

"He was in France, in the trenches. He did what the other men did. I think he was quite popular, they taught them all those songs like 'Long Way To Tipperary'"

Geraldine

Skywards

In 1917, O'Hara's realised his burning desire: to be transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, qualifying as a pilot.

"Then I had some crashes! Sixty altogether. Of course they weren't all bad smashes. Some were only forced landings but even these usually meant some nasty bumps. But it was good fun."

Harry O'Hara, during WW1

"He said they earned very little in that time."

Geraldine

"He went up on this plane and he took a young woman from the office and he stalled the engine and said, 'Now, you come and kiss me'. And then she started screaming! He flew, as a dare, very low over the barracks. He got reprimanded for that. He was a bit of a daredevil."

Geraldine

Injuries

While flying over the trenches, O'Hara was shot down, ending his wartime fighting. Overall, he received the following injuries: bullet to the hand; shell splinter to the shoulder; shrapnel to the abdomen; shell splinters to his scalp and shoulder (again); shell splinter to the head; rifle shot to the arm; and the shattering of his upper jaw. He also suffered from influenza.

His jaw injury required facial reconstructive surgery from the pioneering plastic surgeon, Harold Gillies.

"[Gillies] fixed his jaw so beautifully, he got a new one. But years later, I remember splinters were still coming through the jaw. On a Sunday, when we were having dinner, gravy was spilling down his chin and he couldn't feel it. It was numb. So we'd have to say: 'Dad, wipe your chin'."

Geraldine

Family Man

During the war, Harry met his soon-to-be wife, Muriel McDonald, a Cornish girl. They married in Lewisham and had two children together.

"My grandmother being married to a foreigner was not necessarily the kind of thing one did."

Peter Ohara, O'Hara's grandson

"One day, they were walking down in the West End and this paperboy called out: 'Read all about it, how our men are out fighting in France while our women are going out with foreigners'. She was so furious that she turned around to go back, and he put a hand on her shoulder and said: 'Don't, it's not worth it.' He wasn't somebody who wanted to argue."

Geraldine, O'Hara's daughter

Second World War

After the war, O'Hara worked various jobs, even helping the police at one stage.

"He got medals during the war. Some decent medals, I would say to dad 'where are they?' and he would say 'oh he probably sold them before the Second World War' - to get a bit of money!"

Peter Ohara, O'Hara's grandson

He was a gifted artist and volunteered for St Dunstan's charity for blind veterans, decorating their ornaments and furniture in traditional Japanese patterns. He even earned the honour of a visit by the Queen in 1948.

"It must have been difficult for him during the Second World War . . . but my father said he was an air raid warden or on fire watch. They had people who went on the roofs to watch where bombs had dropped . . . so he did that."

Peter Ohara, O'Hara's grandson

Japanese Heritage

Meanwhile, O'Hara's own son went on to fight at Dunkirk . . .

"When [father] wanted to join the army, there was some issue because his father was a foreign national. But because of his father's war record he was allowed to join."

Peter Ohara, O'Hara's grandson

Today, his descendants believe in the importance of honouring his memory . . .

"When I was growing up [after the Second World War] my name was always O'Hara, in the Irish way. You didn't want to say it was the Japanese Ohara. I would have been beaten up in the playground. It was only in my early twenties that I changed it back to Ohara."

Peter Ohara, O'Hara's grandson

O'Hara died of cancer in 1951. Here is the man himself, speaking to a journalist near the end of the First World War:

"Yes I may write a book about my travels when the war is over . . . whatever I may do now I have not a single note of my experience, or kept a fragment of a diary. It is all in my memory. And if I die, it dies with me."
