

WALTER NICHOLSON

Amthor: This is a portion of the oral histories of northwest Missouri in the 1940s program. Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council and with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Amthor: Today's date is October 29, 2008, and this interview is being conducted at the home of Walter B. Nicholson and located in Bedford, Iowa. Today the interviewer is Joni Amthor and the assisting is Margaret Kelley. I said earlier we are here with Walter B. Nicholson and his birth date is June 6, 1924, lived during the 1940s and this interview is his story and life during that time period and including World War II. First section that we're going to talk about is just some biographical details like where and when were you born?

Nicholson: I was born approximately 6 miles east of Burlington Junction, Missouri on a farm, and Dr. Carsons, from Burlington Junction at the time, assisted and I grew up on the farm.

Amthor: Tell us about your parent's occupations, and whether you had any brothers or sisters.

Nicholson: I had no brothers. I had two sisters. My life on the farm: my father was a farmer. My mother was afflicted with Alzheimer's in later years so that she had to be in an institution, but he continued living on the farm for quite some time as I did and my sisters and I worked as I got old enough; I worked as a farm hand on other farms and helping out until I was drafted to go to the army.

Amthor: Do you have any other family members that participated in the war?

Nicholson: Yes, that participated, no. I have several cousins that were in the war. I don't know how I can answer that. I know about the war effort, that we were encouraged to and did, to collect scrap metal. Before the war, we had coupons, as there were lots of scarcities a coupon for sugar, say, and coffee, and tires. The tires were rationed; I don't know if we had a coupon for that or not, exactly. Several things: one place where I worked out, the daughter of my boss tore out, stole the coupons for my coffee and sugar and at least if not some of the others, I forget. That's something about before the war that I can remember.

Amthor: Well, this next section is going to be on propaganda. What did you know about the war in Europe or in China?

Nicholson: I didn't know about China at that time. The war in Europe I knew, I was told, and believed, the German Nazi were terrible people, any cartoons that I saw, were of a German soldier as a big burly, mean looking fellow. Propaganda, otherwise, what can I remember? I can't remember too much. They were a regime that needed to be stopped that they were an evil influence that we came to despise if not and hate them. This was result of propaganda, I found out later, a lot of it.

Amthor: How did the U.S. portray the war and of the Japanese?

Nicholson: The U S, as I described, German and Hitler were an evil force. The Japanese were bad and sneaky and a group to be somewhat feared too and stopped. They were hated and we were suspicious of them. I think here in the Midwest not so much in the western United States, and as I got into the service and heard more about the enemies, that we were to be facing, it didn't sound good, that's all I can think to say about that.

Amthor: Were you aware of all the propaganda of here and abroad?

Nicholson: I was aware that it was propaganda and necessarily the truth. No, not really, I believed what I heard and told and believed it. I found out later not quite that way. Particularly about the Germans whom I faced in World War 2, I was Instrumental in taking several prisoners during World War 2, and some of those fellows I thought were ordinary guys who were defending their homeland. Not fanatical. However, there was a group of Nazi that was loyal to Hitler and very fanatical. I didn't run into many of them, or have to deal with many of them, and I'm glad of that, but they were there, there were those I guess that's about all. I would add, but this is getting ahead of my story about in the war, but during the war, two of our prisoners, one of them was a strappy, jovial fellow- he was our barber in our company our battalion actually, and the other was a shorter fellow, a likeable kid he was- he had been cooking for the Germans and he was with our cook in the army, too, during the progress of the war overseas.

Amthor: How did you learn about Pearl Harbor?

Nicholson: It was as I remember, a Sunday and my dad was relaxing on the couch and suddenly said to the rest of us, his family, "Listen to this, listen to this, this may affect all of us." We heard Roosevelt tell about the Germans had attacked Pearl Harbor and then went on to -my dad went on talking about it, I was about 16, or 17, I guess.

He said, "I don't think you'll have to go but I'll possibly be used; have to go."

I said, "Well, what will you do? "

"Well, possibly as a guard of some of our installations around over the country." That's all I know, but it didn't turn out that way. I was the one that was drafted and went into the service.

Amthor: How did you learn about the progress of the war?

Nicholson: During the war, of course, I learned from our officers. There was a paper published by the military, I think, but it was a good one, called *The Stars and Stripes* during World War 2. From that I guess mainly that I learned about the progress of the war.

Amthor: Next were going to talk about your actually service.

Nicholson: Alright.

Amthor: You already said you were drafted.

Nickelson: I was drafted.

Amthor: How old were you and what year was that?

