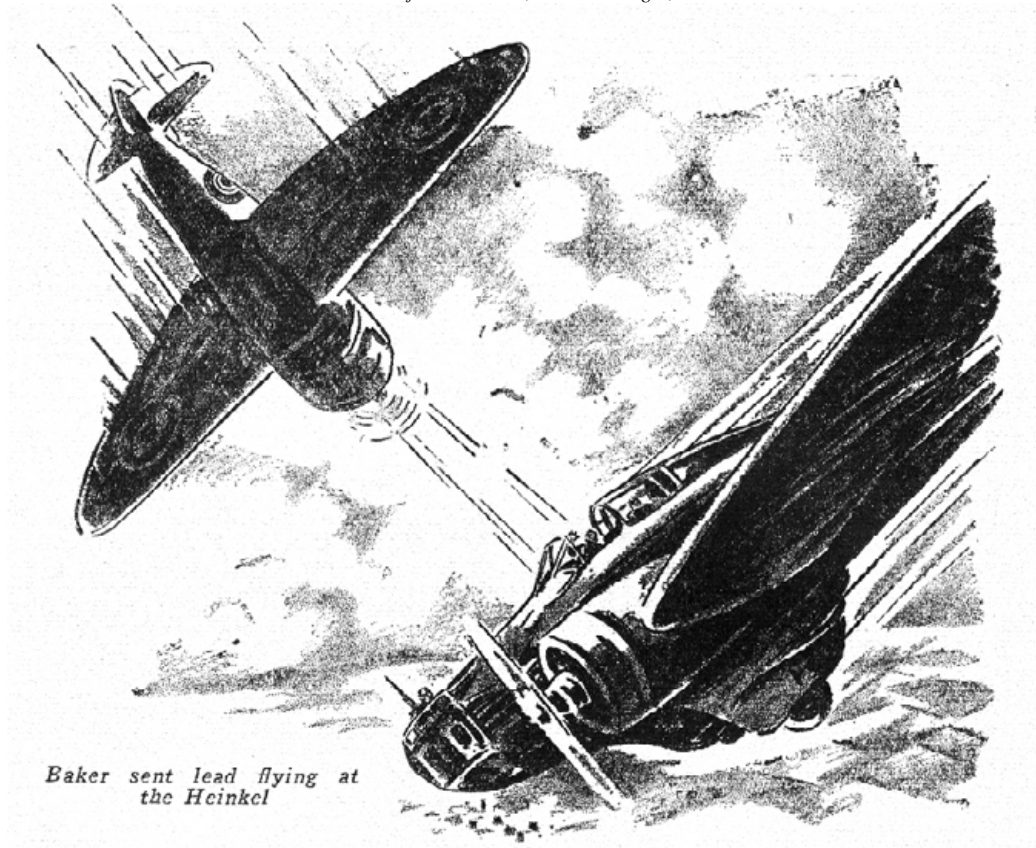


UNOFFICIAL

By JOHNSTON CARROLL

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*Jeff Baker, Newshawk, Sees Flaming Red and Engages
Himself in a Furious Air Combat of Life and Death!*

JEFF BAKER, Aviation Editor of the New York Press Syndicate, turned off the shower adjoining his London hotel room, grabbed a towel and dried his body. Throwing a bathrobe about him he lighted a cigarette, spewed a lungful of smoke into thin air and grunted contentedly.

"Just the Hawker-Seymore outfit to see," he murmured, "and then back home to the good old U. S. A."

With a happy nod for emphasis he went over to the door, opened it and picked up the morning paper. The banner headline hit him right between the eyes.

ENGLAND DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY

He didn't bother to read the details because he wasn't terribly surprised. Like everybody else in London, he knew that it was bound to come. However, he hadn't expected it so soon. Not on this particular Sunday morning anyway. He threw the paper away and began to climb into his clothes.

"Looks like you're just getting under the wire, kid," he grunted aloud. "A photo

finish, you might say.”

An hour later he walked across the lobby to greet a typical Englishman who had entered the hotel and had gone straight to the desk.

“You had me worried for a bit, Parsons.” Baker grinned and shook the man's hand. “Afraid you might not show up, considering what's in the papers. Have a drink?”

“Much too early, Mr. Baker.” The Englishman smiled, shaking his head. “And I have some disappointing news for you.”

