

Serving with Honor – A Family Tradition.

By Wayne Nichols, Jr.



Photo Source: Wayne Nichols

I contracted Polio in 1953 when I was 3 years old. I was paralyzed from my left knee down and wore a hard brace from my hip to ankle. This allowed me to walk until my first surgery in 1956 – where they transplanted a tendon from the left side of my leg to the front. Afterwards, I was able to walk without the use of the brace. Three years later, a pin was inserted into my “great” toe (more commonly known as my “big” toe). This allowed me to walk without throwing my left leg out.

In 1962, they “tweaked” a tendon which gave me further stability in my gate. Six years later, I was determined to join the Navy. When I completed the physical exam, they deemed me 4F. In other words, I was identified as a person who was “unfit for military service”. It was a “nice” way for the military to tell me I was physically unqualified for any of the Armed Services.

Just like so many polio survivors, I have been gifted with a “Type A” personality, meaning being rejected was not an option. I visited an Orthopedic surgeon who examined me and drafted a three-page medical report letter stating that I was physically fit. I sent this report to Washington, DC where it was reviewed by the Department of Defense. After a review that spanned three months, they approved me for a 2-year enlistment. This was unheard of in the Navy because normally enlistments were between 4-6 years.

I served through 1969 where I was stationed in Coronado, CA. I was attached to the Sea Bees, preparing for action in Viet Nam. I never went to war, but our entire company was ready to mobilize at a moment’s notice. I was proud to carry on my family’s tradition of service. My 2 brothers and father (WWII) all served with honor.

Twelve years ago, I was diagnosed with Post-Polio Sequelae. As a result of these late effects of polio, I live with fatigue, poor sleep and a decline in respiratory function. I have had some life changing symptoms, including significant walking and gate issues that have resulted in three back surgeries. I have had both hips replaced.

As time marches on, muscle weakness and stamina are my number one concerns. Wearing a AFO (ankle/foot/orthotic) and the use of a cane helps me navigate through my daily life. As T.S. Eliot wrote “Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.” This speaks not only to me, but to the millions of polio survivors who are continuing on, today and every day.

Wayne Nichols story is easily available on the Survivor Story page of our website:
www.papolionetwork.org/survivor-stories.html