

Elinor Otto Oral History Interview

March 25, 2015

Interviewed by Thomas Webb

[Starts at 1:40]

Webb: My name is Thomas Webb. We're here at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Today is March 25th, 2015, and I'm here with Elinor Otto—one of the last Rosie the Riveters. So, thank you for being here.

Otto: Because I worked until I was ninety-five!

Webb: Work till you're ninety-five. I'm gonna skip some of my questions. I know that we're a little bit pressed for time today.

Otto: Yes.

Webb: But I'm interested in your life growing up. Especially, maybe, when and where were you when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Otto: I was in a car with my step-dad, who was in the navy, and we were in Santa Monica, and we were driving around looking for a restaurant to have breakfast. My mom was with me, too. And it came over the radio, Roosevelt, ya know, this day will live if need and if Pearl Harbor is attack or anything, and I got so nervous and my step-dad said, "Oh don't worry. There'll be no war, there'll be no war," he said, ya know. That was when—the first time I heard about it. And we just didn't want to be scared after that because we kept hearing in the paper: war! That very night, I think, Roosevelt declared war. I think that very night or the next day or something saying this day will live in infamy.

Webb: And where...were you still in school at that point or had you graduated?

Otto: No, I was out of school. I was twenty-two, twenty-one, something like that.

Webb: Okay, and what were you doing at that point?

Otto: I was married at that point, but when I went to work, I got a divorce and I had a little baby, and I brought my baby with me to San Diego where my mom was living, and stayed with her. I did a load of things for a while, like car hopping. You've probably never heard of it, car hopping, where you bring food on a tray to cars.

Webb: Yeah.

Otto: Yeah.

Webb: On roller-skates?

Otto: Yeah! No, when they started the roller-skates, I left. No, I did not want to fall, food all over the ground. But then, of course, we heard about—they wanted women to replace men to build the airplanes when the men went to war, and they advertised for us, and so we all got a job. They were hiring women like mad. People were coming from other states. Let's see: Arizona, Arkansas, Texas, all over these women were coming, yes. They were so happy to be able to have that kind of job.

Webb: When you say that they were advertising, just in newspapers or...?

Otto: Yes, and on the radio. We had a radio. Radio—no television.

Webb: Sure, yeah. I guess I would like to back up for just a second, and after Pearl Harbor, after we enter the war, were you affected at all? Did you know people that enlisted that went off to fight or...?

Otto: I knew some people, some friends. Yes, and my step-dad's nephews, they went. My step-dad went, too.

Webb: Well, what was the first day like? Showing up for this new, kind of...

Otto: It was exciting and it was a challenge. We didn't know what was in there for us. We didn't know that...the men welcomed us, even though at first, we heard they were having a fit because women were gonna work with them. They didn't think we could do anything, but we did, and we just ignored them for a while, you know, until they got over it and realized they had to help us. So, they showed us how to use tools and what to do. Different jobs came in, different ones, and so they started...we had lead men. Lead men would direct us all and show us, and it didn't take us long to learn. Pretty soon, I was building 'em like a mile a minute. These hard little things here, and I'd put 'em...and then, we had a machine. We use it like a step, like a sewing machine, a pedal, and we put the part in there, and the rivet by pedaling that before we got the rivet gun.

Webb: Okay. That first day, was there any mixed feelings from some of the other ladies that had decided to do this?

Otto: No, we were all together, excited together.

Webb: You were all excited.

Otto: We were all cooperating together because we knew this was a challenge that we had to take care of with the men. We had to prove ourselves; we had to prove ourselves.

Webb: Even at the beginning, you knew that you needed to prove yourselves?

Otto: Yes. We had no problems.

Webb: Can you describe your first—you called him a lead man— I was gonna call him a supervisor, but what was your first...?

Otto: My first lead man was called Bob Lawler. I will never forget, and he was so nice. Yes, I'll never forget how nice he was, and kind, and willing to help us. Funny I remember that name after all these years, but I was impressed with how nice he was.

Webb: What kind of clothing did you wear to the factory?

Otto: Just normal clothes.

Webb: Okay.

Otto: At the time, they called 'em capris. In those days, they were called capris and not jeans. And later on, capris, jeans, and all that, ya know. And just normal blouses and sweaters and whatever.

Webb: You said that the women that signed up with you were very excited, very together. Did anybody, your mother for instance, anybody in the community have any hesitation? I mean, you were basically breaking some new ground. Did anybody you know have any hesitation for you?

Otto: No. In fact, a couple of my neighbors joined too. They came and worked and also an older lady. I was youngest.

Webb: Can you describe the first time you got to use the rivet gun?

Otto: Yes, that took a little while to realize the pressure of the different rivets...we had to be very careful because we had flat sets, different sets to put in the rivet gun. At first, they started with the round rivets. So, you had a set with the round piece to go on it, and it was easy to make a mistake and shoot too hard; too much pressure and you could ruin the part. So, we had to be slow and take easy. You could set the rivet gun. You could set it for slow or fast or whatever. Then, ya know, we got flat sets for counter-sinking, so the flank could be flush against the fuselage, we used to work on fuselage, to be flush against the fuselage. You can see now, that's what it all is. Before, the little planes—I go see 'em now; they got the round rivets in there. They decided it was too much weight; both rivets were too much weight, so they flushed them.

