In February 1947, Thomas R. "T.R." Delaney was a 41-year-old father of six with a law practice on the shores of Flathead Lake in Polson, Montana (population 2,000).

A faithful Democrat and a 1930 Creighton University law graduate, Delaney was disappointed to fail the medical examination for service in World War II, but he looked to other outlets for service. He was elected Lake County Attorney in 1944 in a wave of New Deal/World War II Democratic support along with his friend and fellow Irishman, Michael Mansfield, of Montana’s 1st Congressional District. And now, a year and a half after victory in the Pacific, here was Mansfield calling: if Delaney couldn’t help win the war, would he help win the peace?

The Congressman asked Delaney if he would be willing to shoulder some of the load in another massive undertaking — the prosecution of Japan’s war criminals, including the man toward whom so much American wartime rage was directed, former Prime Minister Hideki Tojo. If Delaney hesitated, it wasn’t for long. He kissed goodbye his wife of 17 years and his children and began the 5,100-mile trek from the wilds of Montana to the still war-torn streets of Tokyo.

"In a lot of ways, it was a first example of carrying the Creighton mission forward on a global scale," said Creighton Law Professor Michael Kelly, who specializes in international criminal law and leads a summer course in Nuremberg, where the first endeavor into international criminal justice was effected in the aftermath of the Allied victory over Nazi Germany. "It was incredibly exciting for us as a university and a law school to bring this to light, because this is what Creighton does and here’s a Creighton alumnus right in the middle of it."

Within months, Delaney’s family had also arrived in Japan. By then, he was immersed in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East as a deputy prosecutor, analyzing evidence of atrocities orchestrated by Tojo and other high-ranking members of the Japanese military and government.

In 1985, Delaney donated his personal and legal papers from the Tokyo trials to his alma mater. The papers, comprising 24 sets of documents and several thousand pages, arrived at the Creighton School of Law shortly thereafter.

"It’s such a fascinating story," said Karen Griffin, Delaney’s granddaughter, who was instrumental in helping Creighton rediscover the papers. "My mother had amazing accounts of her time in Japan — one of her best friends from that time is now the Empress of Japan — and I’d always wanted to know more about what my grandfather had done and when I started asking around, aunts and uncles started telling me Creighton University had his papers from the trials."

Though always aware of the papers’ existence, the law library didn’t unearth them again until Griffin inquired about their status in 2012.

"We knew the papers existed, it was just a matter of bringing them out, taking a look and finding out what we had," said Corinne Jacox, a reference librarian who helped Griffin locate the papers and has spent the time since cataloging and digitizing Delaney’s archive for the Klutznick Law Library’s Venteicher Rare Book Room and into an online format, the Delaney Tokyo Papers. "I treasure historical documents like this and when you can find something out there this significant and special, it’s a great opportunity."

For the 70th anniversary of the onset of the trials, which opened on April 29, 1946, Jacox is planning a display of the papers at the law library.

Delaney’s efforts with the evidence helped prosecutors working on the closing statement in Tojo’s trial summation, which amounts to about 200 pages in the collection and which Kelly said is itself an indication of the tremendous collaboration of the lawyers working on the trial.

"He really was an instrumental part of the back and forth work that goes into a closing," Kelly said. "You get a great sense of that in the papers. It’s a true collaborative effort between the lawyers, building that case and then summing it up."

Tojo was one of seven Japanese officials executed for crimes against humanity. He was hanged on Dec. 23, 1948.

Delaney’s decision to take part in the Tokyo trials launched a 25-year legal career in the American Foreign Service. After his posting in Japan, he worked as a lawyer for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Africa and the Middle East and also as a judge in Okinawa.

His efforts at helping Japan rebuild its legal and governmental infrastructure earned Delaney a commendation from the U.S. Supreme Command in 1952. He returned to Nebraska in the early 1970s and served as a Bellevue City Planning Commissioner and on a mayoral steering committee for social action.

Delaney died in 1989 at the age of 83, in St. Petersburg, Florida.

"What I learned from my research at Creighton and interviews with my aunts and uncles was my grandfather’s incredible contribution to our country in all of his work with the foreign service and USAID," Griffin said. "But most of all, what came out of the research was his complete dedication to his family. I recall that he never talked much about what he had done, he was always more interested in what you were learning or doing. My family and I are grateful that Creighton University has preserved and now digitized his papers for scholars to use in their research. I am sure that he would be very happy to know that they are accessible to anyone interested in this fascinating time in history."

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