

## War Era Story Project 2012

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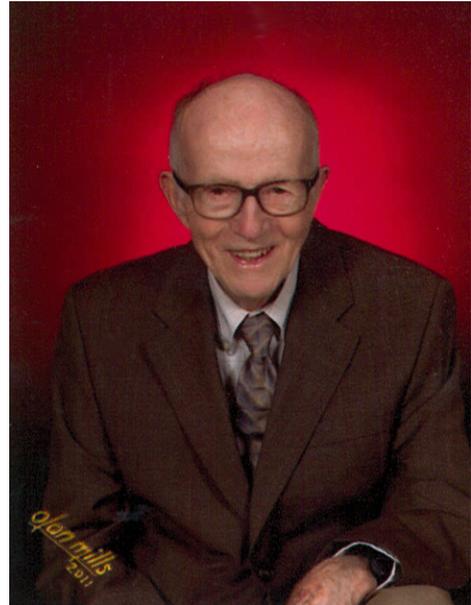
This is the personal account of Richard P. Nicholas, Jr.'s service in World War II having attained rank of Staff Sergeant, No. 35277356. I entered the army February 1942, at Fort Hays in Columbus, Ohio. The next day, I was sent to Fort Blanding, Florida, near Jacksonville. In that location, I joined Company G, 2nd Battalion, 142 Infantry, 36th Division. This was the same time the 36th, Texas National Guard had come to Blanding. Blanding is where I received my basic training.

In the summer of 1942, we went by truck to the Carolinas for maneuvers. In the autumn, we traveled to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. We had some amphibious operations training on Martha's Vineyard in October. We spent some time in tents and later transferred to barracks. The temperature was 20 degrees below zero at the time. In March of 1943, some of us were sent to Piney River, Virginia for mountain training. In April, we were transferred to a staging area at Fort Dix, New Jersey, then to New York.

In New York, we loaded onto a troop ship and 11 days later arrived in Oran, Algeria. We set up roadblocks in Oran, Algeria to block Germans who were disguised as Arabs coming through our lines, escaping to Casablanca, Morocco. In early September of 1943, we sailed from Africa to about 30 miles off the coast of Salerno Bay, Italy. Around midnight on September 8, we arrived at this position. The announcement was made that Italy had surrendered. Some people were very happy at this announcement, but some of us felt it would not be in our best interest.

We then were loaded on LCI's (landing craft infantry) and sailed around in a circle until all were ready. The decision was made not to bomb or shell the coast before we went in. We were the only American division in the first wave. I was made Corporal soon after arriving in Africa. My orders were to see that every person was to get off the LCI. We landed at 03:30 on September 9, 1943. Air pictures of the night before did not show a sand bar, but when we hit a sand bar, water was up to our necks. Everyone but one person got to the ramp. He froze, so I put both hands on his back and shoved him. He hit the water like a statue. This awakened him. We had to get off in a hurry, since a German 88 artillery made a direct hit on the craft a few feet to our left.

When I got to the sand beach, several men were just piled up behind the barbed wire. I took my bayonet and probed around for mines and finding none, I led all the men around the wire. In moving off the



beach, I realized I had stepped over a machine-gun emplacement and woke up the occupants, but I could not do anything, so someone behind me took care of it.

When we were off the sand beach, we set up the mortar with an important part missing. I dropped in shell, and we had a direct hit on an 88 German gun. During this time, we were located in some Greek ruins in Paestum, Italy. Our command had told us that if we could not make it off the beach, we should evacuate, and they would shell it. We had the uncomfortable feeling that we might be shelled by both sides, because we were sure we could not get back to the beach. Therefore, we had no choice, but to go forward. There was much confusion. We lost some men, and men from other units joined us. It was about two hours before more troops could arrive. They were to arrive at half-hour intervals.

After a time, we were able to cross the plain and reach our objective: Hill 424. As we arrived at Hill 424, we realized there was a pass coming on to the beach. A German convoy came down the road toward the beach. Our men were waiting for the last German vehicle to pass us, when a shot came from our group. The whole German convoy turned and retreated back to the valley. The 142nd Commander said, "Who fired that shot?" I said, "Colonel, your aide did."

Our troops that were fighting in Altavilla, Italy, were being hit hard. We had lost contact with other units, so we were not aware of this hard battle. I led a patrol back in the hills, and as we approached a small town, we asked native townspeople if there were any Germans in the town. They told us that they had gone into the hills behind the town. We learned later from German prisoners that the Germans had pulled back from Altavilla when they had seen us in the town. They thought we were going to go behind them. They had studied our manuals and concluded that would be our next offensive position.

In December of 1943, we moved into a defensive position on the slopes of Camino-Maggiore. The Germans gave us some trouble, but the real trouble was that the heavy rains made it very slippery. The 3,000 foot Mount Maggiore earned the name, "Million Dollar Mountain". This was because 600 allied guns pounded the mountain for many hours, using much ammunition.

When we secured the mountains and pushed over the rock-cliff top, our supply time was a problem. American fighter planes dropped supplies to us, but the Germans got our food of K-rations. For three days, we lived on three candy bars a day.

