



# Sabretache

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## A Canadian in the Devil's Brigade - Part 1

By Roy Akins

**Thomas Francis O'Brien** was born in Toronto, ON in December, 1913. He had been working as an assistant manager in sales when on 30 May 1942 he volunteered for active duty with the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. He was initially posted to the 7<sup>th</sup> Division Petrol at Camp Borden but one month later was TOS to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Tank Brigade, R.C.A.S.C. By the end of July he had qualified as Driver I/C Class III (Wheel).

On 27 August 1942 O'Brien volunteered for a special unit that was looking for volunteers. He reported for the selection process at NDHQ, Ottawa and 2 days later and was accepted into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion (1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Special Service Battalion). He immediately proceeded to Fort William Henry Harrison in Helena Montana, and became a qualified parachutist on 5 September.



*Tom O'Brien in full dress uniform, October 1942. Tom O'Brien*



*Photograph of the last Force parade in Helena, MT in support of the local war bonds drive, April 6, 1943.*

O'Brien went on to participate in all major engagements undertaken by the First Special Service Force; the Aleutians, Italy and Southern France. After the battle for Monte la Difensa and the Italian mountain campaign, Pte. O'Brien was double-promoted to Acting Sergeant on 25 January 1944. That rank was confirmed on 12 July and on 20 August he was promoted to Staff Sergeant.

*Type 3 SSI removed from S/Sgt. O'Brien's uniform*



### Here is his story,

*My name is Thomas F. O'Brien, and I was with the 1st Special Service Force, which was a special unit from 1942 to 1944 in the Second World War. I joined the Paratroops - as we thought - in August, '42, and we thought we'd be going to Fort Benning, Georgia, because there were no paratroop facilities in Canada. However, we ended up in Helena, Montana, at Fort William Henry Harrison, and the first item on the program was to become qualified as paratroopers. So from Sunday to Friday they gave us a fast course in paratrooping, and we made our first jump in five days. We were there from August, '42, until April of '43, but we shipped out to Norfolk, Virginia, for amphibious rubber boat landings. And we did that in Virginia for about six weeks. Then we were sent to Burlington, Vermont, to Ethan Allen, where we took night training. We were then shipped out to San Francisco, and to the Aleutian Islands for the invasion of Kiska. And we made the invasion, but fortunately the Japs had left, and we were back in the States shortly. From there we went back to Virginia, and from there to Casablanca. We were there for a couple of days and then on to Oran, and into Italy in late November of '43. We had our first combat mission at a little town called Mignano, and we were to take Mount La Difensa, which the Germans held, and they were holding up the drag on Rome. We were taken up to the front lines one evening, and from there we marched up the mountain - or walked up the mountain, climbed it - and when daylight appeared we bivouacked. It was silent all day, and on the second day we made the final assault on the mountains, which we took. From there we went on to other mountains. And from there we went to the Anzio beach head. We were there from February until the break out in May. I was wounded just south of Rome, and never did get to Rome, but I got back to the force in July, and we made the invasion of southern France on August 15th, '44, two islands off the coast of Marseilles [Levant and Port-Cros]. From Marseilles, we marched through to the battalion frontier, and we were there from probably September until December when the force broke up. We went back to Italy, and of the original members that went to Helena, Montana, we were all sent back to England, and of the nine hundred or a thousand of us, there were a hundred and fifty of us. From there, I did a little instructing and got a lower category. I was shipped home in May of '45, and was demobilized in August of '45.<sup>1</sup>*



**FSSF Enlistment Photo, Eric Queen**



*(L-R): Lt. Hugh Savage 1-3, Sgt. Albert Sproule 5-2, Sgt. Morris Lazarus 5-2, Sgt. Thomas O'Brien 5-2 and Sgt. Delbert Stonehouse 5-2, Anzio Beachhead, 1944. O'Brien is using his V-42 Stiletto to cut the ties on the parcel.*



**Sgt. Tom O'Brien wearing a US Jump Jacket, Southern France, 1944.**



*Sgt. Tom O'Brien in Southern France, 1944.*



*Sgt. Charles Shepard 6-2 and S/Sgt. Tom O'Brien, England, 1945. Shepard wears the Spearhead SSI on his right sleeve, while O'Brien is wearing a French SAS cap badge.*

FIRST CANADIAN SPECIAL SERVICE BATTALION C.A.(A)

This is to certify that, *E. 10415, Sgt. O'Brien, T.F.* has undergone the following specialized training while on the strength of this Battalion.

