

# Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge: A Leader in the Making, Part 2 (1929-1931)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 26, 2024)

Barbara Scollin brings us the second in the series on Major General Kenneth Nichols.

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Ample reasons, most notably leadership skills, personality traits and qualifications, led to choosing General (then Colonel) Kenneth D. Nichols as Deputy District Engineer and subsequently as District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District (MED). In this capacity he had supervision of the research and development connected with, and the design, construction and operation of all plants required to produce plutonium-239 and uranium-235, including the construction of the towns of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Richland, Washington.

The responsibility of his position was massive as he oversaw a workforce of both military and civilian personnel of approximately 125,000; his Oak Ridge office became the center of the wartime atomic energy's activities. He also was responsible for internal security operations in the production facilities that helped keep the development of the atomic bomb secret.

In this second installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we explore his first tour of duty and lessons learned to become the leader needed for the Manhattan Project.

After graduating from West Point in 1929, Ken's first assignment as a Second Lieutenant with the U.S. Corps of Engineers was with the 29<sup>th</sup> Engineer Topographical Survey unit in Nicaragua. He wrote and furnished survey data and diamond drill data. Ken explains:

"Before building the Panama Canal, the United States had given serious consideration to a canal through Nicaragua. Congress rejected that route only after someone pointed out that the country's national seal contained the images of five volcanoes.

"However, the Inter-Oceanic Canal Board was charged with comparing various proposals: incorporating a third set of locks in the Panama Canal, building a sea level canal across the Isthmus of Panama, or constructing a canal through Nicaragua. The [Nicaraguan] route we were to survey offered a shorter trip between the Atlantic and Pacific for about two-thirds of the traffic then using the Panama Canal."

Although the United States abandoned the idea of a Nicaraguan canal by 1932, recently the idea was resurrected by China. <https://www.theepochtimes.com/article/china-behind-super-highway-that-targets-us-with-mass-migration-economic-warfare-5610607>

Ken summarized his Nicaraguan assignment in his account HOW I CAME TO BE A U.S. ARMY ENGINEER which could rightfully be retitled "How I Came to be a Leader". Ken summarized the Nicaraguan tour and the impact on his leadership training with his characteristic humility:

"I learned far more during my tour as a 2nd lieutenant in Nicaragua than how to keep my valuables dry. I found that West Point didn't actually train 2nd lieutenants—they trained prospective generals. I had a hell of a lot to learn when I arrived in the field. In the Old Army the noncommissioned officers tutored new officers during basic troop duty.

"Sergeants Smith and McLean were quite experienced, and ...they constantly taught me how the peacetime Army functioned. I learned how to drill at the Academy, but I didn't know how to take care of my men and perform all the field duties of engineer officers.

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"I was always one day's distance from the next officer in the chain of command, so I had to maintain a close relationship with my sergeants; we were sort of interdependent. I needed all the help I could get!

On his first outing by boat Ken recalls,

"The first time we halted along the bank to gas up the outboard motor I wrapped my rope around a convenient tree extending out of the water. Right then I learned a first-hand lesson about tropical ants. To my regret, the tree was serving as a flood haven for ants which immediately swarmed over the rope onto a new haven – my hand. It felt as if I had stuck it into a bed of hot coals."

Describing his camp life (for his first eight months),

"Each night we made camp fairly early so as to be finished before dark... We placed our cots and stuck poles around them into the deep mud caused by the constant heavy rains. Atop the poles we placed a sloping frame for a roof made of sticks and vines tied together with four layers of palm leaves over that, and then we put up our mosquito bars.

"With our shelters in order, we then ate our meal of crackers, beans, corn beef, sardines and fruit. Getting ready for bed was quite a ritual. I ...stuck my leather boots down into the mud so they would remain upright and not fill with water. Then off came my wet clothing to be hung outside on a stick.

"I put on my dry trousers and shirt and crawled under my dry blanket. Before I fell asleep, I thought of the stories my grandmother told me about their pioneer cabin in Ohio and wondered if they ever had to contend with rain this hard."

