



ROSIE

A LEGEND ON THE HOME FRONT

*A talk with Emily Yellin, author of *Our Mothers' War*, with home front vets Betty Reid Soskin and Rosalie Pinto
Moderated by Lucy Lawliss, Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park*

“Sometimes the din will seem to swell and engulf you like a treacherous wave,” says welder Augusta Clawson—quoted in Emily Yellin’s *Our Mothers’ War*—about working down in the hold of a ship. “It makes you want to scream wildly. And then it struck me funny to realize that a scream even couldn’t be heard. So I screamed, loud and lustily, and couldn’t even hear myself.” Clawson captures just one of the experiences thrust upon women on the “home front,” a place in time not seen since. Here, Yellin joins a roundtable moderated by Lucy Lawliss of Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park in talking with two who were there. Rosalie Pinto, a tack welder on PT boats at the Philadelphia Navy Yard—the nation’s first, founded in 1799—had to move to another job when her eye caught a spark from a welding rod. Still, she “loved it” and would go back today, she told Robert Stewart, author of a yard history for the Historic American Engineering Record. Betty Reid Soskin, an African American and now ranger at the Rosie site, had a different experience in the San Francisco Bay area—as a clerk for the segregated boilermakers’ union, which served the Kaiser shipyards, the nation’s newest and largest. “The Bay Area boilermakers restricted blacks to powerless auxiliaries and stripped women of voting and other rights,” writes Fredric Quivik, author of the HAER history of the yards, rights that included training in a craft in exchange for initiation fees and dues, a typical track for new workers. Despite its reputation as a progressive employer, he says, “the Kaiser organization did little to overturn the boilermakers’ policies and pressured blacks not to be too bold in their advocacy.” Adds Yellin, “It was a difficult prospect for all women because they were pioneering in areas that weren’t created for or by them. But for African Americans, it was a double whammy.”

Above: Joining sections of a B-17 wing at Long Beach, California’s Douglas Aircraft Company, the photograph part of a U.S. government public relations campaign to show a woman could do a man’s job and look attractive, too. Right: The Philadelphia Navy Yard, where Rosalie Pinto toiled as a tack welder, pictured five decades later. The photograph, like the other site shots in this article, is part of HAER’s documentation of these history-making places.



RIGHT JET LOWENPSHAER, LEFT ALFRED T. PALMER/LOC



THE



Lucy: *Betty, what did the home front mean to you? Or did that term have meaning?*

BETTY: I don't think it did. I had very little sense of the issues of the war. I thought of it as an opportunity to be something other than a young woman who took care of people's children or cleaned their houses. It was a new definition of what I might be—a clerical worker. It was a time of growth, but also pain. It's hard to recall.

Lucy: *How did you get your job?*

BETTY: Through friends. A young man from Chicago was brought in to run the segregated auxiliary of the boilermakers' unions. He was really a sportsman who owned a basketball team. His wife was a friend of mine who went to work in the union hall. At least it had the look of being part of the war, though we didn't see a single ship. We were about two miles away in a small office. We car-pooled from Berkeley, so we didn't see the waves of humanity going to the shipyards. There was no sense of being part of that.

Top: During World War II, the Philadelphia Navy Yard—shown here in 1995—was a small city with its maze of railroad cars, piers, cranes, and drydocks. Above: Contestants for the yard's "War Bond Girl"; bond buyers got to select the winner (Kay McGinty, second from right). Near right top: Douglas Aircraft technician in a photo taken as part of the public relations campaign to glamorize war work. Women quickly acquired a spectrum of skills—welding, shipfitting, riveting, blacksmithing—with male supervisors eventually concluding they were just as good as the men. Near right bottom: Riveting an A-20 bomber at Douglas Aircraft in another photograph from the campaign.

Lucy: *That's very different from your experience, Rosalie.*

ROSALIE: I was so proud to receive my award for selling war bonds. I still remember the date—December 7, 1944. My four brothers were in the service, so I went down to the Navy Yard gate and got hired. I was about 18 years old. My mother loved that I was a welder. My father was really proud too, especially years later when I was in a documentary and on the front page of the *South Philly Review*. After I got a flash in my eye, they put me in a woodwork shop where I did clerical

FIRST DAY I WENT TO THE YARD, THEY PUT ME IN A PT BOAT,
*right in the magazine, a little room where the ammunition went. Women were put
 in the small spaces because of their size.*

work. I got the same salary as a third-class welder. The clerical workers complained that I shouldn't get that. I worked almost three years, then left when I got married. They gave me a small retirement check.

