

The Old Soldier Who Didn't Fade Away

A 59-year-old sergeant in Afghanistan is determined to serve any way he can. His real fear? Retirement

By **MICHAEL M. PHILLIPS**



Nicholas Family

'I don't mind people calling me old,' says Sgt. Nicholas, left, with a colleague in Afghanistan earlier this year. He joined the Marines in 1971.

Staff Sgt. Don Nicholas disproves the old refrain: Old soldiers do not, in fact, fade away. They re-enlist.

At 59, Sgt. Nicholas is the oldest of the 6,000 soldiers in the 25th Infantry Division in eastern Afghanistan, the Army says. And he is probably one of the very few Vietnam vets now back for more in Afghanistan. He's certainly the only one who saw first-hand the ugly end of that war from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

"It's really not a fascination with war itself," Sgt. Nicholas explains. "It's more trying to keep people from getting killed. I'm taking the spot of some 19-year-old."

Raised in Magnolia, Ohio, Sgt. Nicholas dropped out of high school and joined the Marines in 1971, expecting—almost hoping—to go to Vietnam. At the time he was a believer in the domino theory. He remembers telling a local TV reporter at the recruiting station that he didn't want his children "living under communism."

The Marines sent him to the Vietnam War, but not to Vietnam. He was stationed on an aircraft carrier in the Tonkin Gulf, watching planes take off to bomb a shore he couldn't quite see.

"It was kind of disappointing that the war was winding down," he says. "I was a Marine rifleman, and I didn't get to do what I was trained to do."

The U.S. withdrew its combat forces from Vietnam in 1973. The following year Sgt. Nicholas re-enlisted and maneuvered his way to the Marine detachment at the Saigon embassy.

By early 1975, the situation in South Vietnam was precarious, as enemy troops moved ever closer. At the end of April, there was fighting all over the city. He remembers scenes from those days: providing security while American officials burned pallets of U.S. currency at the airport; guarding the gate as thousands of panic-stricken Vietnamese tried to enter the embassy grounds; promising to marry a bar girl he didn't know so that she could get a U.S. visa; the killing of two Marine guards at the airport, the last American casualties of the war.

On the final day, April 30, Sgt. Nicholas and his fellow Marines barricaded the door to the embassy lobby, but the crowds burst in anyway. He walked backward up the stairs, ready to use his rifle as a baton to keep the crowd at bay. On the roof the helicopters darted in to pick up the lucky few and carry them to ships.

Sgt. Nicholas was on the second-to-last helicopter. "I never considered Vietnam to be a lost war," he says. "Politicians lost that war. I will take that thought to my grave."

The Marines let him pick his next posting, and, with blonde women in mind, he chose the U.S. consulate in Frankfurt. There he met his wife, Dagmar. He left active duty in 1978 to go to college, and in 1986 graduated from the Ohio College of Podiatric Medicine. Even after he opened his own practice, he was still working out frenetically, in the hope of going back into the Marines someday.

He gave it a shot during Desert Storm, but back then the military was shrinking. He tried after the Sept. 11 attacks. The Marines said no, but in 2004 the Army Reserve said yes. He was 52 years old.

He joined the Army's psychological-operations branch because there he had a good chance of going to war. And war he got. He spent his first Afghanistan tour, in 2005, in such infamous valleys as the Korengal and Pech. He had shuttered his podiatric practice, so after his tour he made a living from house calls until the Army accepted his request to deploy again. This time he spent 11 months north of Baghdad.

Soon after he got home, he put his hand up one more time. In March he arrived in Kunar Province, along the Pakistan border, for a year. Kunar is a place he doesn't want his son Christopher, who is joining the Army, to end up.

"He doesn't want the other 19-year-olds to go," Mrs. Nicholas says of her husband. But "it makes him 19 again. He finds youth in the military."

Sgt. Nicholas's ID photo from the Saigon embassy shows a young man with a Superman forelock, fixing the camera with a challenging stare. Today his face is weathered, but his crew cut shows no gray. He runs two miles in just over 12 minutes. And though he carries glasses to read the maps, he has never fallen out on a grueling march.

Sgt. Nicholas's rifle is always slung around his neck, whether he's at a desk, eating dinner or on patrol. He wore a salted cobra skin on his helmet until his commander, 40-year-old Lt. Col. Colin Tuley, suggested that he take it off.

On missions, the sergeant is particularly adept at chatting up the locals. In a culture in which age implies wisdom, he has an edge over a fresh-faced lieutenant. As a psy-ops soldier, he tries to persuade the Afghan elders that their interests lie with the Kabul government and the coalition forces, not the Taliban.

"I don't mind people calling me old," he says. "The only time I get upset is if they say I'm old and I can't do something."

Next July, Sgt. Nicholas turns 60, and the Army will tell him that he can't go to war anymore, one of the few things he finds truly frightening. He's trying to get a quick commission as an officer; that would allow him to join the medical corps, which has a higher retirement age.

"If he has to retire," says his wife, "it will be really bad for him."

Write to Michael M. Phillips at michael.phillips@wsj.com