Nicholson: I guess I must have been about 18 turning 19 the next June, I was called up. I had been working in northern Iowa, west of Des Moines on a farm. They called me and hoped to keep me as a hired man, which was complementary. My dad wanted me home, he thought I had been gone long enough, and was soon to be drafted. Which I found out was true when I got back, soon after I got away back home.

I was inducted at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and sent to Camp Fanon, Texas, for my basic training. After basic training I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, as further training in the - for the infantry as an infantry replacement, and in radio and wire communications for the army. This is the training that I used all through the war. I shipped out then, after furlough home, I shipped out at Hamptons Road, Virginia, I believe and was 19 days crossing the ocean. They told us because of dodging German submarines, it was 19 days of sea sickness, believe me. We landed in Naples and were out in north of Naples in tents, for a few days, and were taken as replacements to various places we were needed, still fighting in Italy. By that time though, the Italians were about whipped and what German support they had. So my experiences in Italy didn't amount to an awful lot. And then we were gathered at the beach in Italy it was probably toward northern Italy, and a thousand ships gathered out and we went by landing craft out to go on ships across the bay, to southern France. Then back on landing craft we engaged in the southern France landing. You don't hear much about the southern France landing as the boys, as it should be they got the glory for the landing from England across the English Channel and all that, and they deserve that too. But the southern France landing was also spectacular, within the German emplacements that machine guns were guarding. We had a group called engineers who worked with the 142nd regiment and they and another regiment the engineers worked in behind these machine gun emplacements, and got rid of them through flame throwers and grenades and continued on into France and the reception as we went through southern France was really something. The people came out - we were liberators, you know, and the girls hugged us and the older women, and there were a few old men. Most of the men, though, were involved in the fighting for their country. -----, they called - well, the French called it FIFI. Free France Interior. They were involved in that.

Anyway, on to - up through France, at first of course, loaves bread they had for us, and bottles of wine, and greeting and all that was wonderful, and continued onto chasing the Germans up through France and the [-----] Mountains, sometimes known as the Black Forest, I guess, and on into an area we came to there was a regiment of Japanese-Americans, who were fighting the Germans also. They got cutoff by the Germans, a part of them, something like 260 some men, I believe, and I received on the radio a frantic call, a very terrified call, for help and of course each message I got I gave to my commanding officer and he looked rather grim, but we continued on. Our unit and other units eventually break in and allow - freed those captured Japanese American regiment. And continued on through - I'll probably forget a lot of things - chasing the Germans.

Broke into Germany through what had been a port of entry for the Germans in more peaceful times. The Germans had, after World War 1, I think, -had built this the French called it the Maginot line. Perhaps you have heard of that? The Germans called it the Sigfried line and it was close pyramids of concrete to stop any vehicles from coming through, on the hills back of

that were German gun emplacements, pill boxes we called them, they were cemented over the top and dug back in and could fire on us as we advanced. Well, that stopped us for a little bit. Artillery was brought up and blasted some of these concrete pyramids out of the way to just make a path; just so one road path through, followed by tanks equipped with bulldozer blades and pushed the concrete to the side and then we went on through then, riding in vehicles and so forth. On chasing the Germans on into Germany, then. As we came to German towns, if there was resistance or artillery, our rifle companies and so forth obliterated the town, practically completely demolished it so there was no place for enemy to hide.

If we came to a town and we did to some small towns in Germany, they're very close together and we came to one that offered no resistance, white flags were out from the Germans, hanging out upstairs and so forth. Occasionally a few times, there were curious German citizens out watching, looking to see the Americans march through. Then we continued on to - I may get a bit emotional, but it's the truth and it needs to be told. One of Germans concentration camps, they had them all over Germany for their enemies: the political enemies and the Jews. Hitler had these installed, and the one I came to and had duty with as part of the 142nd regiment and same battalion was as a guard around this and some of our men helped and it was a horrible place.

The people had not been cared for, they were starving; they were skin and bones, those alive.

There were a lot of dead bodies. There were heaps of dead bodies on railroad cars. They took these, as I understood it, they took them to other camps where they had kilns or they had ways of burning people, marched in and burnt. There were other places where they, even at this camp, I believe, as I remember, they had gas chambers where the enemy, Jews and politically enemies, were stripped of their clothing and in this big room when the gas was turned on and they were gassed to death. It's the truth.

I continued on with my unit from Lansberg, Germany; on down through Germany with, until it came down, clear down to Austria. The edge of Austria we were still fighting the Germans, I didn't realize where I was, except I was still in Germany and fighting Germans.