Lucy: *Emily, can you put these very different experiences, on either side of the country, into perspective?*

EMILY: There were three main areas where women worked—shipbuilding, aircraft manufacture, and munitions. Shipbuilding was an established domain. Being a welder was hard work and there were injuries like what you experienced, Rosalie. The aircraft industry was relatively new, so it wasn't always about women coming into a workforce that had been men forever. It was still oriented toward men, but there was a little more sense of—I won't say "equality" because there wasn't any. Munitions was probably the most dangerous area. That was where a lot of African American women were employed, a sad commentary on our country. African American women didn't move into the workforce until late in 1944. They were not part of the

early home effort. The way it went was they got all the men they could, then white single women, then white married women, then black men, then black women.

BETTY: My relationship to the war was that my husband, who was a senior at the University of San Francisco, enlisted to fight for the Navy, and found that he could only be a mess man.

EMILY: It was a difficult prospect for all women because they were pioneering in areas that weren't created for or by them. But for African Americans, it was a double whammy.

BETTY: At 20, not knowing the issues of the war, I wasn't always sure who the enemy was.

EMILY: Rosalie, you were a welder. A lot of people don't understand how hard that work is. Can you talk to us a bit about that?

Below: Rosalie Pinto, with clipboard, shown here at the Philadelphia Naval Yard in its World War II heyday.

CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT OPPOSITE PAGE NPS/HAER, JET LOWE/NPS/HAER, NPS/HAER, ALFRED T. PALMER/LOC (2)





AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN DIDN'T

ROSALIE: I had to go to school for five weeks to learn how to tack-weld. I would tack spots maybe 12 inches long, a shorter line than in regular welding. I had to wear a helmet and special gloves. The first day I went to the yard, they put me in a PT boat, right in the magazine, a little room where the ammunition went. Women were put in the small spaces because of their size. When I needed a break I'd have to go up this ladder and off to the ladies' room in the gun turret shop.

Lucy: *You were wearing gloves and a helmet, so it must have been quite warm in the summer with no air conditioning. Was the work hot?*

ROSALIE: Oh sure. But it wasn't that hot.

Lucy: *How did you get used to working with men?*

ROSALIE: I got to know them. I went out with a carpenter for a while.

Lucy: *Betty, you were working in a city where many thousands were employed by shipbuilders. Were you ever interested in that work?*

BETTY: No. I wasn't even aware of the shipyards. You have to realize what it was like in the Bay Area. Change dominated everything. You could be driving down the street and a convoy would come by and all the cars would pull over. There were trains and trucks everywhere, and air raid warnings at night. There was so much so fast that with our small role in it we had no way to understand what was going on. I had no expectation to do that kind of work. There were no such role models in my life. I came from the service-worker generation. Our parents were the barbers and the red caps and the porters and the hospital workers. They were not professionals. Even my husband, who was hired by Kaiser Shipyards as a helper, could not become a journeyman because he could not join the union as a full-fledged member.

EMILY: This was the first time women were allowed in the military, and the first time that married women outnumbered single women.

BETTY: The successful girl was the one who married and had chil-

Above: Operating a hand drill on a dive bomber at Vultee Aircraft in Nashville, Tennessee. Women took special care knowing the results of their labor might wind up in the hands of a loved one. Right: The Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. "I don't remember any African Americans at the yard," says former tack welder Rosalie Pinto. Adds Yellin, "The Navy didn't allow them until near the war's end."

ABOVE ALFRED T. PALMER/LOC, RIGHT JET LOWE/NPS/HAER, RIGHT TOP FDR LIBRARY





Right: Welders. Despite the opportunity for better pay, racism was rampant at wartime plants, with African Americans hired last and often denied training.

MOVE INTO THE WORKFORCE UNTIL LATE IN

1944. They were not part of the early home effort. The way it went was they got all the men they could, then white single women, then white married women, then black men, then black women.



