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William Nichols interview for Wright State University History Course 485

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William F. Nichols

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Summary

Interviewer: What was your life like before the war?

(198) He grew up and in Lima, Ohio attending South High School when he was drafted.

Interviewer: What was your perception of the war before you went?

(203) He discusses how he didn't really know anything about it. All he knew was that everyone in his age bracket had to go.

Interviewer: When listening to the news, and reading the newspapers about the war, what did you gather about the war before you went to Toledo?

(215) Nothing much was ever said about the war so, he really didn't know what to expect.

Interviewer: What did your family think when you found out that you were drafted?

(228) He tells that his family wasn't surprised, and had even expected him to be drafted.

Interviewer: How old were you at this time?

(236) He was seventeen years old.

Interviewer: When you were going to Toledo, what were your goals and expectations?

(244) He didn't really know what to expect, all he knew was that he wanted to get into the navy.

Interviewer: Did you get a choice of whether or not you wanted to be a paramedic or not?

(250) He was more or less asked whether or not he wanted to go to school or not.

Interviewer: What kind of training or schooling did you have to do in order to become a paramedic?

(258) He had to go to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania of paramedic school, where he was trained.

Interviewer: What was boot camp like? What were some of your experiences at boot camp?

(275) He tells of his experiences in boot camp in Chicago, IL. Discussing the training that all the men had to do, and some personal, memorable experiences.

Interviewer: When you were ready to go to war, what was the process of

going from boot camp to getting stationed somewhere? (300)

Interviewer: Did you train in Philadelphia? (347)

Interviewer: How long did your training take? (364)

Interviewer: After Philadelphia, what was your next step? (379)

Interviewer: Now, you're in New York, What was next? (400)

Interviewer: Did all seventy-two ships cross the Atlantic to England? (423)

Interviewer: You being a paramedic on the ship, did your ship ever get hit? (452)

Interviewer: What was it like when your ship was hit? (463)

Interviewer: On your voyage across the Atlantic, did you ever have to use your paramedic experience? (470)

Interviewer: Why did you think that they didn't publicize the Tiger Invasion? Do you think the U.S. was repressing it? (517)

Interviewer: What were your living conditions like? (520)

Interviewer: After the Tiger Invasions, what happened next? (534)

Interviewer: When you headed back to the United States, what were some of your experiences? (562)

Interviewer: When you finally reached America, where were you at? (572)

Interviewer: How many days did you get of leisure time, and what did you do? (593)

Interviewer: After you got the letter for the next expedition, where were you sent? (632)

Interviewer: So, once you got to Norfolk, Virginia, what happened next? (646)

Interviewer: So, compared to the former ship you were on crossing the

Atlantic, what was the Destroyer like?

(657)

Interviewer: You said you were a paramedic on the other ship, did you play

the same role on the destroyer? (657)

Interviewer: What's the difference between first class paramedic and a third class paramedic? (670)

Interviewer: What was your role on the destroyer? (686)

Interviewer: What was the destination? (710)

Interviewer: Were you ever attacked on this expedition? (726)

Interviewer: When did you come back to San Diego? (729)

Interviewer: What was the process of being discharged? (730)

Interviewer: How does the point system work? (737)

Interviewer: So, you say you weren't discharged right away. When were you discharged? (742)

Interviewer: After you were discharged, what did you do? (749)

Interviewer: What were you feeling as you were heading home? (754)

Interviewer: In what ways did World War II change you?

(776) He says that the war was probably the "best-worst" experience he'd ever had.

Interviewer: So, we discussed your views of the war before you went, how did your views change after you were discharged?

(770) Here he discusses that his views didn't change much, but it just became more real to him.

Interviewer: how do you think World War II was portrayed in the popular movies today?

(779) The movie was realistic, and portrayed the war precisely to an extent.

Interviewer: What were you feeling when you were watching the film?

(787) Here he discusses how the movie was so true to the real thing that he didn't know if he would be able to watch it or not.

Interviewer: Is there any other experience that you'd like to add?

