

O'HARA'S

BY JAMES J. COLLINS

Stepping in from the sun on an afternoon the first thing to assail your senses was the smell of stale beer. It permeated O'Hara's, and spoke of the night before and of other times when beer flowed freely, until suds doused the bar, as orders were rushed to the clamoring throng. However, there was nothing to indicate that this was the fabled bar where it all occurred. Only the bullet holes in the frame remained, and you had to have them pointed out to recognize what they were.

Dan O'Hara's Bar in 1955 was a nondescript, Bronx bar, in a predominantly Irish neighborhood, located on a quiet, taxpayer lined, side street, who's most noticeable feature was that it was situated on the middle of a steep, hill. This tilt made it dangerous for the regulars to get too inebriated, as the way up or down could make the trip home an experience. As one wag put it, (he, who could not negotiate the hill, until he got down on all fours,) "It felt like I was sliding off the face of the earth."

Among the neighborhood bars, there was a fierce rivalry to determine who was best, which requiring combat on the fields of sport. Because of these monumental struggles, O'Hara's acquired a well-known reputation as a jock bar. It had fielded many good softball teams and a few excellent touch tackle teams, but when it came to basketball, the common knowledge was that the teams from O'Hara's just ran out of steam in the last quarter. Lugging those beer bellies takes its toll.

A number of the "members of the bar" (for that was how they referred to themselves) had just completed their stint in Korea while a few had also served in WWII. They mounted souvenirs of those encounters over the bar where they competed with the mirror-backed display of bottles of hard liquor. Two Japanese rifles (without any ammunition), a battered Japanese flag, and a Samurai sword spoke of these past glories. Everyone treated these souvenirs with deference in memory of the 'members of the bar' who died in those conflicts. These were only taken down on those anniversary dates that commemorated those deeds. They were the remembrance of times they did not want to forget- the great trials that they themselves had unexpectedly survived.

At any time, after eight, entering O'Hara's was like trying to squeeze into the subway at rush hour. As you opened the door, you first met the backs of the third row; music would assail your ears from the jukebox that was perpetually blaring; shouts and cheers emanated from a well-attended tabletop shuffleboard game. Over the heads of the crowd, hands full of dollar bills waved frantically as if to fan the enthusiasm of the crowd to increase the side bets. Off in the booths or at the end of the bar, there would be as many as three noisy sports discussions going on; cigarette smoke filled the place, while the fragrance of spilled beer overpowered shaving cream and after shave. Often Dan was not in attendance, for O'Hara had a weakness, as they said in the neighborhood,..."he liked his oil". On numerous nights

from 8 o'clock on, O'Hara could be found in the back room, sleeping off the excess samples of his stock that he had imbibed in that afternoon. Now when this happened the bar never shut down; there were always volunteers to work as the bartender.

Bars in the 50's used to like to attract clientele and keep them. One interesting custom was the "buy back." a very interesting marketing ploy. If you went into a saloon and stood at the bar for a period ordering beers, on every third or fourth beer, depending on the bar, the bartender would give you the next beer at no charge. This was your "buy back," - a free beer. This attracted people, particularly alcoholics (the real main stays of a bar), retained a stable clientele, and gave the bar a nice friendly atmosphere. Dan O'Hara was very generous with his "buy backs", and everybody knew this. Of course, when Dan went to the back room to sleep, and one of his volunteer bartenders took over, the rules for "buy backs" seemed to change. If you were a regular, instead of getting a "buy back" for every third beer, you got three "buy backs", and then you bought a beer. As a result, O'Hara kept a very friendly bar but they were ripping him off. Effectively the "members of the bar" had a private club where the dues decreased when the owner was snookered. Therefore, everyone wanted to buy Dan a drink, which he never declined...