Below left: Poster published by the U.S. Office of War Information, which posited that war jobs had "to be glorified as a patriotic war service if American women are to be persuaded to take them and stick to them." Below right: Most of the public relations images in this article—like this one at Douglas Aircraft—were taken by chief OWI photographer Alfred T. Palmer, who sought out the most attractive women in the plant as the first step in preparing for a shoot. His goal, he later recalled, was to capture "the beauty of people, their work, their creations." Marilyn Monroe was discovered on a similar assignment by the Army Air Force First Motion Picture Unit under Captain Ronald Reagan.

dren. There is a famous quote by an African American woman at the time—"Hitler got us out of the white woman's kitchen."

Lucy: Even when I grew up, long after the war, my mother still didn't want us to work. Her ideal was that her three daughters get married and have children. I still hear it. It's amazing for that to carry into the '70s and '80s and even up

AT FIRST THE COSMETICS COMPANIES DIDN'T KNOW

to today. Yet Rosalie's mother wasn't concerned that her daughter was going off to a job, even a non-traditional one. Betty, did your mother have concerns?

BETTY: I was no longer living at home—I was newly married. My mother had three girls. Getting us married before we got pregnant was probably her ambition. To have gotten us through high school was the height of her expectations. There was never any thought of college. The fact that I was engaged to a young man in his senior year there was the greatest thing my mother could have wished. Going to work was my contribution to the war effort. All of my friends were doing it—that's what was important. I lived an untypical life because my family came here as refugees from the New Orleans flood of 1927, when I was six. My husband's family came here during the Civil War. We were part of a small African American community spread throughout the Bay Area. Although the war changed our lives drastically, we remained in that insular group. Our friends were the ones who became the Tuskegee Airmen, the guys who fought with Patton and the 761st Tank Battalion. These were young, educated African Americans who in some cases moved into officer training school, where they met others in segregated units. So my social life did not change, except in that way.

Lucy: Rosalie, you dated a man you worked with. Did it change your social life to be working with men?

ROSALIE: I dated him for a short while, and there was a man who drove me to work. Then I met my husband, and he said, "Get rid of your driver. I'll drive you to work." "Well, why?" "Because I'll drive you to work, and I'll pick you up." He used to pick me up at a statue outside the gate. I went to look for it a few months ago. It's not there. I heard it was moved to what's now called Franklin Roosevelt Park.

Lucy: It sounds like a very traditional protective role. Your boyfriend, then fiancé, was concerned about your working there.

ROSALIE: Yeah, he was. When I got the flash in my eye, I had to wear glasses for six months. I'd come out of the yard without them on and he'd say, "Why don't you have your glasses on?" "Because I don't like them." "Do you think the men want to look at you?" "No, that's not the reason." But everybody knew each other. I had six brothers, and the men would say, "Are you Charlie's sister?" When a truck came with box lunches—that was the best part because the sailors would want to treat us. Everybody was friendly. I had wonderful—they call them "bosses" but we didn't—I had wonderful leading men.



ABOVE LEFT WORLD WAR POSTER COLLECTION/UNIV OF MINNESOTA LIBRARIES, ABOVE RIGHT ALFRED T. PALMER/LOC, RIGHT JET LOWE/NPS/HAER

BETTY: I'm listening to Rosalie—how different our lives have been. My life was not changed by the war. I went in during the day to file cards and collect union dues, and went home at night to my small



WHAT TO DO. MAKEUP SEEMED FRIVOLOUS.

So hand lotion ads would say, “You work in the factory all day, keep your hands pretty for your man.” It was patriotic not to have rough hands when your man came home. At the time it seemed completely natural.

apartment with my husband. So I didn't have a connection to the war.

Lucy: *Did any of your sisters work, Rosalie?*

ROSALIE: One in a bank, the other in a tailor shop. I said, “You're so gorgeous. You should get a job with Heinz. So that's where she went—her and her girlfriend—and she married her boss. They moved to Phoenix, and he became president of U-Haul Company.

EMILY: Did you ever work again?

ROSALIE: I sold jewelry and worked at Ritz Crackers and Keebler's. I didn't work while I raised my son, but from '62 to about '89 I worked at an exclusive dress shop on Broad Street, where I became the manager.