Qualified Parachutist.	X
Army Skiing, 6 weeks	X
Mountain warfare, 3 weeks	X
Amphibious landings and rubber boats, 6 weeks	X
Demolitions, 2 months	X
Special Recon Track Vehicles, 1 month	X

He has also had considerable training in tactics and United States weapons, he has qualified in the following:

M.1 Rifle .30	X	Rifle Grenade	X
Pistol .45	X	Flame Thrower	X
Johnson Automatic Rifle	X	Mortar 60mm.	X
Browning Automatic Rifle	X	All Purpose Grenades (US)	X
Thomson Sub Machine Gun	X	Chemical Warfare	X
Browning L.M.G.	X	Radio Operator	X
Anti-Tank Rocket Launcher	X	First Aid	X

*A. Brunette, Capt*  
 Officer Commanding 51st 2 Reg  
 Lt. Cdn. Special Service Bn.

***S/Sgt. Tom O'Brien's Specialized Training Record.***

S/Sgt. O'Brien received the 1939-45 Star, the Italy Star, the France and Germany Star, the Defence Medal, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal 1939-45.

Little else is known of him, but fellow Force member Charles Mann did have this to say, "Tom O'Brien was the president of the Force Association and a good one at that".<sup>1</sup>

Tom O'Brien passed away on 23 October 2004, 2 months shy of his 91<sup>st</sup> birthday.

**S/Sgt. Tom O'Brien's Memorabilia**

*Included are a piece of cord for the US Garrison cap and a 1960's era Canadian Parachute Badge.*



**S/Sgt. O'Brien's Collar Discs**



*S/Sgt. O'Brien's ID bracelet*



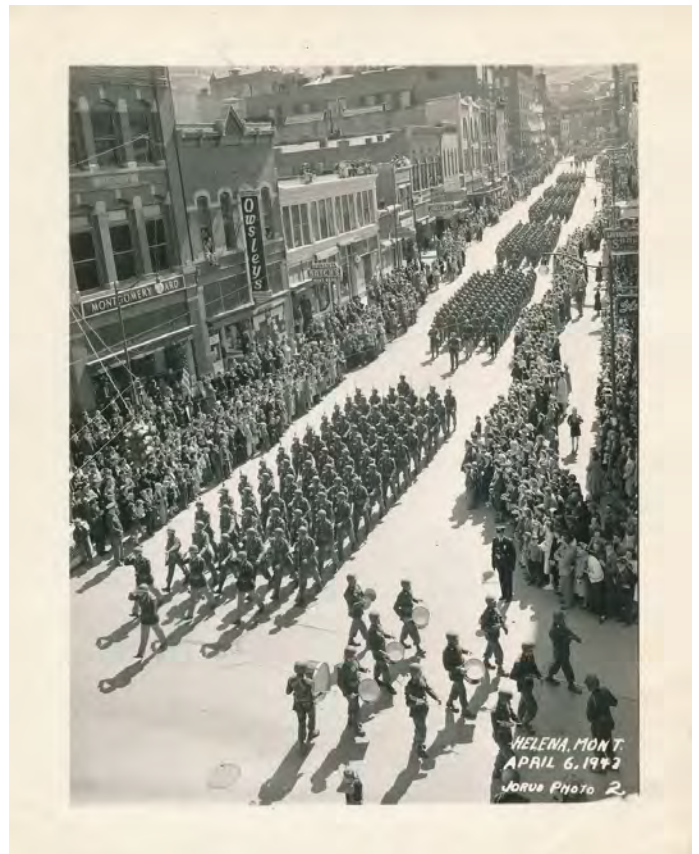
*S/Sgt. O'Brien's Souvenir of Italy wrist bracelet which he likely obtained in Rome*



