

Air Force Is Career For Wing Cmdr. at 25

It Runs in the Family of Pete O'Brian, Toronto

London, March 23.—A motor car accident in the early weeks of the war deprived him of the opportunity to take his place in the Battle of France. He rose to squadron leader status on a ground job, dropped two ranks downward when he took to the air again, soon to gain decoration. Today, at the tender age of 25, Peter Geoffrey St. George O'Brian, D.F.C., of Toronto, wears wing commander's braid, the youngest Canadian to hold that rank operationally.

The title of wing commander flying went to the Torontonian when he moved from a group training post in Fighter Command to take over a wing.

Air force is a career with Pete O'Brian, and he should come by it naturally. It runs in the family. His father, Group Capt. Geoffrey S. O'Brian, A.F.C., is one of the most popular officers in the R.C.A.F., and presently is commanding officer of a personnel reception centre in England. His young brother PO. Jim O'Brian has rounded out the family group since coming to England, and is training for role of fighter pilot. Now a fourth O'Brian is contributing a share of service. Mrs. P. G. St. G. O'Brian, who was the former Miss Edith Beatty of Toronto, came to England last year, and was married to Wing Cmdr. O'Brian shortly afterward. Her bit toward the cause is driving a Y.M.C.A. tea wagon.

Lots of Experience.

Looking every bit as young as his 25 years would indicate, Pete O'Brian has crammed a lot of experience into his air force career. Black-haired, well-set-up and athletic-looking, he stepped straight from school in Toronto into the Royal Air Force College at Cranwell, Eng., in January, 1936. He hasn't been home since.

War found him training for army co-operation work, and mighty well trained at that. When graduation came from Cranwell, it found him in an outstanding role. He was awarded the Sword of Honor.

O'Brian was a casualty before he even saw enemy action. That was in September, 1939, when he was a flight lieutenant and adjutant of a squadron. An automobile accident put him out of commission. He was hospitalized for 17 days and rendered unfit for flying duties for some time. His squadron went to France without him.

By November of 1939 he was back in service again, but grounded. He became controller at a R.A.F. station, with rank of acting squadron leader. He was destined to remain at that post for a lengthy period, as war became more intense over Britain.

Gets Into Battle of Britain.

The Battle of Britain was in full swing before O'Brian could get at the controls of a combat aircraft again. This time he found himself with Fighter Command. On joining the fighter unit his rank dwindled to flying officer. It did not take him long to gain his first taste of aerial battle. On Aug. 20, 1940, a Heinkel 111 failed to return



Wing Cmdr. Peter O'Brian, D.F.C.

to its German base, following a reconnaissance flight. O'Brian had bagged his first Hun.

In late September of 1940, O'Brian took over a flight of Gladiators at an English Channel airdrome, and he flew that equipment until the beginning of 1941. At that time the flight was stepped up to a fighter squadron, and O'Brian was named as commanding officer. They became Hurricane-equipped, but seldom saw a Hun. In May of that year they found new duties awaiting them, and things immediately took a turn for the better. They had become Hurricane night fighters, delegated to "beat-ups" and night intruder work, as well as convoy and patrol duties.

He Wins D.F.C.

O'Brian dismissed his activities in that direction in a decidedly sketchy way, but it was the type of work which earned him the purple-and-white-striped ribbon on his tunic. He is very non-committal regarding a certain night intruder raid in his Hurricane, which carried him over wide water in the English Channel, and deep into enemy-occupied France, to Rennes.

By May of that year further recognition came his way. He was taken off "ops" and given the post of Wing Commander Training at a Fighter Command Group Headquarters -- a wing commander at the age of 24. Of Canadians overseas, only Wing Cmdr. Harold Kerby of Toronto has been able to claim that status at such a youthful age, when he commanded a R.C.A.F. Army Co-operation Squadron. O'Brian is six months younger than Kerby, having turned 25 on Sept. 19.

Prior to coming overseas in late 1935, O'Brian had made quite a name for himself in athletics, both at Trinity College School and University of Toronto Schools. He was captain and flying wing on the football team of the latter school, and also played on its hockey team. He tried his hand at athletics in England when he entered Cranwell, and played on the wing in rugger, also engaging in swimming there.