

AIR CHIEF MARSHALL SIR JOHN BAKER, G.B.E., K.C.B., M.C., D.F.C.

JOHN Wakeling Baker was one of that exceptional generation of Eastbournians whose lot it was to see service in the Great War. He went on to serve in WW2 and beyond and to achieve high rank and honours. He was also a loyal Old Eastbournian who acted as chairman both of the OEA and of the College Council. Last year his family gave to the College his honours and decorations on permanent loan; permanent for so long as the College remains independent. These will shortly be found a suitable home and so it is timely that we remember him and his life.

John Baker was born in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1897, the son of the Rev. F. V. Baker, D.D. He was though, as he was proud to say, a Kentishman through and through. His family had lived in Kent for at least 300 years and his home from 1947 onwards was at Chislehurst. After attending Ascham St Vincent's prep school in Eastbourne, he came to School House in 1911 where he proved to be a good all-rounder: a school prefect, cricket and rugby colours (captain in 1915) and 1st running strings; a company sergeant major in the OTC and a member of the Army Class, he passed into Woolwich in 1915. A contemporary in School House, and also in the cricket and rugby teams, was A. K. Cowper, who was to win a Military Cross with two bars flying for the RFC in France.

We are fortunate that John Baker was a conscientious writer of letters to his family in England from 1916 through to his service in South East Asia Command in WW2 and that these letters (or transcripts of them) have been deposited by his family in the archives of the RAF Museum at Hendon. I was able, with the support of his son, Frank Baker (S.H.'51), to obtain copies for the College archives. They are available to be viewed at Hendon or at Eastbourne by a serious researcher.

On leaving the College in 1915, Baker entered the RMA Woolwich and was commissioned into the Royal Garrison Artillery in 1916. His work in France was artillery observation, dangerous but exciting. He sent a "Letter from the Front" which was published in the June 1916 *Eastbournian*, in which he described his post in a "rickety old church tower" and the excitement



Lt J. W. Baker, M.C., standing (right) in front of an RE8 of 4 Squadron at St Omar, 12th May 1918.



The Air Chief Marshall.

of marking the fall of the shells and of being shelled in return. After 18 months, the cruel killing of the horses was one of the factors which led to his applying for transfer to the Royal Flying Corps. His posting as Artillery Liaison Officer to 4 Squadron was confirmed in 1917; six months later he was transferred to 4 Squadron as an observer. A photograph shows a nonchalant Lieutenant Baker standing beside his RE8. He earned his Military Cross during the retreat of March/April 1918 while in this rôle, his citation stating:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in carrying out low-flying reconnaissances and contact patrols under heavy machine-gun, rifle and anti-aircraft fire, he remained in the air for long hours, often under abnormally bad weather conditions and often in darkness or thick mist. On one occasion he fired into enemy troops and transport, causing great confusion, and remained over their lines taking notes until quite dark, when he returned with his machine riddled with bullets. On every flight he obtained most important information, which was dropped at headquarters, and throughout the period his work has been magnificent.

After the Armistice, he qualified as a pilot and joined 12 Squadron in France, moving with them to Cologne as a part of the army of occupation. His name was among those in the first list of officers granted permanent commissions in the RAF in November 1919.

In 1923 he was posted to 60 Squadron on the North West Frontier of India, stationed at different times at Risalpur, Peshawar, Kohat, Miranshah and Quetta while taking part in operations against the border tribes. The most important of these were in 1925 when he played a prominent part in the successful independent air operations (known as Pink's War) in Waziristan. He was

awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his part in these actions.

In 1927 he married Hilary Bonham-Carter, by whom he had three sons and one daughter.

Returning to England in 1928 for a staff appointment, he attended Staff College in 1930–31 followed by command of 33 Squadron, flying Hawker Hart light bombers. In Autumn 1935 he took the squadron to Egypt when Middle East Command was reinforced during the Italo–Abyssinian campaign. 33 Squadron formed part of an air force/army garrison at Mersa Matruh until the summer of 1936.

He returned to England to join the staff of the new Training Command, leaving in 1938 to attend a year's course at the Imperial Defence College, after which he was appointed an instructor to the Staff College at Andover where he remained until the outbreak of war. At an Old Aschamian gathering in 1938, he was asked how we stood in relation to the Luftwaffe if war was declared. "The Germans have more 'planes," he said, "but our pilots are better than theirs. In the final showdown, it is the quality of the pilots that will be the deciding factor." On mobilisation, Baker joined the operations planning staff at the Air Ministry, being appointed Deputy Director in March 1940, a post that he held until promotion to Director of Bomber Operations at the Air Ministry in February 1941. In the birthday honours list of 1942 he was made CB.

In March 1943 he was appointed Senior Air Staff Officer at Air Headquarters, South East Asia Command, based in India. Gaining a "mention" during this posting, he must have worked closely with Mountbatten. Unfortunately his time was bedevilled with health problems, probably an ulcer, and in 1945 he returned home to take command of 12 Fighter Group where he flew himself in Spitfires and Meteors in order to keep his own standards up to date.

In the years following the war, Baker held in succession the posts of Director-General of Personnel at the Air Ministry (1946–48), Air Officer Commanding in Chief, Coastal Command (1948–49), Commander-in-



Ready for the Coronation Procession, 1953.

Chief, Middle East Air Forces (1950–52), Deputy, then Vice-Chief of the Air Staff, Air Ministry (1952–53) and Controller of Aircraft, Ministry of Supply (1953–56). From 1952 to 1956, Air Chief Marshal Baker was Air ADC to the Queen. In this rôle he had the honour of riding immediately behind her carriage in the Coronation procession of 1953.

He was awarded two knighthoods, the KCB in 1949 and Knight Grand Cross of the British Empire in 1954. He was a member of the College Council from 1953 to 1972, being Chairman in 1969–71. He was also Chairman of the OEA from 1956 to 1957. His record, both as an airman and as an Eastbournian, was marked by the placing of a plaque in the cloisters.

Air Chief Marshal Baker died in March 1978, aged 80.

MICHAEL PARTRIDGE