Before daylight on December 15, 1943, two battalions of the 142nd assembled at the base of Maggiore to await the coming evening. My 2nd Battalion went around Mt. Lungo to attack it from the rear on the north side. The 1st Battalion attacked from the west. We caught the Germans by surprise and many were asleep in their fox holes. By early morning, we had the mountain secured. Our artillery observers spotted German vehicles and tanks fleeing from San Pietro and troops being rushed up to make a counter-attack. The observers called for artillery fire, and we watched as the fire was very effective. We later learned that the Germans had withdrawn from San Pietro.

I became a sergeant in January of 1944. I took two patrols off Mt. Lungo; one with a captain and another sergeant. I was trapped by artillery and machine-gun fire. I had to climb a low wall, breaking down chicken wire on the top, and made my way through shrubs, all the while a machine gun was chopping

shrubs over my head. The second patrol, I took to the foot of Mt. Lungo. It was rough going. The Germans had taken a railroad engine with a hook on the back and ripped up the rail ties. The communications lines were all down.

In February of 1944, I was sent to the 24th General Hospital in Africa. I was suffering from dysentery, a slight case of yellow jaundice and trench foot. After three weeks of hospitalization, I was ready to return to Italy, however, I developed a case of strep-throat and consequently, remained in the hospital.

I rejoined Company G, 2nd Battalion, 142nd Infantry, 36th Division after the 36th had attempted to cross the Rapido River, in Italy in March of 1944. The division had suffered heavy casualties. At this time, the spring rains created mud six to eight inches deep, in which nothing moved for two months.

In May 1944, we started an offensive at Valletrie, Italy. Mt. Cassino, a very prominent and heavily defended German position, was preventing troops from moving into Rome, which was our main objective. The Fifth Army had made a landing at Anzio, Italy, just north of Mt. Cassino. Due to military blunders and German defenses, the Fifth was stranded on the beach after three months and was unable to advance. Consequently, we were sent to support the Anzio invasion. When we arrived, a half-track had a radio, which was playing big-band music. The music stopped and "Axis Anna" welcomed our 36th troops to Anzio, as well as voicing propaganda.

Around 16:00 hours, we were sent by truck about 30 miles to a jump-off position. The next day at 01:30 hours, my 2nd Battalion led off and made our way up the slopes. We had no opposition. We passed through other parts of the 36th. We were on top of the mountain behind Valletrie. Around 08:00 hours, the German awakened to the fact that we were behind them. They thought we were just a small force, but we were at least two regiments. That morning was like being in a bee hive. The Germans used "ack-ack" guns on us, and we had no flack jackets.

Valletrie was the key that would open the door to Rome. We were joined by troops coming up from the south. After leaving Valletrie, we were moving very fast. In fact, our own air force thought we were Germans, so we were bombed and strafed by our own forces. Just before this happened, we had been in a deep ravine. I had climbed out and was going up the road to see if German troops were there. When I saw the planes approaching, I recognized them as American, but all of a sudden 50 caliber bullets were passing over my head. I hit the ground while reaching for and exploding a colored-smoke grenade, our signal that we were Americans. The planes left, leaving some wounded troops.

We were not able to catch the Germans, but the allied air-force did, as evidenced all along the road to Rome. The road was littered with tanks, trucks, horses pulling guns, etc. On our way to Rome, we were temporarily stopped by small forces of German troops. By June of 1944, we went through Rome and marched north about 50 miles. We were withdrawn from north of Rome on June 26. After a brief stay, we were back in Rome, and returned south to Salerno for some R & R and fresh supplies. In addition, we received a couple of weeks of training as preparation to invade southern France.

In August of 1944, we sailed from Naples to southern France. Our unit the 142nd Infantry was to land on Red Beach at 14:00. The Division commander had gone ashore at 22:00 hours and an assistant was on

his way to shore. The communications between the naval commanders and our commanders were not operating properly. Something was wrong with the landing on Red Beach. The naval commander shifted us to Green Beach, landing at 15:30. We then flanked to the north and west over the mountains and attacked Frejus from the rear. Had we landed at Red Beach, we would have made a frontal attack on Frejus. There was heavy fighting, but we were able to clear Frejus. The 143rd Regiment was able to clear the town of St. Raphael. This cleared and secured the Red Beach. My crew set up mortars and supported the troops.

Our 36th division was ordered to stop German divisions in the south from escaping to the north. This we did partially. The Germans lost many men as well as equipment, including six 380 mm railroad guns. As we moved in the Voges hills, the rain and mud, plus German mines and booby-trapped roadblocks, caused our advancement to become measured in yards at a time. Though we were in France, it seemed like we were still in Italy. When we finally got into the hills, the Germans were there. We were in a wooded area with an opening in front of us. The Germans were across the opening in the woods. We felt that the Germans would attack sooner or later. Our riflemen were positioned at the edge of the woods. There was an oblong opening in the trees overhead, so we set up one mortar, having to fire through that opening. This meant we had one distance, which was no more than six feet in front of the riflemen. I told them to stay low when we fired. The other problem was that the first shot drives the base-plate into the ground, but this was rocky ground and there was a chance that the shell would go anywhere, but we had to try!