Baker had a faint idea of what he hinted at, but he hesitated to ask whether it was true. For a moment he stared at Parsons, who was the Public Relations Counsel for Hawker-Seymore Aircraft, Ltd.

“I think I can guess, but shoot, Parsons,” he said, finally.

PARSONS sighed wearily.

“I'm afraid we'll have to cancel your inspection of the factory, Mr. Baker,” he said. “There are certain regulations now that we're at war. Do you understand?”

“No, I don't,” Baker said bluntly. “Naturally, I wouldn't write up anything you wouldn't want me to. And the new Hawker-Seymore 'Scout' isn't any secret. I just want a good look at it, a picture or two, and some general dope about its performance. What's wrong with that?”

“Not a thing,” the Englishman admitted. “This isn't Carver's idea, though. He's under Air Ministry jurisdiction, now. It's not right to have the plant over-run with persons who don't work there, eh?”

“Who says I'll overrun the place?” Baker grunted. “It won't take me more than a couple of hours.”

“I agree with you,” Parsons sighed. “Rules and regulations can be stupid, of course, but it's the principle of the thing. If Mr. Carver admits one, no reason why he shouldn't admit a dozen.”

“Is he at the plant, now?” Baker asked.

“This day of all days, naturally,” Parsons said.

“Then let's go,” the Yank said. “At least I can try out my sales talk. No harm in that.”

Parsons protested, but it wasn't any use. Baker led him outside, grabbed the first cab and snapped the address at the driver.

A little over an hour later they arrived at the plant, got out and Parsons lead the way into the office of the president of Hawker-Seymore Aircraft, Ltd. Two men in civilian clothes, but with military stamped all over them, were with Carver when Baker and Parsons entered the office. The Hawker-Seymore head looked annoyed for a split-second and then smiled at greeting.

“Good morning, Mr. Baker,” he said. “I see you came out anyway.”

“Don't blame Parsons, sir,” the Yank begged. “He tried his best to stop me, but I came anyway. Thought I'd try to convince you that I'm not a German spy.”

“Colonel Anderson, and Major Blake, of the Air Ministry,” Carver said and nodded to the two men in civilian clothes. Then nodding at Baker, “Mr. Baker, Aviation Editor of the New York Press Syndicate. I don't fancy you are an enemy spy, Mr. Baker, but I'm sure Mr. Parsons explained the point.”

“He did,” Baker said. Then leaning over the desk, “Look, Mr. Carver, I've been in Europe for the last four months. I've visited every aircraft and engine factory in every country. And—”

“Every factory?” spoke up Colonel Anderson.

“Well, most every one,” Baker grunted. “But what I'm getting at, is this. I've got practically all the dope on all European aircraft. It'll be one of the best syndicated series we ever put out. Now, your company is the last on my list. I don't want any secret

information. Not a bit of it. Besides, your new Scout job isn't a secret, exactly. I don't want any of your welding secrets, or all the dope on the new cooling system you employ for high altitude work. Just a general idea. Heck, I'm sailing for home day after tomorrow. Now, what do you say?"

CARVER said nothing. He looked at Colonel Anderson, and the Air Ministry official shook his head.

"Sorry, Mr. Baker," he said. "Can't be done. Right now no English aircraft company is interested in American sales."

"They will be in time," Baker argued. "This war isn't going to last forever."

"I certainly hope it won't," the colonel said. "Nevertheless we cannot give out any information on anything. This company isn't a private concern, now, you know. Government."

"But just let me look it over!" Baker insisted. "I'm not asking to fly it, like I did the other ships."

"Sorry, Mr. Baker," the colonel said stiffly.

"But what harm will it do?" Baker pleaded.

Colonel Anderson shrugged wearily. "Sorry, Mr. Baker. Would you mind excusing us now? A bit busy, you know."

All of Baker's newspaper instinct urged him to hold his ground and argue it out. Cold reason told him it would be no use, however. Not with Colonel Anderson. His type couldn't be softened up in a blast furnace.

"Thanks a lot, for nothing!" Baker growled and stormed out of the office.

Once outside he headed down the road to the village where he could get transportation back to London. At the end of a quarter of a mile he pulled up to a halt and stared across the broad expanse of the test flying field of Hawker-Seymore. There

were a dozen or more planes on the line, most of them with their props ticking over. All of them were the new Hawker-Seymore Scout jobs. He stared at them hungrily, and scowled at the men in Royal Air Force uniforms hovering about the ships.

