

CHAPTER ONE

The Greatest “I Told You So” in U.S. History

Extensive Navy Career Taught Many Lessons

On December 7, 1941, Admiral James Otto Richardson slipped into the kitchen of his Georgetown home where his wife May was cooking breakfast. Normally Richardson was the chef, but this time he sat and read the Sunday newspapers. After a few minutes of quiet, he mentioned his War College thesis on Japanese policy. He told May he was going to reread it that day.¹ He also told her he thought the United States was on the verge of war, nothing new to May, since she had heard that comment for the past three years.²

Back in Paris, Texas, the previous Friday afternoon the couple's hometown newspaper had bannered the headline “Japan Delivers Fateful Answer to United States.” The subhead declared: “Question of War or Peace May Be Settled This Week.” The Associated Press story summarized what was happening. Japanese Special Envoy Saburo Kurusu and Richardson friend Japanese Ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura delivered to American Secretary of State Cordell Hull a fateful answer to the question of war or peace in the Pacific.³ So, even in the remote area of northeast Texas, citizens were aware of the impending chances of war with Japan.

It was a year and two months to the day from the time that Richardson had stood in the White House, tired after an overnight trip from the West Coast, and told President Franklin D. Roosevelt that the Navy did not trust the civilian leadership.⁴ For this outburst, three months later Richardson was relieved from his post as commander in chief of the United States Fleet. The acronym fit the situation—CinCUS (Sink Us)! His protests to FDR were not new. This time, however, it was his aggressiveness that proved fatal. As a result, Richardson's career seemed to be “sunk.”

However, ten months after being detached and replaced by Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, Richardson was still an employee

of the U.S. Navy. After breakfast he found the 1934 paper he had planned to review that day.⁵ The weather was warmer than normal, so he sat on his semi-enclosed porch as he did almost every morning.

He completed reading the paper before noon.⁶ It was a typical military study paper, one of two he did at the War College, and much like the book he wrote in the 1950s explaining his side of the story of Pearl Harbor. His thesis was about the relationship in war of naval strategy, tactics, and command, sometimes versus policy. Even then, as early as 1934, he felt that the ability to discuss what American naval plans should be in case of war depended upon a good knowledge of the country's foreign policy. "But, the form of our Government is such that no one can state what the American foreign policies are," he wrote then, and probably still felt in 1941.⁷

He thought that a nation should have the right to remain neutral, if it wanted to do so, and that this right should be spelled out during peace times. However, at that time the United States struggled to remain neutral. He was firm in his belief that it would be impossible for the United States to be neutral in any future war in which a strong naval power was engaged.⁸

Like Roosevelt, Richardson was miffed that the American people were so unalterably opposed to entanglement in European affairs and assumed they would also be so when it came to Asiatic difficulties with Japan. "The American people are primarily concerned with domestic affairs, have no desire to participate in World politics . . . beyond expressing moral sentiments and altruistic aims which they like to talk about and wish for, but are unwilling to support by force," he wrote eight years before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

He wrote that the Hawaiian Islands should be prepared as an outpost defending the West Coast rather than a stepping-off place for any westward movement across the Pacific. In that regard, he and Roosevelt somewhat agreed, but Richardson was stubborn in his belief that the U.S. Fleet was not prepared for permanent placement in or near Pearl Harbor. Richardson did expect that

the citizens would demand that the Navy take some aggressive stroke in response to Japanese overt actions. But, he had no confidence that enough study on the situation had been done by the leaders of the government or the Navy.

In his final paper at the War College, Richardson discussed the future battle in the Pacific. It would come from aircraft carriers. He knew then that it would be hard to locate and attack such ships, which might be separated by fifty or more miles. Since searching for and attacking carriers would be difficult even by air, he suggested that heavy cruisers be added to the U.S. naval force to supplement intelligence gathering. "Yet, we have devoted little time and effort to develop the proper method of utilizing these vessels in scouting," he wrote.⁹

Richardson felt that World War I forced reorganization of the U.S. War Department into a war-making mode. However, since the Navy was mainly administrative and supply during that conflict, it had not undergone such change. He agreed that the Navy was very conservative and would resist change anyway. He laid much of the blame for that situation on the civilians who staffed the strongly entrenched bureaus, some on the officers, and a bit on Congress. Ironically, because of his dismissal in early 1941 by Roosevelt, Richardson was selected later to be on boards and commissions that did initiate reorganization, some of it slightly too much for Richardson.¹⁰ On that morning of December 7, 1941, his ideas concerning the lack of prewar planning were about to be proven correct.