(796) He discusses England and their lifestyle during the war, mentioning that there were some who had lost their houses and ended up living in the "White Cliffs of Dover".

Bill Nichols

Interviewed by Becky Moor

April 27, 2001

At the Nichols residence in Elida, Ohio

Becky Moor: I'm sitting here with Bill Nichols in his kitchen in Lima, Ohio, and we're discussing World War II and his experiences. So, what was your life like before the war?

Bill Nichols: I went to, South High School, I played all sports, and, and the war came along, and there was four of us that wanted to get into the navy, so I didn't finish my senior year of school, I went to Toledo, and joined the navy.

BM: So, what was your perception of the war before you went?

BN: I really didn't know, I wasn't informed about it or anything. The only thing I knew was that I was going to have to go. And, whatever branch of service I wanted to go into, I had to sign up for, so, that's why I went to Toledo and, before I was drafted, and, we all joined the navy.

BM: So, listening to the news and, reading the newspapers, what did you gather about the war before you actually went to Toledo?

BN: I really didn't pay too much attention at that time I mean I was just seventeen years old and, didn't particularly, notice too much, I just figured that I was going to have to go to the service, so we went and signed up?

BM: So, what did your family think about this, when they found out you were drafted?

BN: It was just a case that everybody was going, that was in good health, was going to have to, at my age, was going to have to, go to the service one way or the other.

BM: And how old were you at this time?

BN: I was seventeen, going on eighteen, and that was the gist of it.

BM: So, when you were going to Toledo, what were your goals and expectations:

BN: Well, it was all new to me, I was lucky enough to get in a schooling, after I signed up. Course we went to boot camp. But I got in the paramedics more or less school that was there... a lot of the boys didn't get to go to any kind of school.

BM: Now, did you get a choice?

BN: There were very few choices, at that time. But some of them got in, a friend of mine got in the

CB's, and that was a certain branch of the navy. And the other two just went in as seamen, in the navy.

BM: So, what kind of training or schooling did you have to do in order to become a paramedic on a ship?

BN: We had about, I guess about four or five months training to be a paramedic, we had to be able to draw blood, and first aid more or less. No operation or anything like that, but a, we had to work on each other and draw each other's blood, no incisions or anything like that, basically first aid stuff.

BM: So, you went to boot camp in Toledo, correct?

BN: Now we went to boot camp in Greenbay, in Chicago. That's where most of the fellas around here went, when they went to boot camp, and was in Chicago, Illinois. And I spent, at that time it was, usually they had to go about eight or twelve weeks, but during the war, we only went to boot camp for six weeks. And, that was my first taste of southern people. This whole group that I was in with, were all from the south. And I'd never been around anybody that, that was from the deep south, it was an experience. They were all nice fellas, they had one or two fellas that couldn't hardly read or write. And they told me that the only way the navy got'em was they come down after the mail, and ah, they come down from the hills and got their mail, and the service got'em.

BM: What was boot camp like, what were some of your experiences at bootcamp?

BN: Boot camp, they had you getting up at a certain time and eating at a certain time, and you had to wash you own clothes, and that was an experience... I never had to wash my clothes when I was at home, but when I got into the service; you wanted clean clothes you had to wash them yourself. And we had a, we had a drill, chief of navy, that was our instructor, we went on marches everyday, and then we had callosities, and then, we had a, go over to the big pool, and we had to swim so many laps and we took what they call a, whale boat, out in the water and we had to upset it and turn in backside up, and get the water out of it, and then climb in it, and then we'd row it. Then also we had to jump off a platform that was high as a battle ship. Which was at least maybe seven or eight stories high. And they showed you how to jump without breaking your arms... you put your arms down to your side, and, when you jump you wouldn't hurt yourself. We had one fella, he could swim, but didn't like to jump. And they kept talking to him, and talking to him. They finally got him up on the platform, and finally the guy told him, just, just look over the side there, just see how far it is, and he went over to the side, and as he got over to the side that guy pushed him off. I mean it was one of the requirements, that you had to pass, and he didn't lite right, and, he was stunned for a minute... he could swim, he got out of the water, but he was really upset that that guy pushed him off (laughing) the platform.