Lucy: *Betty, tell us about your life in the Bay Area.*

BETTY: My experience was pretty bitter. My husband tried to volunteer, and lasted only three days. He didn't talk about it to anyone except me. He was told he would make a wonderful sailor but they couldn't put him on a ship because it might spell mutiny. He was a leader of men—a college quarterback, a well-known football player. They sent him back on a train with mustering-out pay and an honorable discharge. He felt like a failure. He then went to the shipyards and got a job

Above: Auxiliary plate shop at Richmond, California's Kaiser shipyards, today part of Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park, in 2001. Some articles in Kaiser's employee paper seemed designed to dispel stereotypes: “Women shipfitters? Unheard of till Dolly Thrash, gray-haired and not long off an Oklahoma farm, became California's first at Yard Four in August '42. But in three months, so well did she do the work, Dolly was a fitter leaderwoman, America's first.”

as a second-class workman. Meanwhile, I briefly worked for the Air Force. I left after they found out I was African American. I didn't know that they didn't know. I was light-skinned.

I'd been transferred from a wartime job at San Francisco's Federal Building, where I was filing cards in the basement, and they had not asked my race. Then, a week or two after I was with the Air Force, the lieutenant was notified that I was nonwhite. I went up to his desk. He told me it was okay, that he had talked with my supervisor and I could stay and “the other women were willing to work with me.” I walked out, and this was around the time my husband came back. As a young western couple—without the background to prepare us for this kind of second-class citizenship—we were unable to cope. Here

we were, my husband working as a trainee and me filing cards in a segregated union hall. I decided, at the end of it, that we would never work for anyone again. We opened a little music store on Sacramento Street in Berkeley, and loved it. But during the war no one gave any credit to people like us, who had migrated here earlier. We were buried in a city that grew overnight with people from the southern states, people who brought with them the complete system of racial segregation, people who would not share drinking fountains, schools, public accommodations, even cemeteries for another 20 years. We were right in the middle of that.

EMILY: It wasn't just the South. Restaurants were segregated in Washington and New York, too. The military itself was segregated.

Below: Second floor of Richmond, California's Ford Tank Depot, future site of the park visitor center, in 2002. The war transformed the sleepy town into a teeming city of 100,000, defined by whirly cranes, monumental manufacturing plants, and barracks housing laced with a network of ferries, buses, and trolleys in the form of recycled New York City railcars. "Finding a place to stay was a problem," says Matilda Maes, who worked in the Bay Area's Moore Drydock, in an interview with UC Berkeley's regional oral history office. People were "just swarming," she says, "staying in garages and lean-fos, anyplace they could."

BETTY: Our young men were going to war on the back of the bus. Even now, it's difficult to think of myself as a "Rosie."

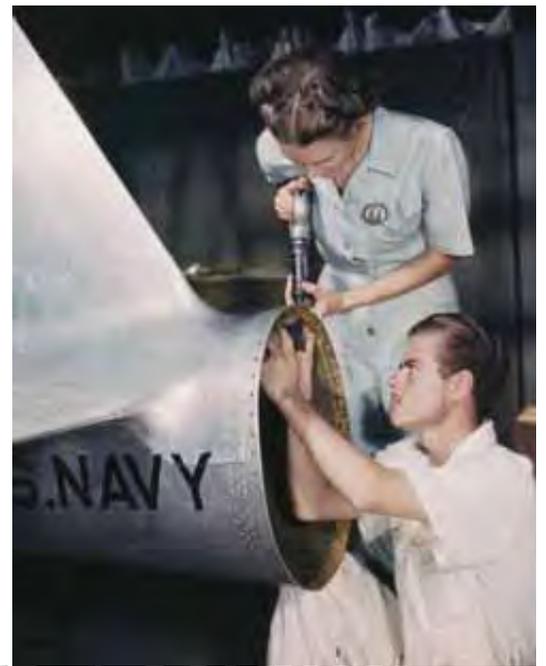
EMILY: Lena Horne, a popular African American singer, was asked to give a show at a military base. She performed in the evening for the white soldiers—her show was a nighttime thing—and was told she had to repeat in the morning for the African Americans. The next day she looks out into the audience—in this awful place, not the nice place of the night before—and sees three rows of white men in front. She says, "Who are they?" And they say, "The German POWs." She walked out.

