

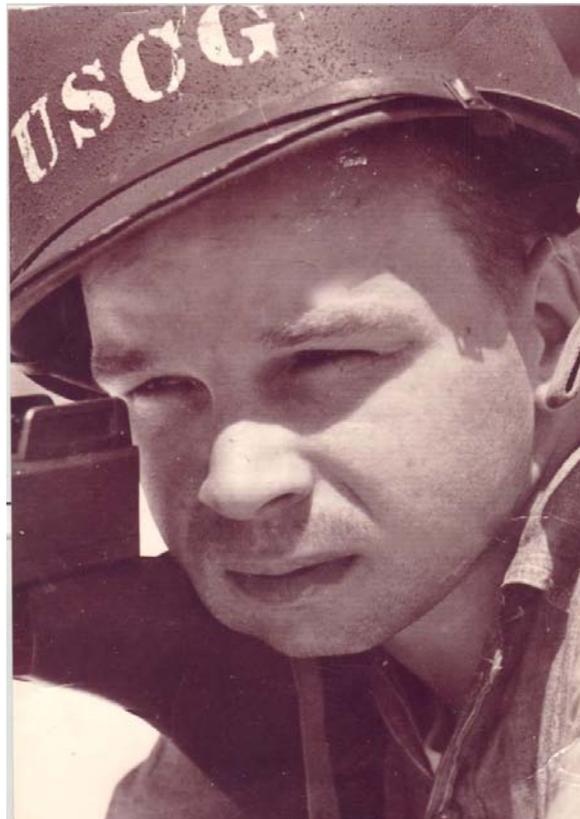
**Interview of Motor Machinist's Mate Second Class Marion "Captain Nick" Nichols,
USCGR**

World War II Coast Guard Veteran
USS *PC-950*

Conducted by C. Douglas Kroll, Ph.D., U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary

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MM2c Marion "Captain Nick" Nichols, USCGR

Biographical Summary:

Born in Yakima, Washington on October 12, 1921 and growing up in White Salmon Washington, Marion Nichols joined the U. S. Coast Guard at Portland, Oregon in June 1942, shortly after graduating from Columbia Union High School. While in high school he operated a tug boat for his father on the Columbia River. He was sent to the former Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Bonneville Dam for recruit training. His first assignment out of recruit training was patrolling the Portland, Oregon harbor. After four months he reported to Coast Guard Motor Machinist School in Groton, Connecticut. Because of his maritime experience he was promoted to MM2 at graduation. His first assignment was as a boat mechanic/engineer at the Coast Guard small boat station in Longview, Washington. In the spring of 1945 he reported aboard the 173-foot U.S.S. PC-590 in Honolulu, Hawaii, then in dry dock. World War II ended while PC-590 was still in dry dock. PC-590 visited Eniwetok Island and Iwo Jima Island on its way to Okinawa. While anchored in Bruckner Bay, Okinawa the PC-580 foundered and broke in half on a coral reef due to typhoon Louise on October 9, 1945. All hands were rescued by the USS *Mona Island* (ARG-9). Mr. Nichols was discharged from the U.S. Coast Guard on March 15, 1946.

He returned to operating tugboats on the Columbia River for next 65 years. On November 29, 1946 he married Ruby Elledge. They had a son and a daughter. His wife died in 1994. He retired as a tugboat captain on the Columbia River at the age of 85 in 2006 and now lives in retirement in Vancouver, Washington.

INTERVIEWER: When and where were you born?

NICHOLS: Yakima, Washington on October the 12th, 1921.

INTERVIEWER: Did you grow up in Yakima?

NICHOLS: No, when I was about four, we moved to the Columbia River, and I never left there.

INTERVIEWER: Where on the Columbia River?

NICHOLS: White Salmon, Washington. I started school there and graduated from high school there.

INTERVIEWER: White Salmon High School?

NICHOLS: No, Columbia Union High School.

INTERVIEWER: What year did you graduate from high school?

NICHOLS: 1942.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you decide to join the Coast Guard?