"Rules and regulations, nuts!" he snarled. "And I used to think that there was red tape in the Yank army. Hell, these beef eaters invented that sort of thing. There she is, and the mugs won't even give me one close look. For two cents, I'd—" He emitted a string of fiery curses.

It helped a little to get the words off his chest. However, it wasn't a case of thought and action becoming one. Perhaps at first, but when he saw the squad of English sentries that hung about the field he changed his mind. There might be some regulation requiring those sentries to shoot first and ask questions later.

He growled to himself as he continued on down the road to the village. The dope on the Hawker-Seymore Scout would make his European aircraft survey complete. Of course, the omission of the Scout wouldn't spoil his series. Probably it wouldn't even be noticed, but that wasn't the idea. When Jeff Baker did something, he did it in spades. But that English colonel—

Reluctantly admitting defeat, he went to the village garage and hired a drive-yourself. He had the day to kill, and this was a section of England he had planned to tour in his spare time. Well, he had nothing but spare time, now, until his boat sailed for New York. Maybe driving around would help him think of an argument that would gain him Colonel Anderson's confidence.

Seven hours later he was on England's southern coast, near Hastings. The zigzagging tour he'd made had given him a whale of an appetite. But he couldn't get the Hawker-Seymore Scout out of his mind. He decided to stop at the next

village, get himself something to eat, and then head back.

SUDDENLY, he braked the car to an abrupt halt and stared wide-eyed upward, then to the southeast. Even as he did he heard the faint wail of the air raid sirens coming to him down wind. Dots to the southeast at first, but then they gradually took on definite shape and form. German Heinkel bombers flying low and fast!

Baker's heart leaped, and chilled a bit. The low altitude of the onswEEPing bombers told him that London wasn't the objective. No, too low. It was undoubtedly a *Blitzkreig* raid on the English coast. Perhaps a show of Hitler's contempt for England's declaration of war.

The instinct of self preservation, more than anything else, caused Baker to leap out of the car and head for an open field nearby. Having flown in the last war he knew full well the urge pilots got to strafe a car whenever they spotted one. The onrushing bombers might not even come that far inland, and might not even spot his small car.

"But this lad likes to play it safe," he stopped the argument, and leaped over the fence.

When he was close to the middle of the field, he suddenly skidded to a halt and glanced to the north. A squadron of six British planes was screaming down out of the heavens, heading straight for the nine bombers that were now less than three miles from the coast.

"A grandstand seat, first row, no less," Baker grunted. Then catching his breath, he let out a wild yell. "And how!" he boomed. "Those jobs are the Hawker-Seymore Scout!"

Even as he shouted the words one of the diving British planes seemed to falter for a moment. Then it zoomed off to the

side. It looked as though its pilot had either fainted, or was drunk. Baker held his breath and watched as the trim job flip-flopped this way and that about the sky, losing more and more altitude with each passing second. Unless a miracle happened the plane was going to crash. Impulsively Baker jerked his eyes from it and glanced at the other planes. Not one of them had turned back. There were enemy bombers ahead, a job to be done. The "cripple" would have to take care of himself as best he could.

Baker shifted his eyes back to the "cripple," and shouted with relief. The crazy gyrations of the plane had ceased. The ship still lunged about the sky a bit, but the pilot was making a desperate effort to get his high-powered charge under control. A moment later the roar of the engine died to a soft mutter, then the plane nosed down into a gentle, flat glide. Baker saw that the plane was going to land in the field in which he was.

He raced to the side to give the pilot a clear field to land on. Then he spun around and fastened his eyes on the plane. Lower and lower it came. For a split-second Baker was afraid it was going to undershoot the field and clip the tree tops at the lee end. The pilot goosed his engine, however, lifted the ship clear, and then sailed down and leveled off. It was a heavy landing. Baker watched for the wheels to buckle and the ship to ground loop. But the Hawker-Seymore Scout hadn't been made with toothpicks and piano wire. It bounced three times then clung to the ground and rolled to a stop. Baker already had his legs in motion.

HE SKIDDED to a halt by the plane, climbed up on the fuselage step and hauled back the tri-plex cockpit cowl. The young English pilot in the pit groaned and slowly turned his head to meet Baker's

gaze. Pain-whitened lips drew back in a brave but sad smile.

"Blasted luck!" came the half whispered words. "My side, I think. Can you help me get to a hospital?"

