

# APPALACHIAN

# SCRAPPER

By John W. Kennedy



## HOW A COAL MINER'S SON BECAME A **BRIGADIER GENERAL**

**Cecil R. Richardson** speaks Russian fluently. He knows how to read Greek and Hebrew. He has traveled the world as a brigadier general, in charge of all chaplains in the U.S. Air Force.

Yet Richardson knows without the Lord's intervention his rise through the military ranks would have been impossible. For Richardson's native tongue is hillbilly. He is the son of a coal miner with minimal education from Dry Creek, W.Va.

Along with many other youths growing up in the backwoods of Appalachia, Richardson experienced rough-and-tumble teenage years.

"I was often armed as a youth, with a knife or a gun," Richardson recalls. "That was the way I lived."

With the Vietnam War escalating in 1966, the military drafted the 18-year-old Richardson. He looked forward to joining the military because he wanted to learn a skill.

Initially, Richardson signed up for the Marines. But a friend told him the Air Force had more attractive uniforms, so he switched the next day.

An entrance test showed Richardson had an aptitude for learning foreign languages and he found himself on the fast track in a military intelligence program. He began studying Russian, and soon spoke the language fluently.

At first, his disciplined training as a soldier did little to alter the unbridled anger Richardson carried with him. Once in a fight he threw an airman out of a third-story dorm window. Another time in a scuffle he grabbed a hot iron on an ironing board and burned the hand of his opponent. He nearly faced being discharged for his repeated fighting.

Yet by age 20 another passion caught Richardson's fancy: meeting young women. While stationed in San Angelo, Texas, he unsuccessfully tried various methods. Finally he hit upon the idea of visiting a church off the military installation one Sunday morning. Richardson had no religious background

whatsoever. In fact, his unfamiliarity with Christianity was so high he thought churchgoers had to pay a fee to enter the building. He slipped in a side door in an effort to avoid detection.

At that service, Richardson heard the gospel for the first time. When the pastor issued an altar call invitation at the end of the service to accept Jesus as Savior, Richardson felt overwhelmed with conviction. He knew he had been far from God. He ran down the aisle, fell on his knees, and asked God to forgive him of his evil behavior and to change his life.

The transformation didn't occur immediately. In fact, when Richardson returned to the barracks and told a buddy about his newfound faith the airman began teasing him. Richardson punched him out.

The Air Force transferred Richardson to Turkey, where he served as a Russian interpreter. There, a preacher disciplined him, explaining the need for daily prayer and Bible reading.

A speed reader, Richardson would cover a whopping 150 chapters a day, finishing the entire contents of the Old and New Testaments in a week. He also spent two hours a day in prayer, forming lists that bordered on compulsion.

"I thought I needed to prove my worth to God," Richardson says. Eventually he realized such methods didn't make him a more loved person in God's eyes. However, the efforts did serve to familiarize Richardson with previously unknown scriptural precepts and established a pattern of listening for God's direction.

One night Richardson felt anguished as he poured out his heart to the Lord in prayer. He says God gave him a new calling: preaching. His mentor pastor told him God had confirmed the calling in a dream, and he began to let Richardson preach.

Richardson finished his tour of duty in 1970 and returned to the United States. He graduated from Evangel University in Springfield, Mo., with a degree in biblical studies, then earned a master's of divinity in Hebrew studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill.

In 1977, a decade after his conversion, Richardson began serving as an active duty Assemblies of God



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chaplain in the Air Force. Twenty relocations have followed, to states from Alaska to New Mexico, from Michigan to Washington, as well as to Greece. Along the way came increased responsibilities and advancements in rank.

Upon his promotion to colonel in 1995, Richardson moved to the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. At age 47, he started working with the secretary of defense as executive director of the Armed Forces Chaplain Board, the senior religious advisory board to the Secretary of Defense. In Tampa, Fla., as command chaplain of U.S. Central Command, Richardson oversaw pastoral duties in military visits to bases in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. He was promoted to command chaplain of the Air Combat Command, supervising 110 clergy at Air Force bases.

In 2004, with promotion to brigadier general, Richardson returned to Washington, D.C. As deputy chief of chaplains he is headquartered at Bolling Air Force Base and responsible for providing chaplains to all Air Force units around the world.

He also oversees the quality of worship services and religious ministries.

"I want to make sure our soldiers have access to chaplains who will pray for them and be their pastor as they serve in dangerous and hostile environments," Richardson says.

Throughout his military career, Richardson says he has never been discouraged from sharing his faith.

Two years after he entered church by a side door, Richardson married Jan, whom he met at church. Richardson and his wife, who is an education consultant traveling throughout the United States, have three sons who are serving the Lord. The oldest son, Steve, also is an Air Force chaplain, making him and Cecil the only simultaneously serving active duty father and son military chaplains.

Many of Richardson's ancestors could neither read nor write. The one-star general, who is articulate, erudite, polite and unassuming, is living proof people don't need to be bound by their irreligious past or by an upbringing that didn't afford them opportunities for educational advancement.

Richardson, 59, says the longer he serves the



Lord, the more thankful he becomes. He says it's helpful for

Christians to periodically review how God has met them at important milestones in their lives. That way, he says, Christians can eagerly anticipate what God will do in the future.

Richardson is slated to meet a board for promotion to two-star major general next year when he is expected to succeed the retiring Charles C. Baldwin as Air Force chief of chaplains. With the promotion he would lead 2,200 chaplains and assistants plus be the senior pastor for 700,000 active-duty, Guard, Reserve and civilian personnel in the Air Force. **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).

## ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

### A. Admit you are a sinner.

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

### Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

### B. Believe in Jesus (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

### Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

### C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

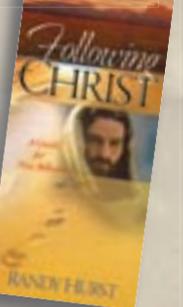
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