BETTY: I can remember traveling in the South. In El Paso, my parents warned me to move into the Jim Crow car, behind the baggage car. I found myself sitting with white prisoners in handcuffs and shackles

CHANGE DOMINATED EVERYTHING. YOU COULD



LEFT JET LOWE/NPS/HAER, BELOW ALFRED T. PALMER/LOC, BELOW RIGHT HOWARD R. HOLLEM/LOC



BE DRIVING DOWN THE STREET AND A CONVOY

would come by and all the cars would pull over. There were trains and trucks everywhere, and air raid warnings at night. There was so much so fast that with our small role in it we had no way to understand what was going on.

only half a car away. They were apparently en route to some prison—separated from the white passengers. I was absolutely terrified.

Lucy: *Having worked for the war effort, how did you feel about just the men getting the chance to go to school afterward? Rosalie, you worked hard for many years and were injured.*

ROSALIE: It didn't bother me because I got married, and my husband didn't want me to work. I just thought of all the good times.

BETTY: We didn't expect it.

EMILY: A lot of women told me they felt lucky to be where they were, and they never even considered comparing themselves to men.

BETTY: I was always an onlooker. I did feel the Nazi scourge was something that had to be stopped, but I don't remember being particularly proud except on VJ Day when it was over. I do remember being afraid. It was visceral feeling, how I felt when the air raid sirens sounded and my husband went out to be a warden and my father before then. I remember being frightened but not sure what of—always as a witness, not a participant.

EMILY: Betty, did you ever hear the term “double victory”?

BETTY: That was a public relations campaign by the *Pittsburgh Courier*—an African American paper—demanding rights. It said we were fighting for victory on two fronts, at home and overseas. I don't think I was as aware of it as later that we deserved more than we got. The campaign continued into Korea and was pronounced during

Above left: OWI photographer Alfred T. Palmer's shot of a woman and an airplane motor at Inglewood, California's North American Aviation. Women often had a second job of housework and child-care waiting for them at home; companies such as North American tried to make the work enjoyable with news and music broadcast at lunch. Above right: Mrs. Virginia Davis, a riveter in the assembly and repair department of the Naval Air Base in Corpus Christi, Texas, supervises Charles Potter, a trainee from Michigan.

Vietnam when we felt more of us were going into service than from the general population.

Lucy: *Let's talk about the p.r. image of Rosie.*

EMILY: During the Depression, if a man and a woman were competing for the same job, the man got it because they needed jobs to support families. Married women who worked were considered almost unpatriotic. Suddenly there was a manpower shortage, and the government had a delicate public relations problem. In a 1943 Gallup poll, only 30 percent of husbands gave unqualified support to their wives working in war jobs. Around that time the *Saturday Evening Post* published a masculine-looking rendition of a Rosie by Norman Rockwell, which set off a reaction. So the image we have today is the woman with the mascara, the lipstick, the nail polish.

At first the cosmetics companies didn't know what to do. Makeup seemed frivolous. So hand lotion ads would say, "You work in the factory all day, keep your hands pretty for your man." It was patriotic not to have rough hands when your man came home. At the time it seemed completely natural. But it was a concerted, very high-level effort to change attitudes. And then, when the war was winding down, there was a concerted, very high-level effort to change them back.

BETTY: I was so firmly imprinted with expectations that, at 23 with both sisters pregnant and me not yet with a child, I adopted one.

Lucy: *You can't understand World War II without thinking about the Depression, when many families could not find jobs. Was that true for your family, Rosalie?*

ROSALIE: That's why I went to work. My brother and I—my mother didn't call it "board," but we gave her \$20 a week. My father had a job working maybe three or four days a week as a blacksmith. I had a

brother who worked in a store—they gave him chicken and eggs. In 1939, my parents lost their house. They had two mortgages. We moved into a rented home. Eventually my sister bought that one.

Lucy: *Rosalie, what was your day like? Did you have a sense that the work was dangerous?*

ROSALIE: No, I loved it. First you showed your badge at the gate. When I resigned I had to turn that in, which I regret, but I remember the number—30307. Then you took a shuttle to your shop. I had to go on a gangplank to get to the PT boat, then down a ladder into the magazine inside the hull. There were no windows. We had lamps, but the main hole, the big hole to climb up and down, was the only outside light.

EMILY: Did the Navy provide health care when you were injured?