On a lighter note, he writes, "Occasionally, I acquired a bed companion in these wild surroundings. The cook's pet ocelot would crawl under the mosquito bar and curl up beside me on my cot."

Each week, Ken wrote to his family in Ohio. His letters provide insight into the extremely difficult conditions of working in a jungle with 400" of rain/year. After a long day, typing a letter could be a challenge:

"Just crawled into bed with my typewriter to finish writing letters, the mosquitoes chased me to cover. However, there is plenty of light under my mosquito [sic] bar so I think I will be able to finish a few letters before time to shut off the generator for our lighting system."

After apparently receiving a letter of rebuke from his father, he responded,

"So I haven't been giving you enough description of this country? Well I will try to do better in the future, starting with this letter. If the typewriter holds out, and it doesn't get too hot in this tent, this will be a long letter."

True enough, he proceeded to type three pages describing the geography of Nicaragua and its society, worthy of an encyclopedic entry. After two years of absence from his parents, he was clearly missing them. On May 9, 1931, he wrote,

"Tomorrow is Mother's Day. If I were not so far away, I would go to see you tomorrow, but they don't make airplanes fast enough to make the trip from here. However, some Mother's Day I may

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be home. You have a wandering son, don't know where he will go next. However, home or away I will be thinking of you tomorrow."

By 1930 he was in San Carlos with his first troop assignment in charge of the warehouse and boat line. Despite his junior status, he was brought in to replace a problematic officer and to solve a morale problem which he did. He was designated Assistant Battalion Supply Officer, Assistant to the Quartermaster, and Assistant Finance Officer. In addition, he handled a court martial of the cook ("vicious when drunk") and various medical emergencies. He wrote home about one medical incident:

"I just took time out to doctor up one of my men. He had a slight fever, probably malaria, so he is now sweating it out as a result of prescribing 24 grains of quinine and a mug of hot coffee containing two whiskey glasses of Johnny Walker and two of Bacardi Rum. I am expecting an increase of patients when the news of my 'treatment' leaks out."

While at San Carlos, he met an individual who would greatly influence his work in the Manhattan Project. Ken recalls, "I also dealt with 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Leslie R. Groves, who would figure prominently in my career a decade later. ...He was, even then, able to encourage and inspire his command to get things done in a hurry."

A specific incident provides insight to Ken's future relationship with Groves:

"I found that Groves tried to get more than his fair share of fresh fruit and produce ...I told Sergeant Jackson to refuse to give Groves more than his quota. At the same time, friction also developed between our noncoms when Groves borrowed a boat for hydrographic survey. Sergeant Smith kept our boats, including the bilge, absolutely spotless.

"When yet another boat was returned dirty, Smith forced Groves' sergeant to scrub it out. I was apprehensive about Groves' reaction, but he ...only said: 'Nichols, I hear you are taking good care of my men and furthering their training when they work with you.' Clearly, he and I learned early on to respect each other's capabilities and methods which allowed us to work together later on the Manhattan Project (development of the atomic bomb)."

His letters home to family reveal his ability to quickly appreciate the workers assigned to his command. They in turn, appreciated his priority of making better living conditions. He recalls,

"Restoring morale in the camp was a real problem. The hardships endured while surveying in the jungle rain forest created constant frustrations. ...Because of the jungle vegetation and the weather, the men seldom saw the sun. I quickly learned that if I visited each crew, each day, it reassured them and the men didn't feel so abandoned. Many times, I carried needed food to the sub-camp so they wouldn't have to wait for the regular delivery of supplies."

And, "Being isolated with men like these was an education in the human problems of command. **Every man is an individual requiring special handling to obtain the best results.**" [emphasis added]

Early morning on March 31, 1931, a large earthquake hit Nicaragua centered at Managua, the capital. At President Moncadas' request, the U.S. Army Engineers provided relief support. With earthquake damage to the city's water system, the Army engineers devised other means to combat the fire and were finally able to contain it after three intensive days of battling it night and day. Colonel Sultan, Major Hawley, Lieutenants Groves, Talley, Calvin, and Nichols received the Nicaraguan Medal of Merit for their efforts.