NICHOLS: It's a little bit embarrassing. I went down to volunteer, to join up, and I went to the Marines first and there was a line there, clear around the block, in Portland. It looked like at least a two or three hour wait in line. I wasn't about to do that. So I went to the Navy and they had a big long line, too. So I went to the Coast

Guard and there wasn't any line. Besides that, I didn't care about getting shot at. So I thought I would be doing my duty and no chance of going overseas. Which is a big fat lie. So I joined the Coast Guard not for any great patriotic duty, I just didn't want to stand in line.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember what day you actually enlisted in the Coast Guard?

NICHOLS: June of 1942.

INTERVIEWER: Just a week or two after graduating from high school?

NICHOLS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Where did they send you for basic/recruit training?

NICHOLS: Believe it or not, Bonneville Dam [Oregon]. It was a former CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp. The Coast Guard took it over for training. By that time I had been running tug boats for eight or nine years. I actually had a [Merchant Marine] motorboat operator license. So, rather than go to boot camp they put me on a Coast Guard patrol boat above Bonneville Dam. I don't know what the heck we would have shot at them with because they wouldn't even give us a gun. But we patrolled above Bonneville Dam.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you live while you were on the patrol boat?

NICHOLS: At the base with all the other recruits. We had our meals with them, too.

INTERVIEWER: How was the food?

NICHOLS: As I remember, it was pretty darn good, and we didn't have to do the cooking.

INTERVIEWER: Did you leave there when your recruit company graduated?

NICHOLS: Yes. When we left, they said they needed a whole bunch of help and since I had fiddled around with carpentry enough I thought maybe I could help. They sent us to Portland then, a whole detachment of us, to build bunks in a brand new barracks in downtown Portland. I got into that and then they found out about my boating operator experience so they put me on harbor patrol there.

INTERVIEWER: Working with the Captain of the Port?

NICHOLS: Yes. My boss, his last name was Paton, used to bawl me out saying "no more of those destroyer landings around here." I always believed in driving up there like that and putting the boat away. I didn't fiddle around with other things. These guys had men on both sides to make sure you didn't get into trouble. I would just drive it in and tie it up. It made him mad.

INTERVIEWER: So you were patrolling Portland Harbor?

NICHOLS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you patrol the harbor?

NICHOLS: About four of five months. Then I think my father had some sort of influence with the commanding officer of the Portland detachment. All of a sudden I had orders to New London, Connecticut. That was what the orders read, but we actually went to the Coast Guard Engineering School at Groton, Connecticut.

I arrived as school as a seaman apprentice but came out a motor machinist mate second class! That was about five pay grades in one big jump.

I had been running one my father's tugboats since I was fourteen. I did my own mechanic work, timing engines, etc. My father didn't want to pay anyone! He promised me 180 bucks a month, but the only thing he ever gave me was a new suit when I graduated from high school.

INTERVIEWER: How long was that school?

NICHOLS: About four months.

INTERVIEWER: How was the food at the training center?

NICHOLS: As I remember it, it was fantastic.

INTERVIEWER: What did they teach you at motor machinist school?

NICHOLS: They started in and even taught us the four strokes of an engine. I ended up teaching part of the class because I knew just about as much as the instructors, because I had been around [marine] engines. That's why I got such a big jump on everybody.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any liberty while you were in school?

NICHOLS: If you got your grades up above 85% you could go on liberty. That was easy for me to do since I had been doing mechanic work since I was 14. They didn't have to really teach me anything. I got my grades up enough that I had liberty every weekend in New York while I was in school. I don't know how many times I went to New York from New London. It was an hour-and-a-half train ride. We got there on Friday night and didn't have to be back until Monday morning. We got to sleep at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The whole lobby was turned over to the military during World War II. You tried to get there early enough to get a comfortable divan. It was a huge lobby that could handle probably 100 guys.

INTERVIEWER: Were you treated well in New York City?

NICHOLS: I was never treated so fine in all my life. Hawaii was bad, or indifferent. New York City was the opposite.

INTERVIEWER: When you graduated from motor machinist school they made you a second class machinist. Where did they send you?