ROSALIE: No. I happened to go down to the restaurant, and a man said to me, "What's wrong with your eye?" "I got a flash." "Hey, go in and get the potato skins." So they sent me to the lab. They told me the only way to get cured was to stay off the job and put potato skins and tea bags—compresses—on my eye, because it was burning. It did help.

EMILY: What's a flash?

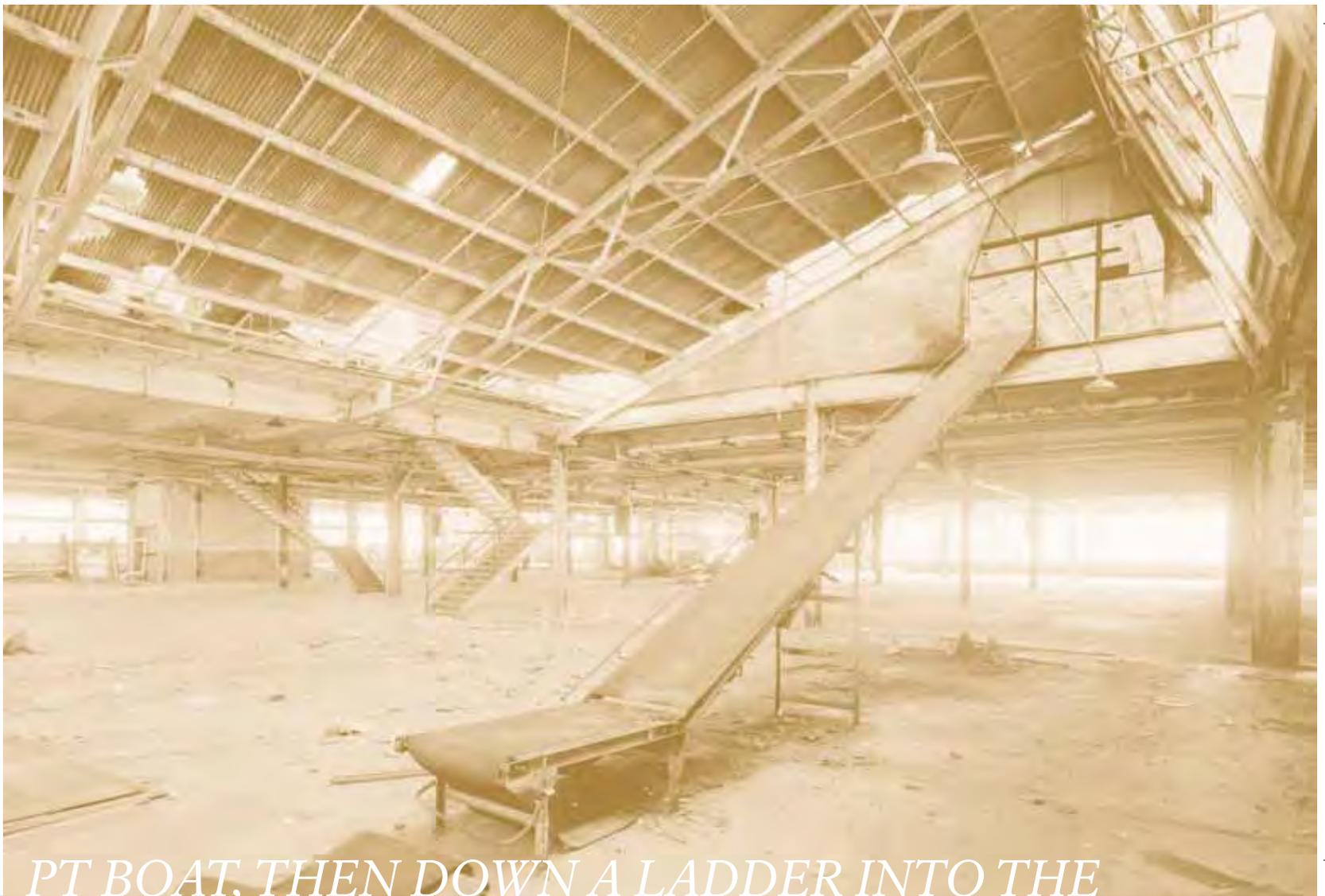
ROSALIE: A spark from a welding rod. It didn't affect my vision, but I had to wear glasses for six months. I still have them. My eye did clear up.

