

Veteran Pilot Saw Action In Three Wars
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Veteran pilot Oliver O'Mara Jr. and his wife Ruth look through photographs from World War II Monday, June 11, at their home. O'Mara was a pilot in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. (J.R. Oppenheim/Daily News)

Oliver O'Mara Jr. served and saw action in three wars: World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

Oliver O'Mara Sr., whose teammate was the legendary Casey Stengel, was within three years of wrapping up his career as shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers when his son, Oliver O'Mara Jr., was born in Brooklyn, New York, on Aug. 17, 1921.

"My dad knew Babe Ruth quite well," O'Mara said. "They played a lot of ball together."

At the age of 18, O'Mara was ready to serve his country. But Oliver Sr. was just a bit reluctant to see his son go off to war.

"I took my dad out and got him drunk so he'd sign the papers," O'Mara said.

After boot camp came officer school, followed by flight school. O'Mara graduated as a flight officer fighter pilot of the Army Air Corps in November 1943.

World War II

"A month later I was in the Pacific Theater flying P-51 Mustangs, Curtiss P-40 Tomahawks and P-47 Thunderbolts on Saipan and Iwo Jima," said O'Mara.

While flying a P-51 off Iwo Jima, O'Mara took a hit from heavy ground fire on the island.

"My plane was in flames," said O'Mara. "I had to bail out."

Bailing out over the Pacific, more than 10 miles from the island, he inflated his one-man raft and climbed in. He spent three days drifting on the sea.

O'Mara was fortunate that a Japanese plane did not spot and strafe him, ending his life there and then. But he was even luckier when an American submarine surfaced less than fifty feet from him.

"It was the U.S.S. Steelhead," said O'Mara. "Was I glad it wasn't a Japanese sub! I had somehow injured one of my arms during the bail-out, so I needed help getting out of the raft and into the sub. A sailor jumped off the deck of the sub, swam to the raft and got me on board. His name was Joe Magnola. He was from New Jersey. Because the sub had its own mission to accomplish, I

ended up staying on her for 18 days before they dropped me off back with my squadron."

To this day, Magnola and O'Mara stay in touch with each other, exchanging Christmas cards each year.

In February and March of 1945, O'Mara and his squadron, called the Sun Setters, flew air support for the U.S. Marines during the Battle of Iwo Jima. Once Iwo Jima was taken by our troops, O'Mara and his squadron flew from Saipan to Iwo Jima one last time to establish and protect a new airbase there that would become a strategic landing point for our B-29 bombers in the weeks ahead.

"There were lots of caves on Iwo Jima," O'Mara said. "Lots of Japanese soldiers had committed hari-kari (ceremonial suicide in those caves. We found several of their bodies. And we found something else, too, a wooden box with personal belongings from one of the soldiers."

During his World War II career, O'Mara flew 32 missions, bailing out five times, and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters, the Purple Heart and two battle stars, one for Air Offensive Japan and the other for the Battle of Iwo Jima.

Returning from the Pacific to Wisconsin in the fall of 1945, O'Mara and his childhood sweetheart, Ruth Slater, were wed on Oct. 3, that year. His squadron was demobilized a month later. But for Captain Oliver O'Mara, his time as a pilot in wartime was not over not by a long shot.

Korea

Eight years later, in March 1953, O'Mara was recalled to Ellington Air Force Base, Texas, where he attended the U.S. Air Force Helicopter School.

Shortly after graduating, O'Mara served as a rescue pilot over Korea, flying the Sikorsky H-19 helicopter to pick up wounded U.S. ground troops, downed pilots in the sea, and transport much-needed equipment, weapons, and ammunition to our fighting men.

"I took a lot of hits from the enemy, but never enough to knock me down," said O'Mara. "It was mostly from small ground fire, nothing big."

In 1955, Captain O'Mara was awarded the Sikorsky Flying "S" for his life saving missions in Korea.

After Korea, O'Mara flew helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft at bases in Nevada, Florida, Texas, California, and Japan.

O'Mara had kept a Japanese flag he found in a cave on Iwo Jima, and in 1960 took it with him during his tour of duty in Japan. His wife, Ruth, went with him.

"I asked a Japanese man to help translate what the writing was on the flag," said O'Mara. "He did so, and told me that the writings were actually the names of the Japanese soldier's family members. The mother of the soldier was contacted. You know, she had spent all those years, from 1945 until 1960, not knowing for sure what had happened to her son or where he had died. Then a Japanese television station did a special program about it. They asked me to be on the show, but I'm not really into the television stuff, so I didn't do it."

Vietnam

Following helicopter combat crew training in an HH-3E Jolly Green Giant, Major O'Mara then went to the Republic of Vietnam in July 1966.

"My job was flying missions to rescue our downed pilots," said O'Mara. "On one of these missions, my Jolly Green (helicopter) and a second one went into a narrow box-like canyon on the Black River in North Vietnam. We were trying to rescue a two-man crew of an F-4C Phantom Jet that had been shot down by the Viet Cong. The ground fire got really hot. They were shooting at us from both sides of the canyon ridge above us. Whenever we tried to hover for the pickup, we became sitting ducks."

After several dicey passes and narrow escapes, O'Mara's helicopter was nearly disabled by all the enemy fire it had taken. Even the rescue hoist was so badly damaged that it would not function.

"I knew if we stayed in there any longer that we were going down for good," said O'Mara. "We had to get out of there and back to base."

But before he did, O'Mara directed another Jolly Green Giant helicopter into the area that successfully rescued both downed pilots.

From July 1966 to May 1967, Lt. Colonel O'Mara rescued eight pilots on seven separate missions. He flew a total of 128 missions, 16 of them over North Vietnam.

Following Vietnam, O'Mara was assigned in 1967 to Holloman Air Force Base where he worked in what was then called the Directorate of Aircraft and Missile Test.

On April 2, 1969, Lt. Col. O'Mara was awarded the Air Force Cross, second only for the Air Force to the Congressional Medal of Honor. His citation read:

"On 5 October 1966, while flying an HH-3E helicopter as rescue commander, Lt. Col. Oliver E. O'Mara voluntarily flew into a known area of intense hostile activity in an effort to rescue a downed American pilot. While under intense small arms and heavy automatic weapons fire, during which his rescue aircraft received numerous hits, he made repeated attempts to reach the downed airman. Only after his aircraft received extensive damage which rendered it incapable of rescue operations, did he withdraw from the area.

However, he then directed another helicopter to the site for a successful pick-up. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of the opposing force, Lt. Col. O'Mara reflected the highest credit upon himself and the U.S. Air Force."

At the time O'Mara received the Air Force Cross, only 23 had been awarded, with 15 being given posthumously.

"I can't help but feel a little unworthy about the Cross," O'Mara said. "Considering that rescue was my profession, any one of our group could have and would have done the same thing in the same situation."

Retirement

On Sept. 1, 1970, O'Mara retired after 28 collective years in the service of his country that took him into three wars as an aviator.

He and his wife, Ruth, have two daughters, Peggy, now 60, and Susan, now 54.

In 1997, at a reunion in San Antonio for the surviving members of the Sun Setters, the squadron he had flown with during World War II in the Pacific Theater, O'Mara ran into one of his old fly buddies, Ned "Monk" Baldwin. The two men embraced each other and wept.

Today, Oliver and Ruth O'Mara live in Alamogordo near the Desert Sands Golf Course.

Oliver turns 86 this August.