The Friday night that was to go down in legend started uneventfully. No omen gave a warning of what about to happen nor did any lightning illuminate the sky. It was a typical warm sticky night in early summer, and at eleven o'clock, O'Hara's was jumping. Close to sixty people filled the bar with a five to one ratio of men to women. All the stools were occupied and dozens were standing trying to get to the bar to order a drink. It promised to be a boisterous night; everyone was primed to party. The jukebox wailed a blues song and waited for the next coin to change the mood. Guys and girls in the back were playing shuffleboard with the coin-operated machines and all the booths were filled with couples who had decided to spend the night in the company of their friends and neighbors. The sound of bells from the pinball machines, and the cash register clashed with the lonely tempo of the selection on the jukebox while an ignored T V show muttered some unwanted commercial to an uninterested audience. To anyone who looked in, the bar was making money; however, O'Hara was nowhere to be seen.

Behind the bar, playing bartender was 'Big Ed'Rooney an off duty motorcycle cop still wearing his calf high boots and flared out riding trousers. He took off his tunic, and put on a long bar apron over a loose fitting shirt which he kept in back for just such occasions. 'Big Ed' had slate grey eyes and a big grin that could, it was alleged, charm the birds out of the sky. If trouble appeared, the grin would change to an intimidating sarcastic smile and the twin eyes that could stare anyone down in a confrontation would turn cold and menacing. Under his close-cropped sandy hair, he stood six feet two inches tall in his stocking feet and carried his 250-pound bulk with an easy grace. He was an imposing figure and easily maintained order in the bar. Rooney worked in a tough part of town and always wore his .38 cal. service revolver until he climbed into bed. Some bet that he took it to bed with him but no one mentioned that within range of his hearing. His friends knew that he also kept a hide away .45 cal automatic in a back holster on his belt. An ex marine, who had spent time on the line in Korea, he always carried two weapons because more than once this fact had kept him alive. Another reason was that the issue .38-service revolver has a reputation that it will not stop a criminal. Many a police officer's widow learned this fact the hard way.

Scattered throughout the booths were four other police officers, a detective sergeant from Bunco, two off duty patrolmen and a representative from the Juvenile Aid Bureau. The

last, Tommy Clancy was imposing in his size reaching six foot five inches in height with a build like a linebacker and a reputation as a fearless and dangerous antagonist. He also carried a pair of weapons and always had them in his possession. In fact, there were so many cops and so many weapons, that O'Hara's could have passed as an armory.

Clancy was a legend in his own right. The second Marines had trained him; the Chinese at the Chosen Reservoir in Korea had hardened him; the country had decorated him with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart; and the Marines honorably discharged him as a staff sergeant. He was a man who didn't back down from a confrontation and was respected and feared by those who knew what damage he could inflict in a fight. Three police commendations attested to his performance in a tight situation since his reappearance in the civilian environment. Some parts of New York City can be more dangerous than the DMZ.

Next to him in the first booth was his girl friend, Betsy O'Toole, a petite leggy brunette who worked as a secretary in Wall Street and planned to marry Tommy as soon as she could get him to set a date. They had been going together for more than three years and everyone expected them to get married. The only one who was reluctant was Clancy. He liked his freedom too much, had plenty of money, no responsibilities, and enjoyed his status. The other eligible girls in the neighborhood viewed him as a catch. So Betsy wisely bided her time and spent her weekends at O'Hara's where she could keep an eye on him

Everyone, this night, was having a good time busy downing drinks, munching pretzels, and discussing the topic of the evening ..."what are we going to do Saturday night?" Sitting in his regular booth with his head against the wall, Tommy was smoking a cigarette while Betsy sat on the outside of the booth and would go for drinks when they needed them.

At eleven fifteen the door opened, and in walked a thin black man about twenty-eight years of age, two inches short of six feet in height wearing a soft peaked hat, turtleneck sweater, brown slacks and sneakers. Lean and mean would have been a kind assessment of his physique; cadaverous would be more accurate.

"I think we have a guest," bellowed Tommy Clancy.

Silence raced through the bar from front to back like a wave. Except for the jukebox and the T.V., all sounds in the bar ceased as the new occupant of the bar was sized up by sixty pairs of eyes. Few blacks lived in the neighborhood, but they were all known to the residents and frequented an other establishment. This was a stranger, a cause for caution under any set of circumstances; but the fact that he was also black wearing "perpetrator boots" (police parlance for sneakers; the standard uniform for muggers and purse snatchers) jolted everybody into a "red alert"

The interloper was a cool confident character, with the disarming smile of the born confidence man. Oblivious to the stares he was receiving, he strutted over to the bar if he were born there; the people parted like the Red Sea to let him by.