*S/Sgt. O'Brien's Shoulder Loop; this is the type that Force members acquired in Southern France*

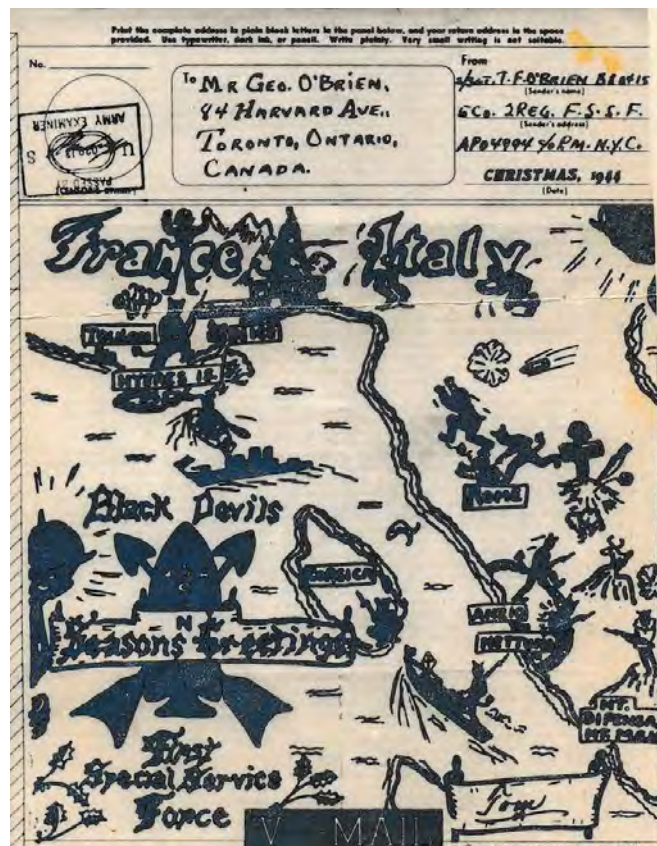
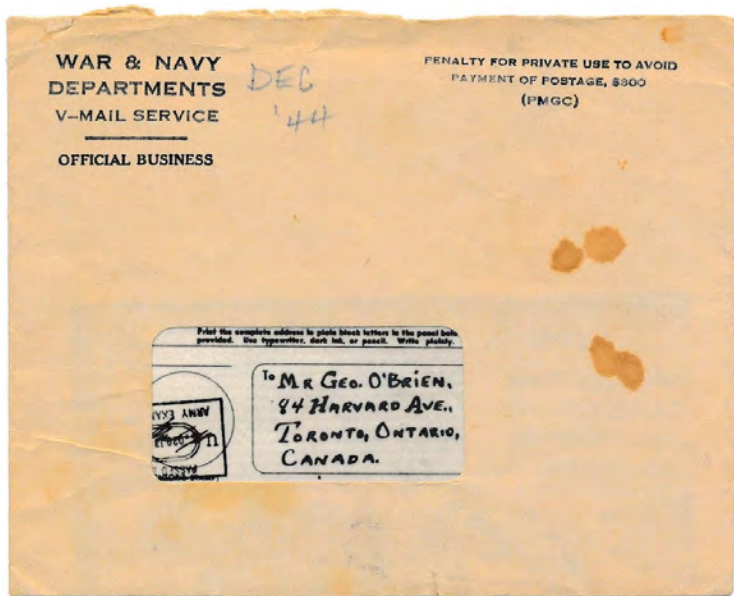


HELENA, MONT.  
APRIL 6, 1943  
Jorus Photo 1



HELENA, MONT  
APRIL 6, 1943  
Jorus Photo 2

*V-Mail S/Sgt. O'Brien sent to his father, Christmas 1944.*



*Spearhead print, circa late 1940s early 1950s.*

*January 1945 Black Devil print by designated Force artist Bob Carb, who also created the artwork for the Force V-Mails.*



**Thank You Member Roy Akins for this article**

- Notes
1. The Memory Project
  2. Email from Charles Mann . June 2015

**Sabretache**

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The SOCIETY

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Contact Editor: David Gale david@sunnyspotservice.ca