

"I'm luckiest man in the R.A.F.," was the way in which Flight Lieutenant E. R. Baker was once described, and few in the Royal Air Force or Royal Navy would disagree. Information concerning him, however, was so meagre that one morning I trudged through the deep snow of a distant city to travel all day in search of someone who knew him.

Around that city dozens of motor cars lay abandoned in the drifts, but the train gradually carried me into a belt of country that was quite balmy and spring-like, with no snow to be seen. It was an astonishing transformation. For hours I journeyed slowly through sunny valleys over which the touch of spring already seemed to hover. It was lovely country with beauty everywhere, far removed from war. But the tops of the mountains piling up around were covered with snow. Now and again the sun was reflected by fairylike waterfalls which had solidified into icicles, and by evening I arrived at my destination. '

Never in my life have I seen anything more beautiful than the scene which greeted me next morning. The snow on the peaks around was turned to a rosy -pink by the sun, their bases were purple and blue, lovely clouds made a pattern in the sky and in the foreground were sparkling blue waters with ships falling picturesquely into place and Sunderland flying-boats at their moorings, while the buildings of the town were grouped so artistically round the waters that it was difficult to believe that this enchanted place was in the British Isles.

Gazing on the scene to take in its full beauty before the changing light banished the exquisite tones, I went on to pay a call to try to find out something about the luckiest man in the Royal Air Force.

He was, I learned, 6 feet 2 inches tall, with a spare figure, very blue eyes, a small fair moustache to set off a well-cut mouth and firm chin, and a natural wave in his fairish hair. Very modest, quiet of speech, with a sense of humour, Flight Lieutenant Ernest Reginald Baker, D.F.C., had at that time wrought more havoc among the German U-boat fleet than any other man in the fighting services. He was the captain of a Sunderland flying-boat which he regarded with as much affection and pride as any owner of a shapely yacht. His flying-boat, which he christened Queen of the Air, had her name -painted over the doorway leading into the hull, and over the name were painted four white stars.

Those stars were signs of high honour, for each represented a submarine which was sunk by Flight Lieutenant Baker and his crew of the Queen of the Air. Happily the same boat and crew took part in all four triumphs

At the beginning of 1941 Flight Lieutenant Baker had already done 1000 hours of active service flying. Before the war he was the second pilot of a Sunderland flying-boat.

"My Skipper, who taught me all I know about flying-boats, was a South African-Flight Lieutenant A. S. Ainslie. He won the D.F.C. He was the grandest chap I've ever known we used to call him Angel. Unfortunately he got shot down by a U-boat," Baker once remarked.

They were out on patrol on September 3, 1939, and when they alighted at 4 o'clock in the afternoon they had no idea that war had been declared, nor had they a gun or a bomb on board.

On September 9th, they took off on their first war patrol and were lucky enough to sight a submarine on that initial trip. They at once attacked with bombs, but to their chagrin the submarine escaped. During their second patrol on September 14th, they again sighted a submarine and let loose their load of bombs, but once more the enemy eluded them. On September 16th they went out for their third patrol and sighted their third submarine which was promptly bombed without avail.

Three submarines sighted on three trips and not one attack successful there is no need to touch on their feelings! Hopefully they took the air again on September 19th, and generous Dame Fortune gave them another chance to sink an enemy submarine, but although

their bombs crashed down without delay, the U-boat got away. Thus on four successive patrols Flight Lieutenant Ainslie and his second pilot Flight Lieutenant Baker had the unusual luck to sight four submarines and the misfortune to lose them all.

By trial and error some of the greatest discoveries have been made. As attacks had not given the results expected, it seemed that something more was needed to bring success. The question remained whether the method of attack and the weapons employed were the most suitable for the purpose. That was the problem which all those engaged on the task had to work out.

The following months increased the experience of Flight Lieutenant Baker. On those long patrols which took him hundreds of miles out into the Atlantic to watch over the convoys of ships that were conveying essentials to Great Britain, his knowledge of the tricks of the weather and the sea grew - with every hour that was added to his flying time. He tasted the joy of being promoted to command a fine new flying-boat which to him and her crew was the Queen of the Air, and he suffered the loss of his friend Ainslie, who was shot down by a U-boat.

It looked as though Dame Fortune, who had given him four chances to sink enemy submarines in the first month of the war, viewed him with disfavour. Then early on August 16, 1940, he dropped into the launch at the quay to be rushed out to the Queen of the Air, and by 7 o'clock he opened the throttle, taxied over the water and, took off to pick up a convoy and go on anti-submarine patrol. It was a dreadful day: The rain poured down and the base of the clouds was within 400 feet of the sea. The Sunderland thrashed through it, but the weather was so bad that her captain once said that he almost decided to go home. He changed his mind, however-which was as well.

Six hours of flying brought little improvement in the weather, but the activities going on at the primus stoves in the galley reminded the crew, whose appetites were in no way affected by weather or anything else, that lunch was ready, so they settled down to enjoy their meal and a friendly chat.

