

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

2nd Lt Patrick Alva O'Brien MC, 66 Squadron RFC

by John Grech

Patrick Alva O'Brien was eager to take part in World War I and, like many Americans prior to US involvement in the war, he crossed the northern border to Canada to join the Royal Flying Corps. His story is one of heroism, determination and adulation by the American public with a brief glimpse of fame, but finally rejection. Except where noted, photos and illustrations in the following article are from the author's collection.

Early Life

Patrick Alva O'Brien was born in the small Illinois town of Momence, in Kankakee County, near Chicago on 13 December 1890. He was the seventh of nine children born to Margaret O'Brien (née Hathaway) and her labourer husband Daniel O'Brien. It should be noted that the family bible gives his name as Alva F. O'Brien.

In his book *Outwitting the Hun*,¹ Pat stated that he started flying at the age of 18 in 1912; if this date is correct, he would have been born in 1894. His mother and some of his brothers and sisters resided in Momence from 1917 to 1921; another brother, Merwin, lived in California at the time of Pat's death. Pat started his flying career in 1912 at West Pullman near Chicago, and later went to California where, he noted, he and an associate, Californian and later Captain Ira Ford Fuller, from Pepin, Wisconsin,² built their own aeroplane. Before 1916 it is known that Pat lived in Richmond, California and worked for the Santa Fe Railway Company as a fireman.

USA and the Punitive Expedition 1916

In January 1916, a group of armed Mexicans (so-called Villistas) attacked a train on the Mexico North Western Railway, near Santa Isabel, Chihuahua, and killed 18 American employees of the American Smelting and Refining Company. This raid was thought to have been instigated by rebel General *A true copy of Pat O'Brien's birth certificate states his date of birth as 13 December 1890.*



The white band on Patrick Alva O'Brien's uniform hat clearly shows him to be a Royal Flying Corps cadet.

Francisco ('Pancho') Villa. In a cross-border raid on 9 March 1916, Mexicans attacked Columbus, New Mexico. The US government responded to that attack by sending 6000 troops commanded by (then) Brigadier General John J. Pershing to Mexico to pursue Villa. During that search, the Aviation Section of the US Signal Corps undertook its first air combat mission with eight Curtiss JN-3 airplanes from the 1st Aero Squadron. The US expedition was eventually called off after failing to find Villa, who successfully evaded capture.

Patrick O'Brien joined the Aviation Section of the US Army Signal Corps in 1915, with hopes of joining the action against Villa, but he was stationed at San Diego for about eight months with the Army Flying School. North Island San Diego Aviation Camp was established in 1911 by the Army Signal Corps after Glenn Curtiss made the first flight on the uninhabited island on 26 January 1911. In 1915 the camp became a permanent ASC aviation school. The US government purchased the site in August 1917, by

which time Pat was probably a prisoner of war. The Camp became known as Rockwell Field in 1918 and was shared by the Army and Navy until 1939.

After some eight months of lack of action, Pat became restless and resigned from the ASC in late 1915 or early 1916. He made his way to Canada, where he joined the Royal Flying Corps. According to some sources, he joined the Canadian Army in Victoria, British Columbia, although the author has been unable to confirm this. If Pat followed the usual pattern he would have been sent to 4 School of Military Aviation in Toronto for basic training and then to 81 Canadian Training Squadron at Camp Borden for his initial flying training; later he became a flying instructor.

With the Royal Flying Corps

On 15 June 1917 Pat was one of 18 Canadian and US-born cadets to sail to England aboard the White Star Liner SS *Megantic*. Other group members from the British Empire and

During Pat O'Brien's RFC pilot training, he flew a Curtiss JN-4, as seen in this photo.

