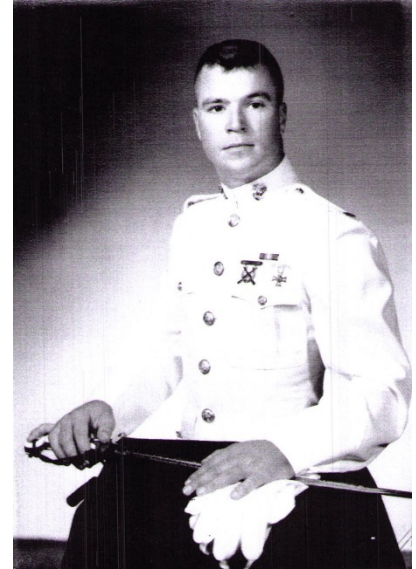


## “A Marine’s Marine”

It seemed like a fairly straight-forward mission: build a bridge over the Vinh Dinh River. After all, building bridges wasn't something new for Jesse Baker. He had worked during school breaks on a bridge construction project in Greenville. In fact, that's how he'd broken his back—and how he ended up a Marine.

Jesse Rutledge Baker grew up in Whitmire, the son of Elmer and Louise Baker. He attended Whitmire High School where he played football and ran track, garnering several honors and medals in sportsmanship. He was an Eagle Scout and an Explorer Scout. Graduating in 1962, Baker enrolled as an engineering student at Clemson College.

At Clemson, Jesse Baker was a member of the Pershing Rifles and the American Society of Civil Engineers. He was also an Army ROTC cadet. During a summer break from college, Jesse hired on with a crew building a bridge. According to his brother Edgar, “One day they were removing the cribbing from under a bridge after the concrete pour. The scaffolding being used fell and Jesse fell onto the pile of lumber, landing on his back.” He was transported to Greenville General Hospital, where doctors diagnosed a broken back—and where they predicted Jesse would never walk again. “Jesse said the doctor did not know what he was talking about.”



After months of difficult rehabilitation, Jesse was up and walking and decided to switch from Army ROTC. Edgar remembered that Jesse again traveled to Greenville, this time to sign up for the Marines. After the recruiter reviewed Jesse's records, he told the would-be Marine that his enlistment had been denied due to his broken back. Jesse pleaded with the recruiter asking, “What can I do to convince you that my back is OK?” “Nothing,” was the recruiter's response. Jesse refused to be deterred. “If I can throw you on your back would you believe me?” After some additional back-and-forth, the recruiter finally agreed to sign the enlistment papers if Jesse could throw him. Before he knew what had happened, the recruiter was on his back staring up at Jesse. “He walked out with his signed papers!”



During summer vacations, Jesse traveled to the Marine Corps' Quantico, Virginia base for platoon leader training. He earned his Marine Corps second lieutenant's commission. Jesse graduated from Clemson in 1966 and reported for active duty with the Marines, training at Quantico, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and Camp Pendleton, California.

By the following spring of 1967, Jesse Baker was serving with B Company of the 7<sup>th</sup> Engineers in Vietnam. The platoon's mission was to construct a bridge over the Vinh Dinh River. Pete Conley of South Portland, Maine, was assigned as a radioman to Baker's 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon. “B Company was hit on a daily basis by VC [Viet Cong] snipers,” Conley recalled more than forty years later. Baker donned a white tee shirt under his flak jacket, believing the white shirt would make him stand out more and divert



the snipers' attention from his men. On May 13, the platoon's Corporal Cooper was shot by a sniper. "Lt. Baker exposed himself to enemy fire in an effort to get Cooper out of the exposed river area." Despite Baker's efforts, Cooper died. Baker decided that the bridge his platoon was building would henceforth be known as "Cooper Bridge."

Cooper Bridge, just south of Da Nang, was formally opened on July 17. At the time, it was the longest permanent bridge built by the Marines in Vietnam.

A month later, 1<sup>st</sup> platoon of B Company was building a dam nearby. One of its heavy bulldozers became stuck in the mud. Platoon member Chuck Holland of Hoover, Alabama remembered, "Despite the operator's best efforts, it could not be extricated. Jesse happened to be near us and came by to assist. Due to his construction background, he was able to work this piece of heavy equipment free of the quagmire." Baker and his jeep driver Fred Sachs then left the area. "Within an hour," Holland wrote, "his jeep hit a land mine and he was killed." Sachs, though badly injured, survived.

Jesse Baker was survived by his parents, Mr and Mrs E. R. Baker, of Whitmire; his brother, William Edgar Baker; two sisters, Mrs Glenn Huff, Greenville, and Miss Trudy Baker of the home, and grandmothers, Mrs W. E. Baker, of Whitmire, and Mrs J. R. Bell, of Due West. He was buried in the cemetery of the Whitmire Methodist Church.

Lieutenant Jesse Rutledge Baker was awarded the Bronze Star with One Gold Star, Purple Heart, Combat Action Medal, Presidential Unit Citation, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation with Palm, Republic of Vietnam Civil Actions Unit Citation, and Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal. He also earned the lasting affection and respect of the men with whom he served.

Floyd Rentz of Milton, Florida wrote in 2009: *I appreciated his humor and was grateful for his past advice as it kept me out of harm's way on several occasions. This was typical of the relationship Jesse had with the other enlisted men, yet he commanded and received the willing respect of those Marines. I was deeply saddened to hear of his death on August the 18th but will always remember him as the compassionate leader and gallant Marine he was.*

Pete Conley sums up the feelings of many who served with Baker: *...there is not a day that goes by that our thoughts do not return to that far away land and time where we had the honor to serve and fight with this special Marine and leader who is with us daily in our thoughts and prayers. Jesse was a true patriot and a "Marine's Marine."*