I had received a promotion during the war, first as what they called a T5, which was technician with a t underneath, which goes with radio operators and I think people of other obligations, but then I got T4, and as again the same classification. Then I was promoted to staff sergeant and this gave me more responsibility. My duty was to supply - it was in what was called Headquarters Company of the second battalion of the 142nd regiment of 36th division. My job then was to supply radio operators for where needed, at the various companies within the 142nd regiment, within the second battalion. Not a whole regiment, but the same battalion's rifle companies so forth. This I did. We came to; I am getting ahead of my story almost, but not quite.

There was the Battle of the Bulge, which I was involved in. You have probably read about.

For me, it was fairly easy, the Battle of Bulge, was German soldiers who could speak English had been selected and given American uniforms to pull on and portray themselves as Americans, but they made a drive, a big drive, a big offensive against us and made a big bolt into our units. My job was, as a radio operator in the back end of a jeep, to ride as did others in my group; I assigned, because I couldn't do it all the time. But a 65 mile roundtrip, challenging at different points, the people whether - asking them questions, in code, which changed every day, and test them if they were indeed Americans or Germans portraying to be Americans. I don't remember exactly how long that lasted, it seemed like almost forever. But I think it was like three or four days, I'm not for sure. History books could tell you, probably, how long the Battle of the Bulge

lasted. Anyway, that was taken care of, and we continued on, and assigning different radio operators at the different companies, and at times I also took my turn as generally as operator in the company with our battalion commander, and I was with him when war ended. Not to get ahead of my story, there were pockets of resistance. Seemed like some Germans, even though they probably had heard that the war was over, they were still continuing to try to resist, and had to be put down, but the day of the end of the war in Europe for my unit, and for all of us fighting in Europe, that day before we knew that the end – it was customary to send reconnaissance forward, and an officer and a jeep driver and a fellow manning the machine gun went on reconnaissance. Well, the fellow manning the machine gun was a twin. Now I know this is unusual for twins to serve in the same unit, after the tragedy of the boys – I can't recall their names, but anyway, he was a twin, and he volunteered to go as machine gunner, and went up over the hill, and all through the night the Germans had been shelling us. A German bazooka hit the jeep, and killed all of them. These boys, their names were Courtney, Ronald and Donald Courtney. They were not in my communications group, but were of the engineers, I believe. I knew them very well, and associated with them almost daily. It was tragedy to hear that through – but then that night, that evening, the Germans were still shelling. I was in a ditch, a deep ditch. Our men, some of them were firing back at the Germans, but you didn't see any, I know, because I looked! We got the message –Germans surrender, effective at such and such - now this is military, and I don't remember the exact time, but it was in May 7th, it sticks in my mind, but I'm not certain about that. Halt in place and do not fire unless fired upon. Well, the Germans we were facing continued to fire mortar shells, and artillery at us, and there was a barn up ahead of the ditch I was in, and they seemed to think we had emplacements in there, or something, anyway, they demolished that barn eventually, but I got the message – there was so much noise that I had to ask for it again. We were taught in radio school, you don't say repeat, because that is a signal that the artillery use to continue their objective, but I asked to give again, got it again, and wrote it down, and turned to give it to my colonel, well, I couldn't find him. He was down the ditch a ways, and I ran and gave it to him, and he smiled, and but we did not halt in place. Our commanders took us back down the hill to – there was a small house down there. By the way, the Germans continued firing, for two or three hours after I got that message. Somehow, their sector didn't get it. I really believe that was the reason, but finally all was quiet. Our officers gathered in the little house and conferred the next move. About daylight, I got in with the colonel's jeep, manning the main radio, which was in the back of the jeep, and the colonel and the jeep driver, and we continued on with the whole column, everybody was to climb on anything they could ride on, tanks or trucks or whatever, and we continued on towards the Germans. Well, just as we got started, here were rows of Germans, on both sides of the road, with their full battle gear, their rifles still slung over their shoulders, standing at rigid attention, and watched us go by. We continued on over the hill and down a little – there was a small white house, as I remember it and a German officer in his best uniform, I can bet he was spic and span. He raised his hands in surrender, and my colonel just waved him on back. Following us were military police, who were taking prisoners, so I don't know what happened to the German officer, but we continued on, then, and came to these pockets of resistance, even then, some that either hadn't heard, or were rather fanatical and didn't want to give up. But they did have to. We continued on through Austria, to I was told by my officers, just across those hills and valley over there is the North end of Italy, where I had actually started, was Italy, but of course it is a long country, and I was quite a distance from where I actually started. Then we continued on, back through Germany, as the army of occupation, checking out towns as we went for any