Richardson still believed much of what he had written in 1934, and as a member of the 1941 Navy General Board he knew well that administrative duties still overwhelmed officers. "All hands are so busy keeping their desks clear of papers that they have no time to think about how the whole service might be improved," he wrote. Because of his unexpected release as U.S. Fleet commander eleven months earlier, Richardson had little chance to enact his own management style into the Navy Fleet.

At 1:30 P.M., the phone rang. Unlike other admirals, his duties as a special assignee to rework regulations and study promotions

did not entail Sunday overtime at the office. And, he loved golf, planning a trip to the Army-Navy Country Club if the temperature remained steady and the rain held off. "Joe, turn on your radio," a voice on the phone said. "When this was done," he wrote later, "the report of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was heard." The greatest "I Told You So" in U.S. history had just occurred.

From January 6, 1940, until his detachment from CinCUS on February 1, 1941, Richardson had steadfastly told all who would listen or read his messages that the Navy could not stand up to a war mode in one ocean, much less in two. After Richardson realized that the April 1940 docking of the fleet at Pearl Harbor was becoming permanent, a steady stream of conversation and messages went from his office to Washington, DC. Remaining at Pearl Harbor, to him, was an enticement to force the Japanese hand. To FDR, at least outwardly, it simply told Japan that the United States was not only determined to hold what it owned, but was willing to move westward if necessary.

Richardson had an Oriental mind-set, having served a dozen assignments in the Pacific. He studied what Japan did to Russia in early years of the twentieth century, and he knew well what was happening at the moment as the Land of the Rising Sun expanded its horizon. He had only informal intelligence lines, but he knew just from his associations that the Japanese were capable of capturing all the lands they desired in the Pacific Rim. However, his pleadings for awareness and action were ignored, or so he thought.

Loving the Navy as he did, it was only natural to him to spread his perception. He was not a cocky person, nor was he overwhelmed with his own knowledge. His background was education. His father and stepmother were the backbone of the teaching world in his small northeast Texas hometown. However, there was military experience in his family history. His father had served some eighteen months as a Civil War Confederate prisoner on Johnson's Island. Richardson's cousin, Wilds Preston Richardson, attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He later created most of the early highway systems of Alaska. In the Great War, Otto's cousin

Dick Richardson gained some fame when he was ordered by President Woodrow Wilson and General John J. Pershing to evacuate the American Expeditionary Forces in North Russia.

Therefore, Admiral Richardson was keenly aware that his influence could create a foundation for leaders to follow when war began. To him, it was not a matter of *whether* the United States and Japan would clash, but *when*. His belief was so strong that until ordered to cease by Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Harold R. "Betty" Stark, while commander of the U.S. Fleet, Richardson sent out patrol planes each day to check the ocean for signs of an attack on Pearl Harbor.

In a more subtle way, however, CinCUS Richardson began to prepare his younger Navy officers. He talked personally with the ones he noticed had potential to be war leaders. Robert B. Carney, for example, was startled one day in the summer of 1940 when Captain Harold M. Bemis told him that he was to go over and talk with Richardson. "I wondered what I had been caught at," Carney wrote years later after he was a retired admiral himself.¹¹

Still with dark hair, wearing wire-rimmed glasses, and knocking his pipe clean while standing over his desk, Richardson broke right into his speech with no long summary of why he had called Carney to his office. "I am sure that a war with Japan is inevitable," he began, and proceeded to tell Carney that it would be a long one. "He wanted to talk to some of my age bracket, those he considered would be wartime leaders," Carney wrote.

Flattered, but still naïve and confident, the Naval Academy graduate was sure that he knew what to do if a war arrived. Richardson painted the scene. "To me, what he said was shattering," Carney remembered. The admiral outlined the lack of advanced bases. He probably told Carney what he later wrote in his book, "The pre-World War II development of Guam as a naval base was defeated in Congress by the pacifists and isolationists, who as predicted, argued that any such work would be an aggressive act conducive to war with Japan."¹²

Not one to emotionally hammer upon his table with the end of his pipe, or to raise his voice, Richardson simply continued to tell



Extracted Americans from Russia: Wilds Preston "Dick" Richardson was both a stepbrother and cousin to Admiral J. O. Richardson. Since there were seventeen years difference in their ages, the pair probably never knew each other well, though the Army officer came back to Paris, Texas, several times to visit the family. W. P. Richardson guided the building of the Alaska highway system, and after World War I followed the orders of President Woodrow Wilson and General John J. Pershing, organizing the departure of American troops from Northern Russia. He died in 1929. (From U.S. Army Register 1913, copy at Alaska State Library—Historical Collections)

Carney that the Navy was lacking in both offensive and defensive capabilities; short on ammunition, fuel, and spare parts; and had only a few ships to support the fleet as it advanced. Basically, the warships needed to return to the West Coast to be properly prepared for war. For example, wooden decks should be removed and replaced with steel, portholes closed and sealed, and outdated guns replaced by more powerful ones.