EMILY: In Richmond, the Kaiser company provided prepaid health

I HAD TO GO ON A GANGPLANK TO GET TO THE



Above: A riveter works on a bomber at Consolidated Aircraft in Fort Worth, Texas. One plant newsletter advised women to "be feminine and ladylike even though you are filling a man's shoes"; Boeing sent them to charm school.



PT BOAT, THEN DOWN A LADDER INTO THE magazine inside the hull. There were no windows. We had lamps, but the main hole, the big hole to climb up and down, was the only outside light.

Above: Conveyor at Richmond, California's Ford Tank Depot. "We were cautioned to not talk about our work," says Marion Sousa, a shipyard draftsman interviewed by UC Berkeley's regional oral history office. "In fact, my sister worked at the Pre-fab [facility] just maybe a block from the Ford plant, and didn't know that they were making tanks in there."

care with first aid stations at the shipyard and a field hospital to take care of the more serious injuries. But Kaiser was unique. They also provided day care, a new concept at that time. Kaiser was really out front.

Lucy: Rosalie, did other women do similar work?

ROSALIE: I knew only one other tacker. There were shipfitters.

Lucy: What did they do?

ROSALIE: Stand around and look pretty. A friend of mine would come in like she was going to the ball. I said, "Do you intend to work?" We did not have it hard, believe me.

EMILY: I have to say this is a classic statement. Most women say they didn't do much and that the men had it hard.

ROSALIE: Yeah.

EMILY: Being on the battlefield is difficult. But without the contributions women made—and where this country might have ended up

without them—that's an understatement. I never had to weld, I never had to put up with hatred. Women in factories, women in the military, women at home waiting for sons who could be dead at any moment—they weren't allowed to express anything negative. So while I believe you didn't have it hard compared to somebody in a trench with gangrene, it's difficult to be a welder in a hot hole every day getting your eye singed and not knowing if next year Hitler will be running the country.

ROSALIE: I got a couple burns through my flannel shirt, but I took care of them right away. I worked hard, but I was 18. I didn't come home tired. My thing in life was helping my mother.

BETTY: Had I been having the experience alone, it would have been different. Being even a small part of something large made it possible to survive the hatred. I looked around and saw others sharing the load.

Lucy: Rosalie, what would you want as a legacy of this experience?



ROSALIE: Any woman who works a man's job should get equal pay and health coverage. I also want to preserve the memory of working there and all the people I met. I never missed a day. And the memory of my mother. Every morning she made our lunches.

Lucy: *Betty, what's the legacy that you want?*

BETTY: My husband and all the men I knew were experiencing the same humiliation as I was, so it's hard to think of any issues as a woman that supercede that. My great grandmother—who raised my mother and was born a slave in 1846—was still alive, surely a factor in my feelings. My sense of still being part of Jim Crow was strong. So what I want most is to preserve the full complexity of realities lived by so many of us. That if somehow it all can be remem-

THE STORY IS A POIGNANT ONE. WE WORKED



RIGHT JET LOWENPSHAER, ABOVE DAVID BRANSBYLOC

bered—even when the truths are conflicting—that is important. The story is a poignant one. We worked for, and died for, rights that some of us could not enjoy for another 20 years. It was a heroic generation. And the heroes weren't only on the battlefield.

For more information, contact Lucy Lawliss at lucy_lawliss@nps.gov or go to the park online at www.nps.gov/rori. For more information about the interviews done by the Regional Oral History Office of UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library—a collaborative project with the city of Richmond and the National Park Service—go to <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/rosie>.

Left: Checking assemblies at Burbank, California's Vega Aircraft Corporation. Below: The Ford Tank Depot. "I don't want a doll—I want a welding set," a young girl says crossly to her mother outside a toy store window in a cartoon for the Kaiser yards paper. "In my mother's time, when she was a young girl, they were prohibited from so many things because they were girls, they were women," says Matilda Maes. "You do something out of line and you get on your knees and you pray three Hail Marys right now." What made it different for her? "I don't know how to answer that really. Ambition. [Desire for a] better life. Youth. Energy, more energy than we had to stay home . . . we probably could have flown if the occasion had arisen. That's how much energy we had to put into the effort of winning the war."

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