NICHOLS: They sent me right back here to Portland, and then I was assigned to Long View, Washington as a mechanic on their small boats. Then they made me a truck driver because of my motor machinist license. I didn't see the connection, but that's what they said. They said they needed a machinist mate to be driving the truck. So ended driving up and down the Columbia River supplying all the Coast Guard installations.

In 1944 I stepped on the wrong toes of some sort. All of a sudden I was heading to San Francisco and headed for overseas. I get to Treasure Island and waited there for a transport for about three weeks.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the name of the transport?

NICHOLS: No, I can't remember the name. The Navy transport took us to Honolulu. As we were pulling into that harbor, it was quite rough and I saw this little, little patrol vessel [173'] out there roll and it was rolling about thirty, thirty-five, forty degrees sometimes and I thought if it went a little bit farther it would just keep going. I was glad that the Coast Guard didn't have any of those little patrol vessels. Three days later I was an engineer on one of them. That Coast Guard had four of those PCs [Submarine Chaser] in the Pacific and I got one of them! And they still rolled, even when I was on one of them. It was terrible.

When I reported on board my vessel was in dry dock for about three or four months. The engines were overhauled and everything.

INTERVIEWER: This is the PC that is in dry dock?

NICHOLS: Yes. While we were in dry dock we were fairly close to the battleship *New York* (BB-34) which never fired a shot in World War II, as far as I know. They were putting new guns on her. She had 14-inch guns and they were putting 16-inch guns on. The ship was all torn up, so on the dock was where the chow line was and then you went up just little ways to the ship, got what you wanted to eat and went down another gangway and got back on the dock. We were in the Coast Guard and of course the *New York* was Navy, but we found out that we could go over to that chow line and get a lot better food. Our dungarees were the same as the Navy's so nobody paid any attention. So three of us ate over there for about two weeks until they caught us. Then I thought they were going to hang us. But there was no harm done so there was nothing they could prosecute us for. Then we had to go back to our ship to eat.

One of my buddies and I, each got a tattoo and I remember going back to the ship and the captain told us that we were going to sail in about two weeks and if our arms weren't healed by the time those two weeks are up, we would not be going. That means we would have been reassigned, which would have been a bummer.

Anyway, we got all healed up and got underway for a little place called Eniwetok. I think it's in the Marshall Islands. By that time the war was over and we still had depth charges on board. All we had was roll racks, to roll the depth charges off the stern. The gunners mates aboard set the depth charges to go off at "25" which they thought was 250 feet. It wasn't, it was twenty-five feet. They rolled off the stern and promptly blew up. It almost blew the stern right off and ruined all the refrigeration. That's when I learned to hate Spam. We ate Spam breakfast, dinner and supper. We spent a couple of days at Eniwetok getting supplied and getting our refrigeration fixed.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me about your commanding officer on the PC?

NICHOLS: He was a writer for *Field and Stream* [magazine]. He tried to get me to change from motor machinist mate to boatswain mate, especially after he found out about my background. Early on we went along a supply ship and darn near wiped out half of the superstructure when someone backed the wrong engine. Then he found that I had been running tugboats for years so he had me come to pilot house and con the ship. He wanted me to con the ship when we went in and out of a harbor, or were landing alongside a tanker to fuel up. Whenever we had to do something like that he would work to get me to change. The bos'ns would get pretty angry that a machinist mate was conning the ship. I would always remind them that they

better obey what's going on, or they might lose their stripes. After that I never had any trouble with anybody. I was great boat handler.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the captain's name?

NICHOLS: Yes, LCDR C[harles]. C. Pool [USCGR].

Then we went by Iwo Jima. It was secured by that time. We went on to Okinawa and we did patrol duty there, or messenger duty I think it was called. They was a huge flotilla of landing craft south of Okinawa that had found an island, they claimed, with enough equipment on it, to supply one million men. All Japanese equipment and supplies. They would run an LST [Landing Ship, Tank] in there, load as much on it as possible and go out in 3,000 feet of water and dump it overboard. We did that kind of duty.