"Sure thing," Baker clipped. "I've a car here. Take it easy." Then he stepped down to the ground.

Two farmers were running toward him. He waved his arm for them to hurry.

"Help me get him out," Baker said. "Is there a hospital nearby?"

"At Curry, three miles along the road," one of them said.

"Good," Baker grunted. "I'll get my car. Ease him down onto the ground. Gently, now."

It was but a matter of minutes for Baker to rip away enough of the field fence to admit his car. The farmers had the pilot on the ground when he returned. The man's face was white and strained, but he managed an apologetic grin.

"Bit of a nuisance, what?" he murmured.

Baker grinned back at the pilot.

"Nuisance, my eye, brother!" he said. "You're Santa Claus. Okay, men! Up with him, easy."

They got the injured pilot into the rear seat and made him as comfortable as they could with their coats. Baker motioned one farmer in with the pilot, and the other to the wheel.

"No need to over-load it," he said. "Besides, I'm a pilot. I'll switch off his engine and wait here. Get going."

The farmers hesitated, but a groan from the sick pilot jarred them into action.

"Right you are," grunted the man at the wheel and got the car moving.

Baker watched until they were well along the road toward the town of Curry. Then he spun around and dashed over to the Hawker-Seymore Scout. He studied its trim, sturdy construction for a moment, his

technical eye not missing a thing.

Climbing into the cockpit a blinding thought struck him.

"Why not?" he breathed eagerly. "The chance of a lifetime. It *will* make the series complete, you dope. Get going!"

Even as he spoke the words he released the wheel brake and gently eased open the throttle. The supercharged Napier in the nose growled out its power. The ship quivered, moved forward faster, faster. Baker's blood danced, then froze as the field fence came streaking toward him. He eased back on the stick, zoomed clear of the obstacle.

He bolted upright in the seat as he suddenly remembered something. God, yes! There had been a raid! He twisted sharply and scanned the heavens. There wasn't the sign of a single ship. But at the speed modern war planes flew they could be over your head one minute, and way down over the horizon the next. Then his blood froze.

The savage yammer of aerial machine-gun fire had suddenly blasted against his ear drums from above. He looked straight up, and saw that the business end of an ugly twin engined Heinkel bomber was dropping down on him faster than light. One section of his tri-plex cowlings became a crisscross mess of tiny cracks, and half a dozen holes appeared in the "Dural" skin of the right wing, not three feet from his cockpit!

"Hey, nix!" he howled, and slammed the stick over.

THAT was a mistake. He didn't know the sensitiveness of the Hawker-Seymore Scout. During the next few seconds the plane nearly turned itself inside out before he got it under control. A flying mistake, perhaps, but it unquestionably saved his life. The German bomber pilot over-shot his mark and went roaring on by.

Split-seconds later, though, the huge craft whirled around surprisingly fast and came boring in again with its nose gunners blasting away.

For a brief moment Baker debated streaking down for a quick landing and safety. But when the smooth wing skin was once again punctured by bullets, he saw red.

"Yeah?" he jeered and yanked back the loading handles of the twin high-speed firing Vickers gun moulded into the curve of the engine cowling. "Not while I'm in this baby, you don't."

Tapping right rudder he started to swerve off, waited until the nose of the bomber swung around toward him. Then he braced himself and went slanting down in a vertical dive to the left. After he dove five hundred feet, he sucked air into his lungs and hauled back on the stick. His eyeballs rolled and stabs of white pain lanced his brain. Then the increased gravity force let go its grip on him. His eyes came back into focus and he saw the silvery fish-shaped belly of the bomber. Its pilot was trying to drop the nose and circle down after him.

Baker laughed and pressed both trigger trips. Light armor-piercing, explosive bullets began to spew out of the twin Vickers at the rate of fifteen hundred a minute for each gun. He saw the bullets rip into the nose of the plane, saw the effect they had along that silvery belly clear back to the double tail wheel. He cut his fire and streaked out from under so that the big ship wouldn't smash into him. But the big ship didn't fall. It kept right on circling around down after him. Baker felt like a hunter who has blasted away at a charging rhino with BB shot.

Baker stared amazed for a moment, while bullets of hate winged their way towards him. He belted the stick, and went whamming out into the clear. Then he zoomed up, cursing savagely at himself.

