

Richardson, Robert Vinkler ^[1]

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by Paul Branch, Jr., 1994

4 Nov. 1820–5 Jan. 1870

Robert Vinkler Richardson, lawyer, Confederate officer, and civil engineer, was born in Granville County ^[2]. At an early age, he and his family moved to Tennessee, settling in Hardeman County. Here young Richardson received his early education and then studied law. Admitted to the bar, he subsequently moved to Memphis and established a practice. In this station of life Richardson had occasion to associate himself, among other prominent individuals, with two future comrades in arms, Gideon J. Pillow and Nathan Bedford Forrest. Richardson's law practice soon prospered and he was able to acquire considerable wealth for his day. The 1860 census lists his real estate and personal holdings at a total value of \$39,000.

At the outbreak of the Civil War ^[3], he served with General Pillow's forces in the early campaigns of the war and afterwards participated in the Battle of Shiloh on 6–7 Apr. 1862. On 6 September, however, Richardson was given approval by the War Department to organize and lead a regiment of partisan troops from counties in western Tennessee. Through great energy and exertion on his part, he was able to raise more than enough troops for this regiment, which was commissioned the First Tennessee Partisan Rangers, with Richardson elected as its colonel. The difficulty of this task can in no way be underestimated because he recruited his men from counties that had been overrun by the advancing Union forces and were under their occupation. Once the regiment was organized and trained, Richardson led it in countless partisan operations against Union field and garrison posts and communications. His men had daily skirmishes with Union forces, and it would appear that his harassment tactics caused a great deal of concern and annoyance to the Union leaders. The *Official Records* are filled with messages and dispatches between various Union district and post commanders that mention Richardson's command and the trouble it was causing them.

Several expeditions were sent to find and destroy his force and perhaps the most successful of these occurred on 9 Mar. 1863, when attacking Union forces captured and drove Richardson from his camps near Covington, Tenn. On the following day, he found that his regiment was greatly outnumbered and in danger of being crushed between two powerful Union columns, but he eluded these by dissolving his regiment into individual companies, which easily escaped and then harassed the Union forces until they returned back whence they had come. Richardson had had no formal military training in his prewar career, but apparently he had a natural flair for leadership and tactics. In the spring of 1863 there seems to have developed some sort of controversy between Confederate leaders and Richardson due to the fact that his regiment was a partisan unit rather than coming under the jurisdiction of regular Confederate service. Richardson was charged with "great oppression" and "exercising authority not intended to be given," resulting on 15 Apr. 1863 in an order for his arrest. As to the exact nature of the charges and of the proceedings, the *Official Records* contain virtually nothing, but the situation appears to have been resolved by transferring Richardson's regiment into regular Confederate service and recommissioning it as the Twelfth Tennessee Cavalry, with Richardson continuing as its colonel.

While these nebulous circumstances were transpiring, Richardson was called upon to lead a cavalry force in the unsuccessful efforts of Confederate commanders to intercept the famous raid of Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson's Union cavalry through Mississippi from 17 April to 2 May 1863. Richardson remained in the Department of Northern Mississippi, under Brigadier General J. R. Chalmers, with an enlarged command through the summer. On 2 October he was given formal command of a brigade of Tennessee cavalry, which became known as the West Tennessee Brigade. The core of this command centered around Richardson's own Twelfth Tennessee, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Tennessee Cavalry Regiments, augmented at times by the temporary attachment of one or more other regiments or artillery batteries. Two days later, Richardson and his new brigade participated in a raid with General Chalmers on the Memphis and Charleston Railroad.

On 21 Nov. 1863 Richardson and the West Tennessee Brigade were transferred back to their native Tennessee to serve in the cavalry command led by another of Richardson's former associates, the brilliant Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest. On 3 December Richardson was appointed to the rank of brigadier general, to rank from December 1, and his brigade became the First Brigade of a division led by General Chalmers. In February 1864 he participated with Forrest in the spectacular repulse of Union General William Sooy Smith's expedition against Meridian, Miss. On 5 March his brigade, with that of Brigadier General L. S. Ross, attacked the Union garrison at Yazoo City, Miss., capturing the town with many stores and forcing the Union troops to take refuge in the strongest redoubt in the town's defenses. This gallant affair later caused Union forces to abandon the area altogether.

On 12 Mar. 1864 General Richardson was relieved of his command due to charges preferred by one of his regimental commanders, Colonel John Green, of the Twelfth Tennessee, the previous month. Once again, the *Official Records* do not disclose the nature of the offense or the proceedings that appear to have followed. It is certain, though, that because of these charges his nomination to the rank of brigadier general was returned by the Confederate Senate at the request of

President Jefferson Davis on 9 Feb. 1864. These proceedings appear to have kept Richardson out of the field for some months, and during this time General Forrest, in a complete reorganization of his cavalry corps, found it necessary to dissolve the West Tennessee Brigade for administrative reasons and assign its regiments elsewhere. On 21 Oct. 1864 Richardson was ordered to return to the command of his Twelfth Tennessee Cavalry at his previous rank of colonel, serving in the brigade of Colonel Edmund Rucker, Chalmers's division of Forrest's command. In this capacity he served until the end of the war. He was surrendered and paroled with Lieutenant General Richard Taylor's army at Citronelle, Ala., on 4 May 1865.

After the war Richardson traveled abroad for a time and then returned to Memphis to take up civil engineering in levee and railroad building. Here he again had associations with his old commander, General Forrest. Later he moved his family to Hardeman County. Early in January 1870 he was engaged in the interest of a projected railroad and stopped on the night of 5 January at a tavern in Clarkton, Dunklin County, Mo. At about ten that evening he stepped out on the porch of the tavern to get a drink of water from a pail on the porch and was suddenly shot by an unknown assassin who was concealed behind a wagon in the yard. Richardson died early the next morning, and his body was returned to Memphis for burial in a family plot in Elmwood Cemetery. He and his wife, Mary E. Richardson, of Alabama, had three children: Robert, Jr., James W., and Mary.

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