

DAN THE MAN - A HIDDEN HERO

Síomha Ní hAiniféin, Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne

“Life is a journey” chuckles Dan O’ Hara, his dancing blue eyes crinkling like raisins. He sinks into a battered, old arm chair, abandoning a children’s rocking horse he had been working on. His home, a yellow bungalow, smells of freshly cut wood. Slightly musty with a tang of spice, it evokes the Moroccan deserts he once tirelessly explored under the blistering sun. Now” exclaims Dan, as gunshots from a John Wayne film crackle from the television, “where should I start?”

Hearsay had lured me to this home, nestled amongst the lush fields of Annascaul. A much travelled war veteran with many the tale to tell, Donald ‘Dan’ O’ Hara was born in 1925 in a bustling Lancashire village. Walking, wandering and wondering from eight months old, it was clear that to appease his wanderlust, Dan would live a life of adventure and accomplishment.

Dan’s hankering for the high way, or in his case the high seas, led him to join The Royal Navy aged fourteen. His ambition was simple as Dan longed to see his brother, a fellow Allied fighter. It is now that Dan’s voice begins to shake. He pauses for a moment, running his tattooed fingers through his unruly hair. His hair, like the incessant waves of Dunkirk, is wild and scary, akin to Dan’s feelings when he reminisces about D-Day. Feeling he bears an uncanny resemblance to ‘Alex’, Harry Style’s character in the film, Dan survived ‘Dunkirk’ and indeed D-Day but it was also the first time Dan encountered true human cruelty and it frightened him. Recalling this memory, he solemnly glances towards the sky, lost in turbulent thoughts.

Haunted by these thoughts of the “awful, bloody war” and determined to right wrongs, Dan trained as a welder and a deep sea driver. To escape fear you have to go through it, not around it, and in Dan’s case, he brazenly swam through it, decommissioning Nazi bombs in English Ports. I asked why he voluntarily faced the possibility of death once more, “Ah lass, ‘twas my calling”.

Yet not even the zealous industriousness of the Wehrmacht could deploy enough bombs in England to keep Dan in this job for too long. A post war period of economic boom and exploration ensued, enticing Dan’s welding torch to travel from oil rigs and exploration sites to such diverse places as Morocco and Argentina during what Dan called the ‘Dirty War’.” I enjoyed the job, the pay was good and I’ve travelled all over,” remarks Dan of a career which continued well into his seventies.

It was during this time that Dan and his second wife made a *dérive* to the then tired village of Annascaul on the edge of the remote Dingle Peninsula. To a small community under dark and dreary skies, emblematic of the area, the duo brought vibrancy and vigour. An accomplished sheep breeder and chicken keeper, my first memory of Dan was of his boisterous black hens and a cock that became my brother and I’s alarm clock, much to our parent’s chagrin. Dan lets out a throaty laugh as I share this memory. ‘I always wanted the rarest chickens in the village, the only problem with those buggers, they could not fly that high but high enough to hide eggs in trees.’ Much to his doctor’s displeasure, the then eighty year old Dan would scale the steep Sycamore trees in search of breakfast. If Dan’s doctor was worried then if he heard what he accomplished five years later, he’d keel over.

When Dan travelled to Australia for his eighty-fifth birthday he achieved world records for skydiving and freefalling.

So I ask a man of endeavour how does one unwind from a busy day plunging from planes, chasing chickens and extracting oil? "I love John Wayne Westerns and making model boats and saddles". My father remembers jumping into ditches for cover as if they were trenches in Normandy when he heard the gallop of Dan's wild pony. Dan rode side-saddle mimicking his cowboy hero. These days you are more likely to see Dan aged ninety three cruising up strenuous slopes on his ride-on lawnmower after his car licence expired.

Like our other local 'Fame Laureate' Tom Crean, Dan is a true hero, who beat adversity, to live an eccentric life of 'devilment' and bravado. In an era that sometimes smacks of vices rather than virtue, it is nice to sit back and immerse yourself in the story of Dan O'Hara, a man who graduated from the school of life with an 'A' in courage and in character. As I shut the red door of this extraordinary man's home, the author Bodi Ashton's quote "Heroes are made by the paths they choose, not by the powers they are graced with," springs to mind.