

# **CPT Nicholas S. Rahal**

**1921 – 2009**

Nicholas S. Rahal was born on 21 June 1921 in Akron, Ohio. Relocated first to Worchester, Massachusetts, the family moved again when Nickolas was five to Danbury, Connecticut, where he graduated from Danbury High School in 1939.

## **ENLISTMENT AND OCS**

In 1940 Rahal joined the Connecticut National Guard, Danbury Armory Battery D of the 192 Field Artillery Battalion, part of the 43<sup>rd</sup> New England Division. After completing Officers Candidate and Communications School in 1942, he traveled southwest to join the 36<sup>th</sup> Division of the Texas National Guard in 1943.

## **CAPTURE AND OFLAG 64**

Nicholas Rahal took part in the initial landing in Europe at Salerno, Italy, codenamed Operation Avalanche, in September 1943. Moving north to the Monte Casino area, the battle often referred to as the hardest-fought battle of WWII, he was captured by the Germans in 1944. Arriving at the rail head, Rahal and other captured Americans were pushed into densely packed 40 X 8 box cars. These remained closed for the entire trip through Northern Italy, parts of Germany and into Poland, arriving at Oflag 64 in Szubin, Poland, on 21 April 1944. Processed and interrogated first by the Germans, Rahal remarked that he was dressed in a clean uniform for his POW ID card, then his jacket was taken away. Next, he and other Kriegies were received by American officers, then isolated and questioned for verification of their true identity. Fortunately, his battery commander and friend, Tuck Brown, had been placed in the same area, so they were able to spend time together. Assigned later to a specific barracks, Rahal remembers it as a free-standing, drafty building with 30-40 men living together in a large room with built-in, eight-man bunks; trust was never as issue as they were sharing the same hardships. Insufficient heating led Kriegies to invent mini stoves out of the Klim (powdered milk) cans from Red Cross parcels. These served dual purposes as they also heated foods and drinks, which were absolute necessities, making their situations bearable.

A major initiative concerned the rituals of maintaining a dignified appearance by being clean shaved, showering one-a-week, and wearing a clean, modified form of dress code, as much as possible. Rahal remembers that German margarine

was used to keep their shoes shined, perhaps the best example of dress regulations. These and other directives, enforced with strict but fair discipline from the SAOs (Senior Camp Officer) and his staff, maintained order and morale within the camp.

Rahal also related the existence and usage of various shops (shoe, tailor, book binding etc.) manned by Kriegies. His favorite place was the library: "It was a wonderful escape for me. I had always enjoyed reading, of course, so it allowed me to escape from the camp in my mind." He also made use of the "Schubin College" and took courses in law, German language, horticulture, and salesmanship. Camp walks, competitive sports, Kriegy shows with music and the camp newspapers, *Oflag ITEM* and *Daily Bulletin*, were also available. Every Kriegy listened intently to the BBC news gathered by secret, hidden camp radios and hoped each day that the war would end and they could all go home. Rahal had a direct connection to the radio as one of the few men in camp who was proficient in the use of Morse Code and used this knowledge to teach others. Mail from home was equally important. Letters and packages (often shared) were lifelines to Kriegies, each one treasured and read multiple times. He noted that some had even managed to arrange codes to be found within family letters before they departed and wished that he had thought to do this. He even received a "Dear John" letter among his many censored copies. His parents' letters were written by friends as they did not read or write English.

Some parcels became critical sources of food as emphasized by Rahal's following statement: "Red Cross food parcels received during my imprisonment saved my life." When they were late or absent for a longer period of time, Germans blamed the destruction of supply trains by American bombers; Kriegies added these statements to other propaganda spread by their captors. Hunger became a real enemy, as all lost weight and stamina when they had to depend on German rations which were limited and barely eatable. Each portion, according to their YMCA representative, contained only 700 calories per day---starvation level---and they felt hungry 99% of the time. Rahal learned to entertain his mind by remembering his mother's "home cooking" and other foods like hot dogs, beer, apples and cheese.

Rahal also noted the attitude of camp guards. Most were mindful that these POWs were U.S. Army ground officers and treated them with courtesy and salutes. These actions, however, did not translate into complete trust, as Kriegies maintained the reality of their fate if these guards were ordered to shoot—especially if caught while trying to escape or cause problems. Rahal wrote about tunnels (for which they sacrificed bunk slats), and other escape plans which had to be approved before being attempted. Weeks turned into months and through force of will, Rahal and most other Kriegies who spent their WWII lives at Oflag 64 survived until the ultimate event would test their

endurance—a forced march to Luckenwalde in 1945 during the worst winter in 50 years. Fortunately, he survived and was liberated by the Russians and managed to escape until truly freed by American forces and sent home on board a ship bound for America.

## **CIVILIAN LIFE, MILITARY RECALL, AND PROFESSIONAL HISTORY**

Discharged and earning a BS in Electrical Engineering from Columbia University in 1950 was his first collegiate endeavor. This was followed by a military recall as his National Guard Unit had been reactivated during the Korean War.

Returning to the U.S. in 1952, Nick worked at the National Bureau of Standards and in 1954, he received a joint patent for a Plating Thickness Indicator. From 1958 to 1983, he was employed at Data Control Systems (DCS) as an Electronic Engineer. He left this position in 1983 to start his own company, InfoTronics, Inc., a technology-based company with expertise in developing time and attendance solutions. Concurrent with his responsibilities there, he returned to the academic world, and in 1978, received an MBA from the University of Connecticut.

He retired from InfoTronics in 2002 and continued to be active by commencing to write an autobiography, *The Life of Nick Rahal, EX-POW-WW-II*. Unfortunately, he was unable to complete this work because of his death on 21 February 2009. Excerpts from Chapter 15 have been inserted into this biography to describe his personal experiences and observations at Oflag 64.

Fortunately, shortly before his death, Nicholas Rahal was honored in 2008 as the Distinguished Speaker at the Connecticut State Capitol on POW Recognition Day and appeared with Gail in the ITEM newsletter which included comments made at the 2009 Oflag 64 Reunion in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Nick Rahal will be remembered for his continued life of service as he was an active member of the following organizations: The Ex-POW Organization Statewide; Burton Bradley American Legion of Woodbury; VFW Post 7330 of Oakville; the Disabled American Veterans, Chapter 11 of Waterbury; and St. Ann's Melkite Greek Catholic Church of Danbury and its Men's Society.

CPT Rahal was buried in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.

Survivors include his wife, Gail; a sister-in-law and brother-in-law, Deborah and Ronald Fish; and other family members.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Nicholas Rahal was unaware of the Holocaust while he was a POW, but his autobiography offers testament of its impact:

I became well-aware of what had happened shortly after I was liberated. Some stories had circulated around the camp, but we had no contact with the death camps. We had one officer, Lieutenant Levine, who was a New York Jew. He was not treated any differently than the rest of us by the German officers in the camp. We knew about German anti-Semitism of course, but we had no idea of the scale of what was happening. I never saw the camps as they were miles away from the camp I was in. My wife and I took a trip to Mauthausen in Austria decades after. It was very moving to see this place, and there was no question how horrible it was.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers