

Carlos Paul Baker, Jr.

1928 – 2020



Carlos Paul Baker Jr. was born on April 29, 1928, in Newport Beach. He lived a remarkable life, with his casual, extroverted demeanor only partly concealing his intellect, athleticism, and intense drive. His parents, Carlos Paul Baker, Sr, a heavy equipment operator and Jean (nee Standlee) Baker, a free-spirit and painter, moved up into Topanga Canyon in the Santa Monica Mountains during his childhood. As a result, Carlos went to Canoga Park High School in the San Fernando Valley, graduating in 1946. He developed into a good student, a strong athlete (gymnastics) and a natural leader (student body president and Eagle Scout). He started immediately at UCLA, joining Navy ROTC as a freshman, which helped cover the cost of college. He got straight A's in math and physics (his major) but someone told him that with his people skills, he should switch to sociology (though he got just average grades). He always said that this training in calculus was his best asset as a judge. He also captained the UCLA crew team and won national competitions in rifle.

Right after UCLA graduation in June 1950, Carlos transitioned to active service with the Navy. As the story goes, he tasked with sailing a troop transport to Korea. Being the only officer with a math background Carlos assumed to role of navigator. He guided the ship safely to Korea, taking care to choose a route skirting the edge of the conflict zone ensuring everyone on board got extra of combat pay. He arrived just in time to captain a landing craft in the surprise Incheon landings. Carlos was then accepted as a trainee pilot and spent two years in flight school in Pensacola, Florida and at advanced fighter training in in Corpus Christi, Texas. His squadron VF-91, flying F9F Cougar jets, joined the aircraft carrier USS Hornet in April 1954 on a round-the-world cruise and then service off Taiwan during a period of high tensions with China.

One widely reported flight incident captures Carlos' style. During a carrier launch, a malfunction caused his jet to catch fire. Unable to put out the fire or land on Taiwan in the fog, or on the carrier due to the fire danger, he ejected high over the Taiwan Straits. As he came down under his parachute, he remembered he had an 8mm movie camera in his pocket. He shot film of his own jet crashing into the sea, before plunging into the ocean himself, keeping the camera held above his head to protect it.

USS Hornet's return to Alameda was marked by gala celebrations, with a local college beauty, Leslie Anne Lebkicher, as Miss Hornet. Soon, Carlos and Leslie were engaged, and then married on February 12, 1955. They lived in base housing while Carlos finished his five years of active Navy service before moving to San Francisco. Carlos went to UC Hasting law school, roofing houses on the side, while Leslie taught school. He also spent so much time working on the yearbook that he

needed an extra year to finish law school, graduating in 1959 and being admitted to the bar in 1961. Three children, Anne Wallace Baker (1956), Carlos Paul Baker Carlos III (1961) and Ross Daniel Baker (1966) followed. Choosing to serve the legal needs of naval personal, the family moved to Lemoore, California in the Central Valley, the site of new naval air station.

Carlos then launched into a remarkable dual career. Shortly after starting his law practice in Lemoore, he asked to also serve as a part-time justice court judge. He successfully ran for judge in Kings County several times, before formally retiring around 1980 as a judge after 19 years of service. By retiring without losing an election, he became eligible for temporary assignment by the state judicial council. Over the next 35 years, Carlos sat as judge in every county in the state and more than 200 separate courts, an unprecedented record for California judges. He was generally assigned to short-handed courts, but also sometimes to particularly difficult or controversial cases. He heard cases with the United Farmworkers led by Cesar Chavez and in long PG&E forest-fire damage liability cases. He developed a reputation that astute rulings than were never overturned on appeal. He loved the work and the role a true "circuit judge". Over the years he officiated at weddings for friends, family and countless strangers referred by the local court. He could never say "no" to helping someone out. Up through his late 80's he would leave Capitola every Sunday afternoon to drive to some distant corner of the state and arrive back late Friday evening. He knew California so well that he could tell you the mileage between any two towns more quickly than Google Maps.

Simultaneously, Carlos continued his service in the Naval Reserves, continuing to fly until his eyes, ruined by law school studies, grounded him. He would neither confirm nor deny that he once flew under the Golden Gate Bridge. He DID once exhaust his fuel over Nevada and glide back to Alameda. (He got someone to refuel his plane so quickly his hijinks went unreported.) Over time he was promoted to commander, captain, and eventually rear admiral, with responsibilities for aeronautical engineering for the naval reserve, again leveraging his physics and math skills.

At the same time, he was also closely engaged with his community and growing family. They embarked on many skiing, sailing and road trips. He spent hours on family jigsaw puzzles and never went anywhere without a handkerchief and a Sudoku puzzle in his pocket. He was socially fearless and would strike up conversations with everyone, from celebrities to homeless individuals. At family dinners out, he would learn everything about the life of the waitstaff. When at home he was always busy with his hands, doing everything from major house remodeling and landscaping to wood carving. When traveling as a judge, he also liked to go play poker in local card rooms, where he went by the handle "CX". For all his out-going style, he held his cards close and was a regular winner, bringing home extra cash for family indulgences. Even the funds for English handbells used by St. Johns came from a successful outing in South Lake Tahoe.

Once Carlos turned 90, his health declined, and he moved into a memory care facility in 2019. He passed away quietly on December 23, 2020, in Aptos. He is survived by his wife of 65 years, Leslie Anne Baker, their three children (Anne, Carlos, and Ross) and four grandchildren (Elizabeth, Catherine, Leslieanne, and Wallace).