possible snipers. We finally settled in one town, I haven't been able to remember that name for quite some time, but I found it just this morning, Kiershime, Germany, where we stayed almost all summer in this one town. It had a swimming pool, and of course we were at peace time and we had a German lady who did our laundry, and she did a nice job, and folded our clothes. We liked dressing up in our clean uniforms; of course we had to fall out for revelry of a morning, was about all of the military duties that we had to do while we were there that summer. In September, I believe it was, I received orders, and they didn't take all of us at the same time, in my group, but some of my group had points enough that they got to go home earlier than I did, or shipped out earlier. As a replacement, I didn't have quite as many as some of them. I got orders to go to the railroad –go to the train, and we got on boxcars, and rode through Germany, and France, down to Marci, France, on the coast, and there we were – we had different duties. It was there a area that – I forget the name of it, but it was an area for collecting American soldiers on their road home, their boat home. I was – as a staff sergeant, I was given first job of a water pumping station, that pumped water for this area, this camp, and I saw some of my old friends from the war, too, down there, after that. A sergeant that had been in charge was going home, and I had a quick review of what there was to do to operate these machines, the big motors, and pumping station and how to start them and such, how to purify the water, which was another thing, how much to add and test and all that, and I was left with that duty. Then I was given the duty – transferred as head of a motor pool, as a sergeant, as the sergeant there was going home. The motor pool was a place where the army keeps the vehicles, as you know, and the old sergeant there, I said, "I don't know anything – I don't even know how to drive one of these trucks." I had driven the jeeps a little bit during the war. He says, "Just climb in one of those." They had big gasoline transports, troop transports, too. He said, "Climb in one of those and drive it around – and back and practice. I didn't do it, but I told the head mechanic, "Any problems you have, let me know." Well, he said, "The first thing we need is gravel in here." It was – I use the word loblolly, Doris, I think, says it's not in the dictionary, but it was up to axle deep with these trucks going in and out in mud, and well, the fellow that had been in charge, and was leaving, he said, "Maybe you can get some gravel in here, I haven't been able to. I went to the officer in charge, and told him, "Come out here, I want to show it to you if you don't believe it, see what a loblolly it is, what a terrible case, and we need rock – we got rock right away, and I felt good about that. Then I was transferred from that, to finally the job I was trained for, the radio, and wire communications, and some of the men, in my group, that I was in charge of had to string wire, and we did, for communications. They used field communications phones that were a little different, they were crank telephones, but their incased in leather for use in during the war. During the war, we did not use, in my experience, telephones at all, actually, was trained with them in training. So I had that job with the radio and telephone group. Then came my time to go home, and go aboard a ship and came back and past the Statue of Liberty, and shipped eventually to Fort Leonard Wood, near St. Louis, they said, I didn't know where it was, but I had an uncle that lived down at St. Louis, a favorite uncle of mine, and I called him and told him where I was, and he came down and got me, and I spent some wonderful times with my Uncle David. Then home, my dad by that time, was living alone, no, my sister, my oldest sister, younger than I, but she was living yet with him, and was she was a wonderful girl. My dad was somewhat backward, and a farmer, and due to the problems they had when my mother was afflicted with what I believe was now Alzheimer's, our telephone had been taken out, and we didn't have a telephone. The neighbors – I had to call them from my hotel when I got in to

Maryville, and they came up and told them, and he and my sister came down and that's the end of my story I believe.

Amthor: Well, I did have a few questions. You probably mentioned earlier, but what was your branch of service?

Nicholson: Infantry.

Amthor: What year did you go in into the service?

Nicholson: Went into the service, I was drafted and went in I believe it was September of 1943.

Amthor: When did you get to come home?

Nicholson: I got home, and got out of the service in 1945, in March. From September, 1943 to March, 1945.

Amthor: Well, we'll move on to – let's see, you were talking about coming home. Did you mention D-Day? Do you remember D-Day?

Nicholson: No, I did not mention that. D-Day, I know that it at the time of D-Day, that was when the General Eisenhower, decided to send, to attack on the west, of France and Belgium, and did – that was a terrible time. At the day of D-Day, I was still in training and I got the word then, that we had gone into war in Europe against Germany.

Amthor: How did you feel when they dropped the atomic bomb?

Nicholson: Relief. I forgot to mention in this – my talk, as we were heading on after we realized that the war had ended in our sector, see this was in May, and my colonel said, "Are you going to Japan with me, Nick," he called me Sergeant Nick. "Not by choice, Sir," and he laughed, he got a big laugh about that. And I am glad that I didn't. I fully expected to have to go, to Japan, but then D-Day was a big relief to me, and to many more. I think we saved a lot of lives by the atomic bomb being dropped. That's what I think about D-Day, or about the atomic bomb.

