

PEARL  
HARBOR  
COUNTDOWN



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HARBOR  
COUNTDOWN**

**Admiral James O. Richardson**

**SKIPPER STEELY**



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## Preface

For several years as I wrote local articles for my father's weekly Texas newspaper, the *Lamar County Echo*, and later for the *Paris News*, Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Henry Lee Somerville related that the most famous alumnus of Paris, Texas, was Admiral Otto Richardson. "He was fired by the president," he would tell me, "because he wanted to move the [U.S.] Fleet away from Hawaii."

Surely, I thought, if Richardson, the valedictorian of the Paris High School Class of 1894, was that smart, he would have avoided a presidential conflict and run the fleet as in the past. But, then, as I began to read about his career, the problems became clear. No commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet (CinCUS) had ever faced this predicament. With war closing in from both sides of the United States, civilians began to believe that the fleet, with most of its ships in the Pacific, could serve as a deterrent to the Japanese.

Admirals in charge in 1940 knew differently. For two decades after Charles Evans Hughes chaired the Washington Treaty of 1921, the U.S. Navy had been hindered in its growth by an inventory ratio derived from that conference.<sup>1</sup> However, as much as this blueprint for nations disgruntled Great Britain and the United States naval world, it had the Japanese fuming. They were made second-class by the treaty, though they thought they were equal.

Richardson was a big man, and looked even larger when I saw him renewing his subscription on one late 1950's day in my father's newspaper. Being just a fifteen-year-old with no extensive World War II study other than Sunday-night Walter Cronkite *20th Century* television programs, he meant nothing much to me. My father had been an officer in the Mediterranean during World War II, but was not a storyteller.

The admiral, however, though he wrote a book on his career,

left few personal materials behind.<sup>2</sup> His relatives in Paris are gone now. A sister married a widower, to which family Somerville belonged. She had no children, but some of her husband's family took an interest and provided stories, materials, and literature. The admiral had a son of his own, who was a rather prolific screenwriter. He wrote many episodes of *The Lone Ranger* radio show. However, the son, Joe Fenet Richardson, had no children, though he and his wife adopted a daughter. Unfortunately, she stated that she knew little of the admiral and did not allow me to sift through materials in her father's Beverly Hills home.

Richardson and his editor, Admiral George C. Dyer, wrote more than a few times that Richardson destroyed parts of his diary pertaining to 1940 and the constant argument about the fleet's location. In the 1970 movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!* Richardson is portrayed flying over Pearl Harbor in a PBV flying boat, talking with Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, his replacement.<sup>3</sup> This movie is still a very good look at what led up to the attack, mainly because its producers used as consultants Ladislav Farago, author of *The Broken Seal*, and Gordon Prange, author of *At Dawn We Slept*. However, Richardson is only called Jim in the movie and is not really identified to the audience as the outgoing commander. My research reveals that only Richardson's wife called him Jim. His old Paris friends always called him Otto, and Navy personnel just shortened it all by calling him Joe, or JO. The sailors fondly called him Uncle Joe.

When the new look at the Pearl Harbor attack came at the sixtieth anniversary in 2001, that movie left him and most of 1940 out completely. However, what that movie did uncover through the curious researchers, and the anti-government critics, was Richardson's two meetings with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the argument between them about placing the fleet unprepared in harm's way at Hawaii. The Internet began to be pasted with much of the testimony in the eight subsequent hearings conducted on this subject. Each time the Kimmel family made one more move to soften the history of their father and grandfather, who was blamed for the disaster at Pearl Harbor,

Richardson's career was placed out in the open also. In 2006 an episode of Oliver North's *War Stories* finally revealed more about Richardson and his part in the story.

Therefore, the timing to write Richardson's life and thoughts seemed to be proper, especially with the seventieth anniversary fast approaching. For, without knowing what Richardson was thinking, and doing, an understanding of the Pearl Harbor debacle cannot be attained. Hopefully, this book will guide the reader through the days of his life and the years of his career to help explain why he managed the Navy fleet as he did in those crucial times leading up to America's dramatic entry into World War II.



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