BM: I would've been too... so, when you were about ready to go to war, what was that process from boot camp... getting stationed somewhere?

BN: Well, I guess it's just the luck of the draw, they interviewed you, and then they placed you where they had openings, and what you qualified for. I was lucky they needed this, paramedic school that they called pharmacists school, then, like I say, I qualified for it, and there I went to a I think it was Philadelphia, to a hospital in Philadelphia where we took our training.

BM: You had more training in Philadelphia?

BN: Yeah, I went there to a take that paramedic training, at the hospital, navy hospital there in Philadelphia.

BM: About how long did that take?

BN: Oh, I think I was there about six months maybe... four to six months. It was good, interesting, they showed you how to put a tourniquet on if a fella was bleeding. They use all kind of techniques to clean wounds, and at that time they used a power they used to put in a wound and bandage it up. It was pretty thorough.

BM: So after Philadelphia, what, what was your next step?

BN: My next step was, we went to Lytle Beach, New York, and we took amphibious training, at Lytle Beach New York.

BM: And what was amphibious training?

BN: It was for the landing of the invasion, the landing of the troops and the invasion of a Europe. They were getting ready to, you know, cross the channel, so you was going to use these paramedics on these ships, also on these landing barges. The marines didn't have any paramedics, so the navy paramedics served what they call Core men, for the marines. Some of the fellas I went to school with went with the marines, I didn't go with the marines, I stayed with the navy.

BM: So, you're in New York, what was the next...

BN: Well, then after we got the training in New York, we went to Boston and was assigned to an LST, which is a landing barge which is about almost as long as a football field, and just as round on the bottom is a tub and speed wise it only goes about four to five knots, which is not very fast. That was out top speed, and we got on that and set out there in the harbor in Boston, for it seemed like days, getting a bunch of ships together to cross at one time. And the last I heard there was supposed to be around seventy-two ships, all in one cluster, that was going to go across to England.

BM: So that's what happened, seventy-two ships crosses to England?

BN: Yeah we, seventy-two ships, we went over there and, in a bug group, and we had to zigzag across the Atlantic, because the German submarines was out there picking these ships off... I think they got twelve ships out of that seventy-two. We'd go for days, these merchant ships and LST's, if they got hit, we couldn't stop and pick anybody up because we could never catch the Convoy again, because they went so slow. They had very few escort ships, that were with us and, it was thirty-two days getting to South Hampton, England. But like I was telling you one time, we took, after our meals and everything on the ship, the garbage we'd throw overboard the fantail, and we'd see sharks following us for days because they knew that we dumped the garbage... and they could keep up with us. We were going that slow that, you could see them following us. And then these guys getting their ship blowed up from under them, they were in the water and you could just imagine what happened to them.

BM: So, you being a paramedic on the ship, did your ship ever get hit?

BN: We never got hit 'til we hit South Hampton, thirty-two days (laughing), the first night in the

harbor, the German's come over and, scraped the harbor, and we got hit then.

BM: And what was that like?

BN: It was awful scary. We got, not real bad, but we were hit bad enough that they had to go out and get certain parts, so you could run the ship, navigate the ship again. It was a, kind scary.

BM: So, during the time of the invasion, and your voyage across the Atlantic to South Hampton, England... you being a paramedic did you have any experiences with that you had to use... your medical...

BN: No, not that I can, can recall. We were, more or less, just transporting troops and, troops, and jeeps, and six, eight inch guns, and, the two things I did was go to this little town of Exiter, where our supply depot was, and we'd take supplies down to this little harbor, called Foew, just a small harbor, and we never got off the ship in Europe we just take troops over, I think we was on the fourth wave that went across we weren't on the first, and we weren't on the second, but we were about on the third or fourth wave, and I think we made three trips across the channel, that invasion... the weather was so bad I didn't think they'd go when they did go.