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At the close of Ken's surveying tour of duty, President Herbert Hoover sent Ken a letter of appreciation. With his characteristic acknowledgement of others, Ken summarized his Nicaraguan tour:

"I reflected on the two years I had spent in Nicaragua. ...those years proved to be the most interesting and instructive assignment of my career. ...**I gained confidence coping with unusual situations and trusted my own judgment in making the necessary decisions.** However, Major Hawley, and Major Gross in particular, ...spent many hours discussing current problems and solutions with me. I shall always appreciate their counsel." [emphasis added]

Ken was more than ready to return to the United States for the next steps in his life leading to the Manhattan Project.

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This column is written by Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of General Kenneth D. Nichols. She participated with K. David Nichols, Jr., General Nichols' son, on a video cast. You can watch that video cast here: <https://youtu.be/EBH7dhtasUc>.

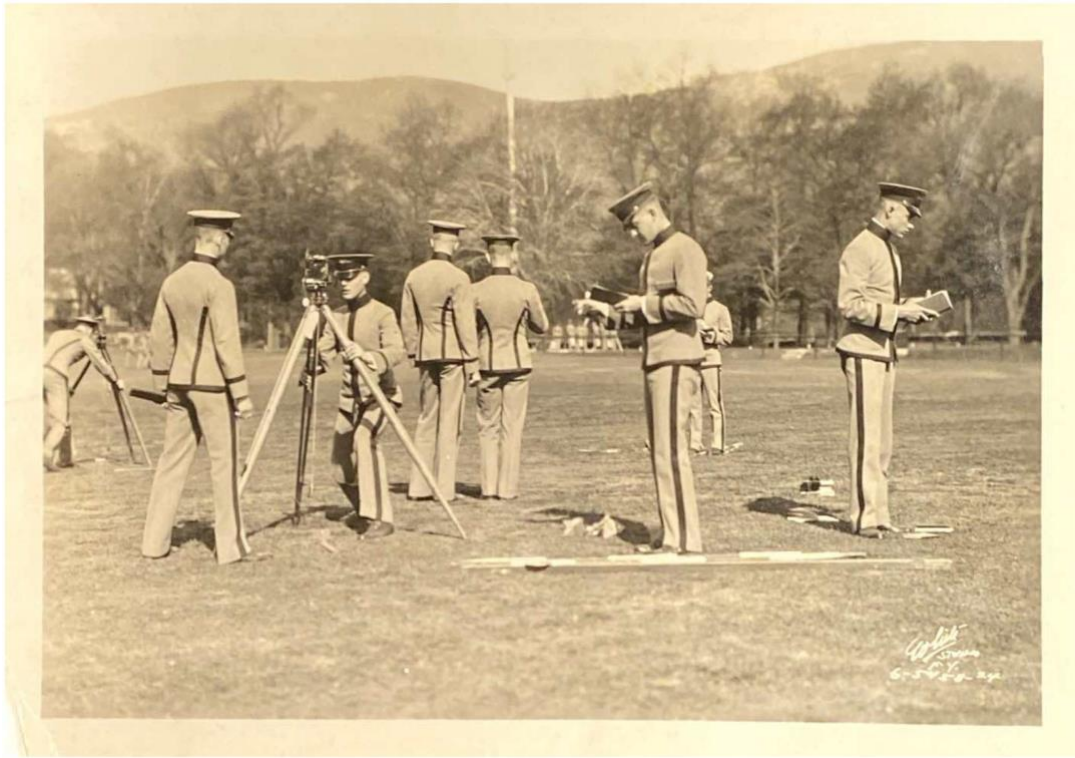
The series continues next with "Behind Every Great Man..."



Handwriting on the back by General Nichols "On the dock at Granada, just before sailing for San Carlos [L to R] Lt. Lane, Lt Nichols, Lt Mills, Lt. Rice" (Courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Office of History)

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Handwriting on the back by General Nichols: "Cadet K.D. Nichols at Transit, Surveying Course, U.S. Military Academy, Plebe Year, 1925," and by Jacqueline Nichols, "looking forward 20 years into the future to 1945." (Courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Office of History)