On the way down there we passed a little island and found that we were in mine field. I had never seen a mine field like that. These are the huge, huge, about 3-5 feet in diameter balls with spines sticking out of them. You touch one of those spines and ka-bloom. The old man decided it would be fun to see if we could shoot them with a .45 caliber pistol. He succeeded, but about half the shrouds on the mast were cut with flying shrapnel. Why nobody got killed, I have no idea to this day. There were dents all over the ship. That captain couldn't have been more than 100 feet away when he shot to mine with his pistol. All of sudden we backed off to 400-500' and [then used] the ship's guns fight our way out of the mine field.

INTERVIEWER: How many men were on watch in the engine room of the PC?

NICHOLS: There were usually three: two in the main engine room and the other one, me, in the generator room.

We got one scare of a typhoon, up by Ie Shima, the place where Ernie Pile was killed. We were heading north, trying to get away from the eye of the storm. When we got there we came upon a beautiful harbor with at least a hundred PT boats. They torched them. They started one on fire and the all burned. They were made of plywood, so they burned real easy. Once the fire got into the gas tanks it was all over. We stayed there for about three or four days. The storm never materialized.

We went back down to Buckner Bay [Okinawa] and the next day they said a typhoon was coming. They told us to just stay anchored in the bay. It struck Buckner Bay on October the 9th, 1945. I will never forget that day.

INTERVIEWER: Were you at sea or at anchor when it hit?

NICHOLS: We were at anchor and then it was blowing so hard, a 140 mph. You can't stand up in 140 mph wind. Our anchor slipped. We pulled both anchors and cranked up the engines. We were unable to get directly into the wind so the captain tacked back and forth. The ship would roll so badly, with just the wind blowing on it, we thought it would stay there at 35 or 38 degrees. The Winton diesels we had wouldn't stand it because they had a side exhaust. The exhaust was buried down so deep under water that it got so much back pressure that it blew all the gaskets out of everything. The engine room was full of smoke. One engine got water in and died, so [we] kept one of the main engines going. That was part of my job. Everybody that had anything to do with the engine room was down there. My job was to make sure the generators stayed going. About this time, we hit a reef. It was a horrible, horrible noise, above all the engine room noise. You could hear that screech. That was the end of us. I knew we were in real deep trouble when I could look straight up and see the sky.



The order was given to abandon the engine room. To this day I don't know why I did it, but I went around and did the routine for shutting down the engines: turned the fuel off, cleared the board on the generators. I did everything by the book. I later thought it was a stupid thing to do. It was habit and training. It would never run again, so who cares?

INTERVIEWER: How did you guys survive after that?

NICHOLS: Everybody was up on deck and because of the high wind mist was blowing off of the top of waves. Out of this mist, which was like fog, came a huge ship and we were trying to signal it to "stand clear". They couldn't see our warning and ran aground on the same reef, but at a location about fifty feet from us. They were aground. They shot a line to us and rigged up a breeches buoy. We all got off that same day. We got on this big ship that had run aground next to us.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the name of that ship?

NICHOLS: Yes, I certainly do. It was the USS *Mona Island*, ARG-9.

INTERVIEWER: You all leave your PC, which has broken in half and are aboard the USS *Mona Island*?

NICHOLS: Yes. I'll never forget that name.

INTERVIEWER: That ship was aground, but not in danger of sinking?

NICHOLS: No, we couldn't go to the bottom, but who knew whether we could or not? I had visions of the big ship breaking her back. Maybe the front end would go one way and the back end another. But it didn't. It was a flat coral area.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you stay on the *Mona Island*?

NICHOLS: I forget how long we were actually on there. It was probably a couple of weeks. We had nothing, no clothes, no toothbrushes, nothing at all. The Navy guys treated us to everything. Extra clothes, everything. There were thousands of guys homeless because of this typhoon. I think there were about 180 wrecked ships there at Buckner Bay. Some were run up on the beach, others on reefs, like us. I also never forget the great big, huge Navy salvage tug backing up to the *Mona Island*. It rigged a line and shackled into their anchor line. That tug took off and we went with it. There was no huffing or puffing or anything. It was one of those big four or five thousand horsepower steam rigs or diesel electric.