"What you got on tap man?" asked the visitor

"Ballantine or Schaefer," responded Rooney "

"Draw me a Ballantine," as he placed a five-dollar bill on the bar and offered a big smile.

No other voices were heard; an eerie silence hung over the room. Then, the unexpected; the door swung open and a second black stood in the doorway; paused; scowled; entered. All heads turned in unison to assess this newest member of the assemblage. Here was a thin, short, obviously nervous, young black man with an angular face and large white watery eyes over seeing a small mustache that he probably grew to make himself look older.

His eyes were everywhere; reminding one of a kid in a candy store, not knowing what to look at first, and yet frightened that it might all vanish. The clothes were nondescript; he could have been a laborer or a truck driver but the jewelry on his fingers (every digit had its own ring) indicated that he had a larger source of income and probably did not work with his hands. A cloth cap that was oversized, covered his forehead, and hung over his ears; a light tan leather jacket hung loosely over his shoulders reaching to the waist of well-worn jeans. New sneakers adorned his feet and were noticed by a few of the off duty police officers who figured him as trouble. Pausing for a second, he glanced around, and then sidled up to the bar to stand next to his partner.

"Another Ballantine for my buddy bartender," said the first visitor.

"Coming right up," said 'Big Ed', as he pulled a glass off the tray and put it under the spigot.

"You fellows are new to the neighborhood," Rooney said as he put the beers in front of the newcomers. "Have you just moved in?"

"Naw," responded 'Confident', "Me and ma friend were working in the area and just stopped in for a brew."

Now 'Nervous' took an interesting position at the bar. He picked up his beer and sipped it as he turned half around with his back to the door. His eyes darted all around the bar looking at the groups in the booths as they in turn watched him as he shifted uneasily moving his weight from foot to foot. None of this got past the scrutiny of the streetwise characters that frequented O'Hara's.

"Betsy go to the ladies room," said Tommy "and as you pass 'Red' tell him to come sit by me but to go on the inside."

As always, she didn't question Tommy, but got up and stopped two booths back to pass on the message. 'Red' Sullivan, he of the broken nose and the cauliflower ear, nodded, and then very casually, carrying his drink, walked back to Clancy's booth and bulled his way to the inside. Tommy stood up to let him in and by doing so placed himself on the aisle facing the two interlopers. As he looked to the back, he caught Kevin McCarthy's eye. A slight, barely noticeable, nod was enough to communicate between them; Kevin got up and started to move over to the bar.

"Looks like we could have some trouble Tiger," said Tim in a sotto voice. "What do you want to do?"

"Stay cool," said Tommy. "I'm going to slip you my extra pistol under the table. Keep it in your lap and keep your thumb on the safety. For God's sake, don't shoot me when you release it and don't pull the gun unless they make a move first. Maybe they will just take one beer and leave but I'm betting they won't".

Tommy had already eased his .38 cal out and had it folded in the newspaper on the table. He sipped his drink with his left hand while his right hand rested on the paper... and he waited.

Slowly, the crowd at the bar shifted from the front to the back opening a space between the two new arrivals while the women were moved to the back of the crowd. It was interesting to watch the front line of the crowd transition from a mixed group to predominantly off duty police officers. Nothing had to be said, everybody knew who the others were, and room was made for those who "were on the job".

As these preparations were being made, the sound level in the bar slowly started to get back to normal, and clinking glasses could be heard competing with the jukebox. The music

had never stopped; numbers of coins had been fed into the jukebox receptacles at the booths, and the selected tunes each awaited their turn to be heard. However, the conversations had turned down to a low murmur. Subtle little changes were happening. Guns were slowly shifted from holsters to the inside of hats or folded jackets. It was like a big chess game. Everybody was waiting for the next move.

"Looks like a busy night man," commented the Cool Dude.

