

Duty above self: Richardson pressed on to accomplish mission.

The formation of B-26 medium bombers rapidly approached the target, the Venlo airfield, home of the Germans' vaunted night fighter unit *Nachtjagdgeschwader I*. The formation was composed of three sections, or 'boxes', of 18 aircraft drawn from the three squadrons of the 387th Bombardment Group (Medium). The third box was being led by squadron commander Joseph Hemingway Richardson, Clemson College Class of 1941.

"Rich," as he was known on campus, enrolled at Clemson with his freshman classmates in 1937, his objective to become a civil engineer. A native of Georgetown, Richardson was a member of Coach Jess Neely's 1939 football team which concluded its successful campaign with a 6-3 victory over Boston College in the 1940 Cotton Bowl. Richardson then helped usher in the Frank Howard era, playing on the legendary coach's first Clemson team. In between those two seasons, Richardson, like most of his classmates journeyed to Fort McClellan, AL for summer ROTC training.



Following his marriage to Arden Trowbridge in April 1942, Richardson was immersed in stateside flight training. He deployed with his unit, the 558th Bombardment Squadron, to England in June 1943. Flying the fast, maneuverable B-26, their mission was to help the Allies gain air superiority, prevent the Germans from reinforcing their forward troops and provide close air support to Allied ground forces. Richardson's Clemson training must have served him well; less than three years after graduation, he had been promoted to major and was the commanding officer of the 558th.

On the morning of February 25, the 558th was alerted for a mission to Venlo, just one mile west of the Dutch-German border and the site of one of the largest airfields in Europe. The squadron would make up the third of three boxes of the group's bomber formation. The heavy bombers of the 8th Air Force were engaged in a costly war of attrition, mounting major efforts to destroy and disrupt German industry in advance of the anticipated spring invasion of the continent. German Luftwaffe fighters were inflicting crippling losses on the B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers as they made their way unescorted deep into Germany. The mission of the 558th on this day was to divert as many enemy fighters from the heavy bomber offensive as possible, enhancing the heavies' chances for success and minimizing their losses.



The weather was poor that morning over England and the North Sea, but cleared over Holland. By the time they crossed the Dutch coast, Richardson's box was down to 15 aircraft. Three had aborted due to mechanical difficulties. He watched as the first box and then the

second dropped their bombs prematurely, having misidentified the target. Confident in the ability of his squadron, Richardson pressed on, even after the first two boxes turned back toward England—and the fighter escort with them. Captain John Coburn, Richardson's bombardier, scored a direct hit on the aiming point. The formation's turn back toward England carried it across the Dutch-German border and earned it the distinction of being the first B-26s to fly over Germany.

With no friendly fighter cover, the 558th headed for the coast, attempting to put as much distance as possible as quickly as possible between themselves and the German fighters sure to be in pursuit. Twenty miles off the Dutch coast, now over the frigid waters of the North Sea, twenty German Messerschmitt 109 fighters caught up with the unguarded formation. Richardson's aircraft, the "Arkansas Traveler," was one of four shot down.

Richardson's wife, Arden, was notified by the War Department that her husband was missing in action. It was more than a year later, after the European war had ended, that his death was confirmed. He left behind a two-year-old son whom he had never seen.

Joseph Hemingway Richardson was awarded the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with four oak leaf clusters. He is memorialized at the American Cemetery, Cambridge, England and the cemetery of Union Methodist Church, Union Crossroads, SC.