We dropped in the shell and it landed in front of the riflemen. Shrapnel sailed over their heads, but no one was hit. We would move the mortar from side to side. We made two bunkers for us to get into. Reaching from rock to rock, we used logs as a roof, but there were some gaps between the logs. We planned to use all the shells we had. The Germans did attack, and we were able to stop it. Some Germans surrendered.

As soon as we stopped firing, we got into the bunkers. The Germans that were left barraged us with mortar. One of my men was about 6 feet, 3 inches. I was able to put my shoulder on his left lung. A piece of shrapnel went into his lung, and I did not know at the time that it went into my shoulder first. The shelling stopped. I realized my friend was hit, and I called for a medic to come. We had the German prisoners carry him down the mountain to an ambulance, but he died before they could get him to a hospital. Someone said to me that I had a hole in my jacket and there was blood around it. It was a small wound and for it, I received the Purple Heart.

The temperature was in the 20s with wet snow. We were able to cross the Voges foothills and forced our way through high St. Marie Pass. We stopped the German attacks and moved to Strasbourg on the French side of the Rhine River. There were still pockets of Germans in Strasbourg, even though the French had captured it a month before.

We entered a building outside the city. There was much food left on the table, but we did not eat for fear of being poisoned. As we moved close to the city, we went behind a building where we thought the Germans were located. We found some lines so we cut them. We placed everyone behind trees on both

sides of the road. We did not wait long when a German came down the road checking the line. When he got to me, I put a .45 in his back, and he raised his hands. The same thing happened a second time, and when a third man came and started running, he was killed. We were in Strasbourg for five days clearing out pockets of German resistance.

By Christmas Eve, we had accumulated 133 continuous combat days dating from the August 15th invasion. As a Christmas present in 1944, the 36th was given relief from the line. On Christmas Day, we were to go 50 miles to the rear. This was my second Christmas spent away from home. When we arrived at about 14:00 to 15:00 hours, we were to have bacon, eggs and pancakes for breakfast; an enormous lunch of steak with all the trimmings; turkey with dressing for dinner, and several days of complete rest. We would also receive our mail, an unexpected present.

We bunked down. Then around 03:00 hours, we were told to get up and prepare for moving. The Germans under Von Rundsted had ripped through the First Army lines in Belgium. The 142nd was to be sent to Saarbrücken, Germany to back up the Allied line, while the 103rd Division relief was carried out. After that, the 142nd was to return to Monthorn, but instead we were sent to Haguenau. The townspeople there were afraid the hated Germans might return.

On January 31st, 1945, we were ordered to cross the Moder River, which was flooded. The mission was to siege Oberhoffen, a small town up river from Buckwiller. The engineers built a bridge to replace the one that had been knocked out by the German's railroad gun. It turned out the engineers had to replace the bridge five or six times. As soon as we crossed, the Germans destroyed it, and we came under fire. We took cover in a building about two-thirds underground. We found that we were in a mental institution with several very frightened patients. When they found that we were not going to harm them, they were relieved. While we were in this shelter, we heard a loud thud and we were ready to hear a boom, but everything was quiet. Upon leaving the shelter, we found that an unexploded shell from a German railroad gun had plowed up the ground for 15 to 20 feet right in front of the door.

In Oberhoffen, my company was in temporary reserve, but I took a mortar squad and set up behind a house in a forward position, in support of another part of the regiment. After we set up, I went in the upstairs to observe. I noticed the house to our left, as well as the one across the street were occupied by Germans who were trying to set fire to the houses. What had happened was that the unit troops that we were supporting had withdrawn and had not informed us. We were there alone except for the German troops.

There was now a spring thaw and the River Moder was flooding everywhere, so we had little room to move. I told our group we would need to get back to our company along the water, going one at a time. This we did. We then returned with our company and cleared out several houses past where we had been set-up originally. After some time, we were able to clear Oberhoffen.

On March 19, 1945, we went to Wissembourg and onto just behind the Siegfried line in Germany. The 2nd Battalion went into the hills just west of Ober-Otterback and took some high ground and found we were facing a mass of German pill-boxes, which were just a few feet in front of us. We were in a trench that we had taken from the Germans. We were there part of a day and could not move forward. While

in the trench, three of our men were killed - two by sniper bullets and one by a mortar explosion. All three men fell into my arms. Later the Germans forced us back down the hills. We reorganized and took back the same ground.

The next day, a message came and informed me that I was going home for 45 days. I immediately got back to low ground. We were trucked to Paris, where we spent a part of one day and then to the coast of LeHarve. I boarded a merchant ship and crossed the English Channel to South Hampton, England. I stayed aboard the ship and 500 German prisoners were loaded aboard as well. It took 32 days to arrive in New York, where the prisoners were given to officials. I went on to Indianapolis, Indiana for one day where I was processed for the furlough, and then on to my home in Shawnee, Ohio.

I was home for 45 days and then returned to Indianapolis. On June 15, 1945, I was informed I had the required number of points to be discharged. During my 45 days at home, the war in Europe had come to end with the surrender of Germany.