"Just a standard Friday," Rooney said as he polished the bar with a large rag about five feet from the duo. What they visitors did not know was that when Rooney went under the bar to get some glasses, he had put his .38 cal in the cleaning rag and was waiting for them to make a false move.

The two new entries were standing with their backs to the street at the end of the bar from which vantage point they looked down the length of the barroom at the crowd. A couple of times they had put their heads together to confer; Nervous was rapidly tapping his fingers on the surface of the bar as the expressive eyes roamed the room, analyzing and calculating. They were obviously nursing their beers; waiting for everything to get back to normal; and trying to make up their minds.

Ten or fifteen minutes passed while the two intruders appeared to be sizing up the place, making note that there was no other exit from the bar, and assessing the occupants of the room. Apparently, they were satisfied that they had the situation under control as their conferences advanced to the nodding stage. 'Nervous', whose right knee jogged continuously, but not in time to the music, listened intently to 'Confident' who appeared to be in charge, and would vigorously bob his head up and down in obvious agreement. After finishing his beer and putting it down on the bar, 'Confident' reached for his cap. This was the signal as both stepped apart and pulled out pistols.

"DON'T NOBODY MOVE THIS IS A STICK UP," hollered 'Confident.

Simultaneously revolvers and automatics appeared from different areas of the bar and Rooney countered, "POLICE, YOU'RE SURROUNDED, DROP YOUR GUNS!"

Again, silence! 'Nervous' eyes bugged out and rolled frantically from side to side looking at the array of gun barrels. For an instant, it looked like a stand off. Then all hell broke loose.

"HOLY SHIT," was the first words out of 'Nervous'.

"LETS GO HENRY," shouted 'Confident' as he ducked down and dashed for the door followed by Nervous running at a crouch.

Now a lot of beers and whiskey had been drunk and quite a few of the participant's reflexes had been mellowed by the night's imbibing so their timing was way off.

BANG...BANG...POW

Women screamed and several people jammed under the tables and into the john looking for cover.

Luckily, the door opened outward; otherwise, the two guests wouldn't have survived. Three shots followed them out the door. One splintered the frame; one penetrated the door jam; the other went out the open door with no apparent resting place. The chase was on.

"LET'S GET THEM," roared Tommy as fifteen members of the bar became a self-appointed posse.

EVERYONE TRIED TO GET THROUGH THE DOOR TOGETHER, resulting in a monumental but short traffic jam, as the two holdup men dashed up the hill.

They had a ten-yard start and they were making maximum use of their speed.

Thundering after them came the informal, anointed, crusade huffing and puffing as they labored up the hill.

BANG...POWW...POWW... BANG

Shots were fired by the leaders who acted as if they were the heroes at the O.K. corral, but the bullets were very ineffective unless you count the added speed that the targets managed to acquire. As the objects of the chase rounded the corner, a parting shot fractured the windshield of a parked car and the herd picked up speed trying to get their prey back in sight.

Only two stores were open on that street which was mainly five story apartment houses lining the street from end to end. These were a candy store and a deli just closing up for the night. A number of people looked out to see what the commotion was about, but when they spotted the two fleeing felons and realized that the noise was caused by gunshots they very wisely went back inside and got behind cover.

The sidewalk was narrowed down by the garbage cans lined up next to the continuous train of parked cars that rested bumper to bumper as far as the eye could see, on each side of the street, broken only by the occasional mandatory space for a fire hydrant or an intersection. (Getting a parking space was like finding gold. Altercations, fights and knifings occurred in New York in disputes over parking spaces.)

Not wanting anything to impede their progress, the two holdup men wisely stayed to the middle of the narrow, one way street running like rabbits.

As the posse came around the corner, they were spread out with the more sober ones in front, and the rest elbowing each other trying to get in the lead. Two stopped, took ragged aim, and fired a pair of shots at the fleeing felons.

BANG... BANG

"WATCH OUT THAT SHOT WENT RIGHT PASSED MY EAR" shouted 'Red' Sullivan as he over ran the shooter.

"SET UP A FIRING LINE IN THE STREET OR WE'RE GOING TO KILL EACH OTHER," roared Tommy.