BM: Was it storming? Or... you said the weather was so bad

BN: Yeah, the rain, it was awful rainy and the channel was rough, they were debating on when to go, course Eisenhower, he had a plan what they called the Tiger Operation, where they would have fake invasions... where they'd go half way out into the channel and then turn around and come back to confuse the German's so they wouldn't know exactly when they was going to do it. One time we went out into the channel, and I didn't think they was going to be any escort out there but all at once the showed up and escorted us back. Then about two or three weeks later a bunch of them went out and there was no escort out there to protect them and the German U-Boats got, I don't know how many ships, but a lot of the fellas I went to training with, never saw them again. They never said much about that Tiger operation, it was never publicized or nothing, was one of those things they got mixed up on.

BM: Now why did you think they didn't publicized that?

BN: Well, it was such a loss.

BM: You think they're kind of repressing it?

BN: Yeah.

BM: So what were your living conditions like?

BN: The navy wasn't too bad, we had good food usually. I can only remember one time when we were down there on the little seaport, Foew, and worked mostly loading the ships, and moving material around. It was Thanksgiving, and a gut came around on a big truck and there were four guys on the back and they had turkeys. They went past and threw us a frozen turkey. So, that was one Thanksgiving we had boiled, frozen turkey. We got a big pot and built a fire, and added water and that's the way we cooked it.

BM: Do you remember what year that was?

BN: Well, it had to be 1944.

BM: So, after the Tiger Invasions, what happened after that?

BN: Well, after that they had the real invasion. We were a supply depot mostly, and getting supplies down to this seaport, and they had the actual invasion. We went across twice with our LST. The first time we went across we got on a sandbar and got stuck, and that big thing set there for quite a while, until somebody came and pulled us off when the tide came up. We never got on a sandbar after that.

BM: After the invasion, what were the emotions of the men? How did they deal with it?

BN: It was just one of those things you took in stride, and hoped that the war would end soon. I think the four or fifth wave we started bringing prisoners back on board the LST. The Germans were captured and brought back to England. Eventually, I guess, they brought some of them back here to the United States to camps around here; I believe there was one in Celina, Ohio.

BM: What did they do with these prisoners?

BN: It was more or less like they were in prison. They gave them chores to do and worked them a little bit. I really don't know just exactly what they did there.

BM: After the invasion, what was the next thing that happened?

BN: When the troops went through France, and we kept on working at the supply depot, still getting supplies down to this little seaport that would take across the channel for the troops. As they moved across Europe.

BM: As you headed back home, what were some of your experiences there?

BN: Well, it took us thirty-two days to get across to Europe, I left the LST and the supply depot, and I came back on the Queen Elizabeth in four days.

BM: When you finally reached America, where were you at?

BN: We came in New York, and we saw the Statue of Liberty and everybody was Whooping, and hollering because the war was over then with the Germans. We couldn't wait to get back on the United States soil. We got leave, for about thirty days, we all got to go home. When I got home I got a letter, for when I got off leave to go to Columbus, Ohio.

BM: About how many days did you get?

BN: I think it was thirty days.

BM: what did you do with your leisure time?

BN: There wasn't too much to do. I got to see mom and dad, and my girlfriend. My mom was working at the Lima Tank Refill, during the war she built tanks. My mother-in-law, she worked at

Canteen, at the train station. They were in the war effort. My mom and my mother in-law both did their little bit to help out.

BM: When you got your letter for your next expedition, where were you sent?

BN: Well, I had to go to Columbus, Ohio, and I didn't exactly know where I was going to go from there. Anyway, I was supposed to go to the post office in Columbus. My dad, mom, and my girlfriend (who is my wife now). I didn't know where I was going after that, and I went in and saw the navy commander that was there, and told him who I was and everything, and he said there had been a slip up some way, and that he hadn't had my order yet. He said you have a week more leave. I run out of that post office, and out on the dock, and it just happened to be my dad. I don't know why, but he just drove around the block, and went past that post office and there I was standing there waving at him. He come down there and wanted to know what the problem was, and I said it looks like I have another week. It was really odd that he would have gone around the block, I guess to see if I got off alright.