Carney listened to each point the sixty-one-year-old admiral administered to the young commander. "He dismantled my confident belief that the U.S. Navy could win a quick decision." Instead, Richardson told him that it was his firm belief that it would take the United States two years to build up an offensive strength. The country would have to hang on while that strength was developed.

In Richardson's mind, following the entry into war, there would be at least one year and probably two of hard fighting. It would most likely be a four-year war. This pronouncement stunned Carney. "I considered myself a competent professional, versed in all the experiences and skills required for advancement. At least I had so considered myself." But, when Richardson finished, Carney later wrote, "I was sure of nothing!"

Staggering from the flagship USS *Pennsylvania*, Carney went back to the battleship *California*, almost physically sick. "Sleep would not come. My tight little professional world had collapsed." Carney accepted, however, what Richardson conveyed to him that day, and started reexamining his naval views from scratch. From that moment on, Carney changed. "No matter what the conventional wisdom held on any given subject, from then on I would challenge it, disregard it, and make my own evaluation."

For one officer, at least, the CinCUS had made a lasting impression, sending him off to carry the word throughout the lower ranks. "I later expressed my gratitude," Carney wrote. Not many did so, and especially not Richardson's superiors President Franklin Roosevelt, Chief of Naval Operations Harold Stark, or Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox. However, many small statements recorded in print during the following years remind

readers and researchers that Richardson warned many times about the lack of preparedness in the Navy.

On Monday, December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Richardson quietly walked into the General Board room. Sitting around were his peers, all giving out their individual viewpoints.¹³ Each tried to explain why, and how, the surprise attack had happened. In his book, *On the Treadmill to Pearl Harbor*, Richardson does not name those present, but most likely few there knew of the intelligence capabilities of the Navy, that messages had been read for months indicating that such a fate awaited some American site in the Pacific.

The president of the General Board, Vice-Admiral William R. Sexton, finally said, "Joe. You haven't said a word up to now. What are your views?" Fully aware that his thoughts were already in numerous correspondences to his superiors, friends, and family, Richardson simply replied, "All I have to say is that every day, from now on, I am going to pray for two things. The first is for the success of our arms; the second is that I may keep my lips sealed!"¹⁴

Richardson almost immediately made a plan to burn his personal notes. He did not want to be accused of disobeying his commander in chief, or of saying disparaging words about the president. He knew he would be called to testify sometime, somewhere about the Pearl Harbor attack. In the meantime, he did as he said. However, as he wrote, "I did not lay down the bricks" and retire from the Navy or society. He had been busy as a member of the General Board since March 25, and though he did remain quiet about his past thoughts, Richardson began what was perhaps his highest call to duty. He served for six more years, working on several projects that would formulate life for the future of others. As he feared, in 1945 he was finally called to give extensive testimony before Congress. But, true to his promise to the Navy Board, he remained fairly quiet during the war years.

Finally, in 1956 his former aide, Admiral George Carroll Dyer, and the Naval History Division, convinced Richardson to reconstruct his career and thoughts. Apparently the pair worked

biweekly for months on the drafts as Richardson slipped toward eighty years of age. "I can attest," wrote Dyer later, "that . . . Admiral Richardson had an inexhaustible memory for facts, figures and personalities." Though completed, the work remained dormant until a year before his death in 1974 at the age of ninety-five. He had requested, because of the frankness of his manuscript, and the long working relationship between the two, that it not be published until after Stark's death.¹⁵

In the end, Richardson expressed regret that he had burned many of his diary pages. However, he wrote, "Since in the diary I expressed frank and sometimes offhand opinions (some of them highly critical) of various officers of the Navy, and of officials of the Government for their actions or inactions during the 1939-1941 period, I thought it best that the diary be burned. So, I burned it, after extracting some non-critical parts. I also burned some of my personal letters and various naval communications carrying my pithy comments."

Today, those comments do not rank in the menial category. They are essential to supplement history's view of Pearl Harbor, and to evaluate Richardson's importance to the string of events that preceded it.