The engines roared rhythmically as the flying-boat cruised over the sea with the captain at the controls. The second pilot kept a keen watch on the seas below, though the bad weather made visibility poor. Suddenly the second pilot let out a shout of "sub!" and

pointed to port. A glance revealed the U-boat to the captain, who instantly sounded the warning Klaxon which made the crew drop knives and forks and jump to action stations.

"I put my foot on everything!" was the graphic way the captain on his return explained how he unleashed all his power to get to- the submarine before it could escape. "The U-boat was on the surface when we sighted it, and they must have sighted us at the same time, for they started to do a crash dive. By the time the submarine was down, I was diving low -over the top of it to drop a depth charge. The result was terrific. The whole of the surface of the sea seemed to shudder for yards around and then suddenly blew up. In the middle of the boiling sea the submarine emerged with its decks awash, then sank rather like a brick. I did a steep turn and came over it again just as it was disappearing. The explosion actually blew the submarine right out of the water. There was such an enormous amount of it out of water that my rigger saw daylight under it. I turned and climbed, and as the submarine heaved on its side and sank I dropped my bombs right across it. Large air bubbles came rushing up-one was over thirty feet across. Then great gobs of oil began to spread over the surface until a wide area was covered. I waited for about an hour until there was no more air or oil coming up, then I fetched a destroyer from the convoy and signalled what had happened. After carrying out an Asdic sweep and reporting no contact, the destroyer signalled to me: `Nice work. I hope you get your reward!'"

From the moment the submarine was sighted until it was destroyed only ninety seconds elapsed. A submarine can crash dive in about forty seconds, and unless the first blow is struck at it within about this time, there is a good chance of it escaping, so it will be realized that the captain and crew of a flying-boat must act instantly, without a second's hesitation, if they are to sink the U-boat. Obviously much depends on the distance at which the submarine is sighted and the time that the flying-boat takes to reach the spot.

So steeply did the captain bank the Queen of the Air to bring her round with the least possible delay, that each time he turned, members of the crew were flung about, and the observer who tried to take photographs collapsed on the bottom of the boat in a heap. But it was the rear-gunner who came off worst. Sitting in the tail waiting for a chance to have a crack at something, he suddenly thought that somebody was having a crack at him, for the flying-boat was so low when she made her attack that the force of the explosion gave her tail a jolt which bounced him out of his seat hard up against the top of the turret, with the result that his souvenir of the action was a large bump on top of the head. Of course, the other members of the crew laughed--no one was in a mood to do anything else after their triumph.

But as base was informed and the Queen of the Air continued to guard her convoy, memories of the grandest chap he'd ever known crept into the mind of the blue-eyed pilot sitting so quietly at the controls. "Well, thank God, that's one back for Angel!" was his first reaction.

As the rigger made a cup of tea to take to the captain, he was heard to remark: "I'll bet those fellows in the sub are drinking salt water now instead of tea! "

The Queen of the Air taxied to her moorings about 7.30 that evening, after flying for twelve and a half hours. Shortly afterwards the first white star appeared on her hull.

Less than a fortnight later, on August 29th, just before dawn, the Queen of the Air began to roar over the waters. The smoke from the adjacent city mingled with the mist to add to the difficulties of that particular base, but she got safely away and was soon heading out to

sea to pick up her convoy. At dawn contact was made and thereafter for hour on hour the captain and crew of the Sunderland carried out their normal submarine patrol, circling the convoy and flying ahead to search for submarines or mines in the course of the ships.

About 11 o'clock that morning the escorting destroyer signalled: "There's a U-boat about here somewhere." The sensitive ears of the Asdic had detected the sound of the submarine moving under the sea and the naval commander had at once invoked the eyes overhead to help to find the enemy:

Diving low, the flying-boat began a creeping line ahead search, but it was about ten minutes before the keen eyes on the aircraft saw the track of the submarine's periscope. Instantly the captain attacked with a depth charge, flinging the crew about as he came round steeply to get in another attack before climbing to finish the U-boat off with bombs. He made no mistake. All that he had been taught about the distance a submarine can travel under water in a minute was in his mind as he made his three attacks along the track of the invisible-enemy. Directly the Sunderland had finished attacking, the destroyer came roaring on the scene to add a few more depth charges just to make sure. The huge air bubbles which belched up to the surface and the gobs of oil which appeared and spread over the area marked the destruction of the enemy. When the destroyer carried out a sweep with the Asdic, she signalled: "No contact. Sub destroyed."

That evening the Queen of the Air landed at her base at 6 o'clock with a very happy crew. If anyone had cause for complaint it was the rear-gunner who had another large bump on the top of his head to prove how the explosion had flicked the tail and jolted him hard against the top of the turret. But he was in no mood to grouse. He was quite willing to stand any number of bumps providing they got the U-boats. So, with due ceremony, the second white star was painted on the hull of the flying-boat.

The third white star was earned on October 17th, about 300 miles away from Cape Wrath, that bleak headland in the north of Scotland, where the Atlantic pours through the Pentland Firth into the North Sea, often with such fury under the lash of the gales that the English Channel at its worst bears no comparison. Getting away in the dark about 5.30 in the morning, the crew of the flying-boat watched the dawn gradually light up the sea beneath them. For several hundred miles they cruised on their normal routine of guarding a convoy when, about 9.30, the warning Klaxon blared through the aircraft.