BM: So you came back to Lima then?

BN: I came back to Lima for a week.

BM: Did you have to go back to Columbus then?

BN: Yep, I had to go back to Columbus, there was no more time off.

BM: And what did you find out?

BN: They sent me to Norfolk, VA, and that was quite an experience.

BM: Why do you say that?

BN: They had so many sailors down there it was really a Navy seaport, they had ships all over, there were a lot of Navy personnel. They actually had signs in the window, "Sailors and Dogs Not Allowed".

BM: Why do you think they had signs that said that?

BN: Too much trouble with the Navy, I don't know if they were tearing up things, but they'd like for them to leave.

BM: So once you got down there what happened after that?

BN: They assigned me to a ship, the HR Dickson 708, it was a destroyer. Now a Destroyer is fairly small, but it had six guns on it, and it had depth targets, it had radar. It was good for tracking submarines. These depth charges would be rolled off the back and they'd go down so far and they would blow up submarines. I can't remember just how many fellas were on that Destroyer, there wasn't too many... it's been so long ago I can't remember.

BM: Compared to the former ship you were on, what was the Destroyer like?

BN: It was a lot better duty. We were at one place and had good meals and service. It was dry and

we didn't have to fight all that weather taking supplies down like we did in England, down to the harbor. A lot better situation.

BM: You said that you were a paramedic on the ship crossing to England. Did you play the same role on the Destroyer?

BN: Yeah, there were two of us that were paramedics. I was third class, they called a pharmacist, and they had a first class pharmacist.

BM: What's the difference between a first and a third class pharmacist?

BN: He was in charge of the station, or paramedic room, and I was more or less under his jurisdiction, whatever he wanted me to do, I did. All we did was give shots. Anytime you went from one zone, like you go from the Atlantic you had to take shots, and you went to the Pacific you had to take shots. We gave shots.

BM: Why's that?

BN: To keep you from getting different diseases, like a flu shot. We had to get shots before we even took off. We was going to go to the Pacific, and we had to get shots before we left.

BM: So, how many ships went out with you?

BN: I think there were four Destroyers.

BM: And your main goal was to escort...

BN: Escort flattops. Now a flattop is an aircraft carrier, and right now I can't even remember what the name of that aircraft carrier was that we escorted. To get out to it we had to go from the Atlantic to the Pacific. When we left Norfolk, we stopped at Jacksonville, FL, we were there for a short time to pick up supplies, and left there and went down to Panama, and from Panama we went down through the ditch, which the United States recently gave back to Panama. Went through the Panama Canal out to the Pacific, and we ended up in San Diego. We were there for a short time. From San Diego we went to Honolulu, HA. From there we went on a rendezvous with this aircraft carrier.

BM: And what was your destination?

BN: We were to protect this aircraft carrier. And we had to fish out these airplanes that went off the deck into the water and rescue the pilots. I was there when they did it but I didn't get in on the rescue. But none of them got hurt, but they lost the plane.

BM: Were you ever attacked?

BN: No, we weren't attacked, but we saw several dogfights, when we first got out there before the Japanese surrendered.

BM: You say dogfights, and you mean...

BN: American airplanes and the Japanese airplanes were shooting at each other, just a phrase that

they used when they fought each other.

BM: When did you come back to the United States then?

BN: 1946

BM: And you landed in San Diego?

BN: Landed in San Diego, and that's where I got discharged.

BM: Was there a process of being discharged?

BN: They had a point system, and you had to have so many points before you could be discharged, and I can't remember just how many points you needed. They took into consideration the fellas that were married, had children, but of course I didn't have anybody and I wasn't married at the time. Had to wait my turn.

BM: Now you say a point system, how does that work?

BN: They graded, more or less like somebody who was married and had children, they'd give them more points because they had a family, and the single fellas were on the tail end and they didn't get as many points at first, and you had to wait your turn.