"You fat-headed spy!" he grated. "You see everything and remember nothing. You know perfectly well that that type of bomber has double armor plating along the entire length of its belly. And you trying to get it down that way."

A blast from the bomber's guns punctuated his outburst of disgust. He dropped the nose of his ship and looked as though he were going to dive down and strike at the bomber from the side. That wasn't his idea, however, but he wanted the German pilot to think so. The German did and pulled up his own nose to make it a nose-to-nose affair. And at that exact instant Baker whirled into action. He yanked the Hawker-Seymore out of its dive, streaked straight through a scattering burst of shots from the bomber, and then he rolled over and went straight down like an arrow.

Too late the German pilot realized that he was trapped. The pilot tried desperately to haul up to a steeper zoom so that the nose gunner could do something. Too late! Engine howling, and twin Vickers spitting, Baker plunged straight down on the pilots' compartment. His first burst shattered the cowling of the compartment and pinned both the pilot and the relief pilot to their seats, stone dead.

BAKER then hauled back on the stick and zoomed upwards. When he had a thousand feet of air between him and the bomber he twisted around in his seat and looked down. The bomber was rolling over slowly like some huge prehistoric bird killed in mid-flight. For a moment it hovered motionless, then all hell let go in its insides. A solid sheet of flame shot a good hundred feet into the air. The back of the bomber broke apart, and the two halves went slip-sliding and tumbling earthward, leaving behind a huge trail of smoke and flaming debris.

"God!" Baker breathed softly. "They even flame more than the old ones used to."

The sight of the two halves of the bomber striking the ground, and the swarm of people, who looked like ants, rushing cross-country toward the spot, pulled a string in Baker's brain, and snapped him back to reality. What a mess he was in. He'd swiped a Royal Air Force plane, taken it aloft for a test hop, and he engaged a German plane in combat and shot it down. He'd been forced to fight, but—

"But get rid of this plane—quick!" he yelled at himself. "It's your only hope, brother!"

Whether the idea was right or wrong didn't matter. He only wanted to get the plane down, and get away from it with no questions asked by anybody. Let the British wonder what had actually happened. Maybe some of them would guess—if they happened to read his syndicate series. He'd be three thousand miles away by that time.

Kicking rudder, he swung toward the west looking for a stretch of barren ground. He soon found what he desired. There wasn't a house anywhere near it. And by the time anybody seeing him land could get over, he would be well on his way by foot. He'd probably be on the boat for home before they got around to checking up on that car he'd had those two farmers drive off in.

A few minutes later, he cranked down the wheels of the Scout, nosed down to a level patch of ground, and leveled off. Not until his wheels were on the ground did he see it. Sweat broke out on his forehead. His heart jumped down into his boots. Another Hawker-Seymore had suddenly appeared. He must have sighted Baker and coasted in directly behind him. To take off and try to shake it was out of the question. But, maybe the English pilot would believe him.

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He came to a stop, and sat waiting like a man in the electric chair. The other ship touched ground, stopped. A helmeted and goggled figure jumped out and ran over.

"Damn fine work, Lieutenant—"

The Englishman stopped short, jerked up his goggles, and stared, dumbfounded. Just as dumbfounded, Baker stared down into the face of Colonel Anderson.

"Good God, *you!*" the colonel finally gasped. "I thought you were Lieutenant Strang!"

"He was wounded and dropped down where I happened to be, Colonel," Baker blurted out. "After I had him taken to the Curry Hospital, I waited by the plane. I—well I guess I got curious and took it up. A German bomber jumped on me. What could I do? I had to shoot it down to save my life!"

Colonel Anderson stood stiff for a full minute, then slowly shook his head.

"Damnedest thing ever!" he muttered. "Wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen Strang drop out of the flight. And you? Good God, you shot down that bomber?"

"I did," Baker admitted. Then an idea struck him. "But you take credit for it, Colonel. I don't want any. Just forget about me and it'll be okay."

"I guess I'll have to take credit for the victory," the colonel grunted. "It would be a fine fix if the papers found out what happened."

"Thanks," Baker said and sighed with relief. "Want me to ferry this back with you?" The colonel started to shake his head, checked it and gave Baker a keen look. He smiled as he spoke.

"Yes," he said. "Of course no one can stop you writing about the performance of the Scout, now. So you might as well have some pictures to go with it. I've some at the factory. Take off, and follow me back."

"I'm off, Colonel!" Baker grinned and reached for the throttle. "And, thanks!"