Quickly the ragged group lined up side by side, and was rapidly firing down the middle of the street at the two zig zagging targets.

BANG...BANNG...BABANG...POWW.POW

Luckily, for the two targets, everybody had exceeded their quota for drinks that night and the shots went wide as the two increased their distance from the firing line. A number of cars weren't so fortunate, and many car doors could have been awarded the Purple Heart; the bricks on the fronting of the buildings also incurred some casualties

In any event, somebody always does not get the message, and this night was no exception.

'Gimmie' Mulroney arrived on the scene very drunk and very angry waving the samurai sword he had taken off the bar; he was not normally armed and figured he needed an edge in this contest. His nickname was acquired because he had a habit of picking up things that did not belong to him and if he spotted something of interest would ask, "Can you gimmie one of those?"

As he rounded the corner, he spotted the two rabbits, and like a hound gave chase, oblivious of everything around him. Straight up the sidewalk, he went swinging his sword and yelling like a demented banshee, "I'LL GET YOU BASTARDS AND SLICE YOU UP LIKE SWISS CHEESE".

Crossing the line of parked cars at the hydrant, he cut into the street and now was right in between the firing line and the targets.

"'GIMMIE' YOU JERK GET OUT OF THE WAY," shouted 'Big Ed', but to no avail. He could not be heard over the gunfire.

"SHOOT AROUND 'GIMMIE'," was the recommendation of one of the shooters who did not want to have to stop.

POWW...POW...BANG.BABANGG

It sounded like the fourth of July; stray bullets were criss crossing the avenue.

One round disintegrated a windshield two cars in front of "Gimmie" and it attracted his attention. When he looked over his shoulder he half fainted and wisely fell down, covering his head with his hands, letting the sword clatter into the street, screaming "DON'T SHOOT, IT'S ME, 'GIMMIE'," as he frantically tried to fit himself under a parked car, but the posse smelled blood and wasn't about to stop until the sport was over.

About this time, the two holdup men reached the end of the block...a new record for the 200 yard dash, and rounded the next corner out of the line of sight.

BANG

One final frustrated shot rang out as the little drunken band stopped to pat each other on the back for having done a fine job.

'Gimmie', quite shaken, came running down the street yelling "YOU BASTARDS COULD HAVE KILLED ME. WHAT' THE HELL'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?"

"Stop complaining," said 'Big Ed' as he calmly reloaded his service revolver from the cartridges on his belt. "We had you spotted and everybody was shooting around you."

"SHOOT AROUND ME BULLSHIT! THOSE BULLETS WERE WHISTLING BY MY HEAD LIKE BEES. HAVE YOU ALL GONE CRAZY?"

"Relax 'Gimmie', everybody will stand you a drink," said Ed. "After all you were the point man in the action, and you did a hell of a job."

Everyone was patting 'Gimmie' on the back and telling him what a good job he did at the same time telling the rest of the posse what they had done individually.

However, this series of events had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the neighborhood. Lights had come on in almost all the windows on the surrounding blocks, and people were peering out singly and in family groups calling down to those members of the gallant band, that they knew, asking what was going on.

Off in the distance, sounding like a disturbed hornets nest, could be heard the rising howl of sirens. The wails raced along the concrete canyons rising and falling increasing to a frenzy and it was obvious that they were converging to this intersection.

Nothing can cause a group to vacate a corner, like a siren especially after a crime has been committed. The posse to a man disbanded, and dispersed without any fanfare without any prearranged signal. All "the members of the bar" were at one time street kids who viewed the police as the enemy, and experience showed that when the police showed up, the best place to be when they arrived was anywhere else.

Nobody ran, for that attracted too much attention. Rather it looked like a heel and toe race had been let loose as everyone walked off just as fast as they could in different directions. Several turned into convenient alleys to appear in the middle of the next block, where their walk slowed to a casual stroll as they continued to put distance between themselves and the incident. Within two minutes, all were out of the immediate vicinity, heading for home or another watering hole, for the night was still young.