INTERVIEWER: Once you got towed off, where did you go on the *Mona Island*?

NICHOLS: They took us to a safe anchorage there in Buckner Bay, they clothed us a fed us up until about the 1st of November. Then we got transferred to a troop ship. We were on that until they were ready to cook Thanksgiving dinner.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the name of the troop ship?

NICHOLS: No, I don't remember. It took almost one month to get a load of people to go home on the troop transport. Anyway, they cooked the turkey on Thanksgiving. That turkey had been thawed out and refrozen probably ten times. It was terrible. I still don't like turkey. Ninety-nine percent of the men took their tray to the edge of ship and dumped it into the bay! It was the worst meal I ever had.

They took the great circle route back to the States. We sailed up around the Aleutian Islands. One of the worst times to go to the Aleutian Islands is winter. Here we were there in the middle of winter! The swells got so huge that you could stand on the stern of the troopship and see the approaching swell that you thought would be the last. Then I looked out there and there was a mine. I bet you we went by at least five and anyone of them could have sunk us. They must have not seen them on the bridge. They could my eye because I had just been in another mine field aboard my PC.

INTERVIEWER: Where did the troopship land you back in the States?

NICHOLS: In Seattle. Everybody was bringing souvenirs back with them. The ship was loaded with them: Japanese, American and everything else. Guys would go into abandoned ships and get all the guns they wanted and break them down into small pieces and put them in their duffle bags. Then the night before we arrived in Seattle they ship announced that anybody caught with any contraband of any sort, or anything that didn't belong to them, would be arrested immediately and put in jail. You could almost feel the ship healing over with people running to the edge and throwing all their contraband overboard. We got into Seattle at about 2:30 in the morning and there wasn't even a bus waiting for us. Nobody was there. You could have got away with anything. But they made that announcement and people believed them.

I then went to a station in Astoria that had the biggest gasoline 83-foot patrol boat--83453 was the number of it. My job was to keep those huge 500-horsepower gasoline engines running. They were straight-eight engines.

Then we were sent to Fort Lewis, Washington and about the 15th of March 1946 I was discharged from the Coast Guard. Three years, nine months and seven days.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do after you were discharged?

NICHOLS: I went right back on the tugboats on the Columbia River, and spent the rest of [my] life doing that, 65 years. I ran the tug *Dragon*, which was the most powerful tug on the river for a lot of years.

INTERVIEWER: When did you retire from running tugboats?

NICHOLS: Not very long ago. I'm 91 now, so six years ago. When I was 85 they decided that somebody 85-years-old shouldn't be running their 2-½ million dollar tugboat.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say is your most memorable experience from WWII?

NICHOLS: The October the 9th [1945] storm has to be it. I wasn't a hero. I was up on deck holding on for dear life and thought I was going to die. The USS *Mona Island* came crashing in there beside us and made you most beautiful lee you ever saw. It blocked off all the wind and everything for us. It made it easy to get off the PC to the big ship. A few days later we passed by our old PC and saw our mascot, a dog, sitting in the captain's chair in the pilot house, which was still above water. We went in there, crawled in the pilot house and got the dog. We never even lost that dog!

INTERVIEWER: What was the dog's name?

NICHOLS: It was Scott or something like that. He was with us on Okinawa for a couple of days and then disappeared. We think the Okinawans got him.

INTERVIEWER: Did you take any liberty while you were on the PC, in Hawaii or anywhere else?

NICHOLS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like? What were the relations like with the local residents?

NICHOLS: I thought it was doggone cool. They kept very distant. We got to go to Waikiki Beach but we had to stay away from the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, because that was all [for the] U. S. submariners. It was exclusively their place, you couldn't even walk through the lobby in the place.

INTERVIEWER: What about relations with the other armed service personnel?

NICHOLS: Not bad, but you could always start a fight if you wanted to. Go in any bar and say something derogatory about another branch of the armed forces.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything I didn't ask you about, or something you would like to share with future generations?

NICHOLS: I love the water. I love the river. Every time I get around somebody who is interested in joining up, I recommend the Coast Guard or the Navy.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