Amthor: Do you think that President Truman should have ordered the bombing?

Nicholson: Yes. I think he did a very good thing there.

Amthor: Where and what were you doing when you got the news that the war was over – the complete war was over?

Nicholson: The complete war was over. The war was over in Japan also? Well, it didn't end – I got home in March in 45, and I don't think – when did the war end in Japan. I mean with Japan. I am asking you questions, now.

Doris Nicholson: It was August.

Nicholson: I know it was August, but what year – it was probably – it was after I got home, I believe at that time, I was home, glad to be, wouldn't give a nickel for any more of what I'd seen, wouldn't take a thousand dollars for all the experiences. I believe I was home, and dating the lady, my first wife that I married in 1947. So, it was in 46, I think.

Amthor: Have you ever contacted or stayed in touch with the people you served with?

Nicholson: No, only one that I trained with, and he also served in World War II, fighting the Germans, but in a different regiment, and I would get in touch with him once in a while, by radio, we would just call, we had a certain kind of call, an illegal but we did it, and Nick, this is Nick, his name was Nicholas, Richard Nichols, and he lives over here in Bethany, he did anyway, and I expect he still does, I haven't seen him now for years. He's the only one I had any contact with. Some of the other guys I would really would have like to, and did attempt to write the addresses – I have a book that has the home address that they were drafted from, but I got a letter back from one of them, and another I never heard anything from. I guess, I haven't been in touch with anyone except this one fellow.

Amthor: Did you ever join the American Legion, or the VFW?

Nicholson: No. I do not belong to the legion, I've been asked to join, but well, I have feelings about them that doesn't quite fit my way of life, and I like the fellows, they are good, and I think it is an honorable organization, it is. But I know they drink beer and I don't do that, and didn't when I was in the service, and they have some gambling, and I don't do that, and didn't when I was in the service. The stakes were pretty high on the ship coming home by some of the fellows, but I didn't play, I guess I'm a Puritan, or something."

Amthor: Are you proud to be a veteran of World War II?

Nicholson: Yes, I am. I am proud of that. I was hesitant in standing up at first. I wasn't the only one that won the war, and we've known a few fellows that talked like they were. This, my second wife, Doris, is one of the most patriotic ladies that you've ever met. Now, really, she is, astounds me, and she has encouraged me to be proud and we go to Branson, to these shows, and at the end of the show, they will have veterans stand up, and at first I was hesitant to stand up. "Stand up, stand up!" she said. She gets me to stand up, and yes, I am proud.

Amthor: After the war, were you afraid of Communism?

Nicholson: Not really. I thought it was a bad thing, and a threat, but afraid? No. I believe in the American people, and I think the war had taught us a lot. We old folks, especially, how precious our freedom is, and we're not about to give it up, easily.

Amthor: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill, any housing loans, any homesteading, any of those things?

Nicholson: I went to a government sponsored class, a group of farmers, at one time.

Amthor: So what do you think is different about the war today and the war when you fought?

Nicholson: I guess I did get some help, too, in going to college. I went to college for a short time. Now, ask the question again, I'm sorry.

Amthor: What do you think is the differences between war today and the war you were fighting in World War II?

Nicholson: I am so glad that I missed the war that these fellows are fighting in Iraq, where you can, as I understand it, can't even tell your enemy from your friends really well, and I think it is a terrible dangerous war that has been, and am glad that I didn't have to be in it. I think that the boys that have served in Iraq deserve all of the honor that we can give them.

Amthor: Now we have three minutes left on this tape. Is there a special memory that you would like to share with us, or something from your book here, that you - your photographs might be something that we -

Nicholson: Not exactly, I don't think, no, I don't think so. I just got pictures here from the scenes where I was coming home, and sunken ships, and the time I got to go up into Switzerland while I was still - while I was still in the service, *after* the war was over. Got a trip to go into Switzerland, and I enjoyed that very much. Of course, there was a furlough from the lines to a rest area during the war, and I was able to come back and go to Paris, and took some trips around Paris; enjoyed that very much. I guess that's about all I have to say about that.

Amthor: Okay, well, we sure appreciate your time today, and sharing your stories with us.

Nicholson: Thank you. I know I talk a lot, and when we were married, I have a granddaughter-in-law that wrote a letter, I guess especially to Doris, that said, "Now you won't have to want for conversation with this guy."

Doris Nicholson: Proved right.

Amthor: Well, thank you for -

Nicholson: Well, thank you so much. Really, I've enjoyed meeting you both, and I hope....