Squad cars screeched into the block coming from all directions because, as it was later learned, the switchboard at the station house lit up with calls about a big shoot out in the neighborhood; all available cars were sent to the area. Police jumped out of the cars with guns drawn looking up and down the deserted streets to find the action, but were frustrated and reduced to talking to each other because no gunmen could be found. The candy store proprietor, and all the occupants who came down to the street, after they were sure the action was over, told the police that they heard the noise but kept their heads down and as a result they didn't see anything.

"We found thirty seven spent shells sergeant. There are .38cal .45cal .32cal and 9mm," said a patrolman. "It must have been a small war, but there are no bodies, no blood, and nobody claims to have seen anything. The only casualties appeared to have been the parked cars."

The crowd grew, as curious bystanders came down to inspect the damage done to the neighborhood, and using the illumination from the street lamps, they viewed the carnage.

One leaking radiator, and two broken windows shared the spotlight with many bullet holes in sheet metal that the insurance companies would pay for but many would never be fixed. It's a great conversation piece to be able to point to a bullet hole in your car, especially if you are twenty years old, and you want to make an impression with the ladies.

"Let's get out of here," said the sergeant. "We'll never really find out what happened if nobody will talk to us. Just put it down as a disturbance. Take any statements you can get, and tell any one who needs an insurance form filled out to come down to the station tomorrow. O K you people, break it up. Go on home. It's all over. There's nothing left to see."

That Saturday was the biggest day O'Hara's saw since V J day. From noon on, people were crowding into the bar to hear the tale told and retold, and to buy drinks for the local heroes. As the afternoon passed the tale grew with each telling, and the exploits of the participants took on the luster of a holy crusade. It was viewed as a foiled Pearl Harbor attack where the villains tried to use a sneak attack but the heroes anticipated them and thwarted their plans. Gimmie climbed up on the bar several times to recreate the seizing of the sword, and then would proceed to wave it around to relive his noble charge up the hill. After the fifth instant replay, fortified each time with another whiskey, it was agreed by all present that the sword had to be locked away in the back and Gimmie was forced to use the scabbard to relive the event. Otherwise, several bar members would have parted with ears or hands as Gimmie's energetic waving became more erratic.

Dan O'Hara, who slept through the event, was so upset to have missed the action that he swore off drinking. That day he made more money than he had in a normal week; the next day he started to celebrate his good fortune, and promptly fell off the wagon.

As the day wore on, the previous night's events started to acquire the patina of folk lore. The first question asked of anyone in the bar was "Were you actually here when it happened?" Many of the answers were quite far from the truth.

Tim Sullivan searched out 'Big Ed' who was nursing a beer while basking in the attention of several hangers on and asked, "Why did those two clowns try a stickup here of all places?"

"Well," pontificated 'Big Ed',"Friday is pay day for most working stiffs, and a busy bar has a lot of loose cash. They were probably cruising past, seen the mob through the window, and figured it would be easy pickings. Obviously, they didn't know there would be a bar full of cops. However, I'll bet they don't try that again without casing the place better the

next time. If they are smart, they will probably go back to heisting liquor stores.

Tommy Clancy, who was occupying his regular booth, and fending off the offer of his tenth free beer from the crowd, was asked by a former upstairs spectator "Why did you boys split when the police came? You're all cops and the two guys had tried to hold you up."

"Think about it," said Tommy." If you fire a single shot from a service revolver, you have to fill out a ton of paper, and go in front of a board to answer hundreds of questions. We fired off fifty rounds, using a number of illegal weapons; we were all off duty; we were all drinking and we were not all sober. In addition, we did a fair amount of damage to a lot of real estate, but luckily, no innocent bystanders were hit. Who needs the hassle; the easiest thing was to disappear; so that's what we did."

It should be noted that nobody ever came in to hold up O'Hara's bar again. Of course, the legend flew around the Bronx but it must also have its counterpart in Harlem. It would be interesting to hear the story from the other side. It could be a very amusing story.

From then on, the bar was quiet until it closed of its own volition and moved into other hands. For O'Hara's sleeping eventually caused him to slide into bankruptcy as his "friends" gently put him to bed and gently ripped him off.

THE END