The front gunner sighted the submarine on the starboard side and at once signalled and opened fire. It was on the surface and travelling towards the convoy, but a smart look-out was being kept on the submarine, for it immediately did a crash dive. Quickly as it tried to escape, however, it was seconds too slow for the Sunderland, whose captain sent her diving

down to attack. Round came the flying-boat, throwing her crew about, to attack again. Just before this attack, all on board felt the flying-boat stagger as a great blow hit the tail. "There was a most colossal crack on the tail plane," explained Flight Lieutenant Baker later. "It gave us a big shaking."

The rear-gunner who received his usual bump on the head when the first attack was made, got a nastier bump still the second time round, for there was a big explosion inside the submarine and he saw pieces of wreckage flying up out of the sea and felt them hitting the tail plane. "The tail plane has been damaged by wreckage from the sub," he reported to the captain.

They watched the surface of the sea belching great air bubbles, saw the oil gushing up and spreading wider and wider, and as the sea quietened down the captain turned the flying-boat for home. "Are you all right?" he inquired of the rear-gunner through the "intercom." this is the service way of describing the intercommunication system between the members of an aircraft.

The rear-gunner felt his bumps. There is no need for you to press the buzzer in future," he replied, "as every time I get a crack on the head I shall know you've got a sub."

They landed safely at base, to find their tail plane fabric badly cut about in dozens of places by the wreckage hurled up from the exploding submarine. In due course the third star made its appearance on the hull of the Queen of the Air.

They were a happy crew who manned the Queen of the Air; they came to know each other so well during those long and, for the most part, monotonous patrols that in an emergency they knew exactly what to do and did it automatically. If the skipper got a laugh at the bumps of the rear-gunner, the rear-gunner and the rest of the crew got many a laugh at the expense of the skipper. Often the Klaxon blared out to send them to action stations where they waited tensely to attack, only to find that the skipper had dived down on some innocent basking sharks or a whale which he had mistaken for submarines;

"They used to laugh themselves silly," the skipper once remarked. So at his appointed times the captain of the Queen of the Air continued to take her across hundreds of miles of ocean to help to bring the tall ships, the food ships and ammunition ships and tank ships and aeroplane ships, safely to the shores of England.

And throughout those long patrols, keen eyes on the flying-boat searched for a sight of submarine or periscope, while the captain was ready to let loose death and destruction upon the German outlaws of the sea.

The weeks passed uneventfully until the beginning of December. At dawn on December 6, 1940, he took the Queen of the Air off the water and flew north to shepherd a convoy. The weather was unspeakable. The cloud base was down to 300 feet and visibility was nil. It was raining and snowing hard and the temperature was at zero. They thrashed along for hour after hour, peering out and seeing nothing, wondering where their convoy was and if the rain and flurries of snow would ever hold up.

Then the miracle happened. Quite suddenly about 1 o'clock the weather broke in a perfectly straight line across the sky. "It was the most amazing thing I have ever seen in my life. We stuck the nose of the aircraft out into clear weather while the tail was still enveloped in clouds the captain said afterwards when he came to explain this phenomenon "It took us a few seconds to grow accustomed to this bright light after flying in gloom for so long. As the second pilot and I blinked and looked ahead, we both sighted a sub at the identical moment, turned our faces to each other, opened our mouths together and howled in unison `Sub!' It was rather funny."

In that clear area, about a mile away, a large submarine of about 1,000 tons was travelling at ten knots on the surface. The aircraft which had been flying at cruising speed suddenly accelerated as her captain went after his quarry. He could see men on the conning tower and recognized her as an Italian submarine of the Ballilla class. The men on the conning tower saw their doom approaching. Quick as they were to close the conning tower and open the valves to flood the tanks that would take them down to safety, they were too late

As the Queen of the Air dived, her skipper saw part of the stem of the submarine still showing. He struck home on each side with depth charges and there was a big explosion as he climbed to renew the attack

The rear-gunner; rubbing the usual bump on his head, looked down excitedly. "There's a sheet of metal about six feet by four just been hurled out of the sea. It was all torn and twisted," he reported to the captain.

The crew of the flying-boat, circling round, gazed on the waters. There was no doubt about the destruction of the Italian submarine. The air released from the shattered craft shot up like fountains for six feet above the surface. The oil gushed up and spread until an area of about a square mile was covered with it.

"These Italians seem to be having a hell of a fine time in this war!" commented the wireless operator. "They're getting it where the chink got the chopper."

It was indeed amazing the way the weather cleared to enable them to sight and sink the submarine; it was no less amazing the way it closed down again as soon as their task was completed. The weather in fact grew so bad that the flying-boat could not make contact with her convoy, so she was obliged to return to base, where her skipper reported his fourth success and the crew duly painted the fourth star above her name.

Thus by sinking four enemy submarines before the end of 1940, Flight Lieutenant E. R. Baker, D.F.C., made ample amends for missing those four U-boats in September, 1939, while patrolling with his friend, the late Flight Lieutenant Ainslie, D.F.C.

1. From 'So Few' by David Masters, Published by Eyre & Spottiswoode (1941)