Webb: And this was with the Rohr?

Otto: Yes, Rohr. Rohr Aircraft in Chula Vista, right out of San Diego. Close to the border, kinda close.

Webb: And then, how long were you with Rohr?

Otto: I stayed there for...let's see, '42 to '45. But the last few months of '45, I don't know why, but my sister and I quit, and we went to Ryan Aeronautical and were like, "Oh, look at that, we're close to where we live." We got tired of paying cab fare for when we were late, and nobody could buy cars and everything, and we had to ride with people, and sometimes they didn't pick us up, so we had problems with transportation. So, we were close. So, I was actually at Ryan when the war ended.

Webb: Okay, and how long were you there?

Otto: For about six months, seven months, something like that.

Webb: Okay. When the war ended, and the men started coming back, was there a push to get the Rosie the Riveter Brigade out, or were you firmly locked into the position?

Otto: No, they let us go within days, but we didn't care. We understood what our problem was. We understood that we worked and did our part, and now it's time for the men that came back to get their jobs, the ones that were able to come back. You know, so many didn't.

Webb: Did you have a favorite part to work on?

Otto: With all the planes I worked on, my favorite part is the wing.

Webb: Why?

Otto: On the C17, I worked on the spar, which goes into the wing that holds the gas. That was my favorite part. With all the years I worked on fuselage, the nose, the rear, the cargo inside, you know. That was my favorite part. And of course the C17 is my favorite plane.

Webb: Okay. Why was that your favorite part?

Otto: I don't know if it's just more exciting 'cause I worked all over it. You just had one little job where you stayed in one little area. I like to move around. So, I like that part of it.

Webb: Okay. Did you ever get to see any of the planes you helped assemble take off?

Otto: Yes.

Webb: Fly?

Otto: Well, yeah. They always had kind of a ceremony, especially for the C17. Ceremonies every time one was sold and was ready to take off. And we also did with the...before working on the C17 for the Air Force, I worked on the passenger planes, you know. All

the DC10, DC-Nine, DC8. I also started working on the 135—and that was many years ago before the C17 took over—and also on the 707 for Boeing many years ago when I worked at Ryan Aeronautical. So, you probably never heard that Ryan Aeronautical built the Spirit of St. Louis for Lindbergh, for Charles Lindbergh.

Webb: Well, I heard about it when I was doing a little research for today, but...

Otto: Well, it's research, yes. And I met them. When I started at Ryan in 1951, Claude T. Ryan was still there, and an old man Van der Linde...It was three built the airplane for Charles Lindbergh, and they were still there, and I met them.

Webb: What was the feeling like every time you got to see a plane that you helped build take off?

Otto: It really gives you a good feeling of worth. That you are doing something worthwhile. Maybe it's not a big part of the whole plane, but you are a part of that, and it gives you a good feeling, it really does.

Webb: What other ways did you, your friends and neighbors, or family participate in the war effort?

Otto: Well, a lot of people went out and sold war bonds. They worked at the USO, they tried to help the boys the best they could, would help people that needed help with food. People come to our door and knock on the door and they were hungry, you could make 'em a sand... Not worry about someone gonna shoot you. In those days, we didn't have to lock our car or lock our house. We didn't have money in those days, but we were more comfortable and felt more safe than you do now, you know.

Webb: You stepped up and did something when it was asked of you. You've watched Korea... Korean War, Vietnam War, some of the more recent things. What do you think that the community needs to be doing differently to support our troops here at home?

Otto: Well, they seem to work more with them. People take things for granted now. There's too much technology, you know. They're too busy with their computers and their cellphones, and even the young children are busy with their cellphones. And you lose a lot, and there's a lot of things you don't have the time for because we used to read books. They don't do that anymore, you know. And also, I've heard that some teachers aren't teaching history anymore, and that's kind of frightening. I mean, they need to know history. How are they gonna know how they came about now without even knowing our forefathers, all they went through to get us to this point? A lot of sacrifices that these kids don't understand. I don't know. I'm getting worried about this situation.

Webb: Well, that's one reason, ya know, that we appreciate this museum and library. We're trying to make sure that the community knows. I think you're absolutely right on a lot of those issues. How did you follow the news of what was going on overseas?

Otto: Well, you know, we didn't have all this instant news, and so when something big happened, there'd be an extra. They were selling papers saying, "Extra! Extra! Extra! Read all about it." They'd scream all over the place with the paper that we knew something big was happening, so of course everybody would run out and get the paper. And, of course, it was on the radio. On the radio, we had to hear the news all the time. That was the only way we had our news in those days.

Webb: You—let's see...let's ask this question first. Rosie the Riveter is an iconic image, but it didn't come about right away.

Otto: No, not for years later. I never even knew about it... When we were working, we didn't know we were doing anything important. It was just something we knew we had to do, and we did it. And when it was over, we went about our business and forgot all about it for years. Now, all of sudden, I got old, and all of a sudden, it's important, ya know. 'Course I'm getting a lot of attention 'cause I worked till I was ninety-five. There's a lot of Rosies left, and healthy Rosies, and they're not on walkers or anything, but they retired early. I'm the only crazy one to keep working.

Webb: Well, let's talk about that. The footage that I saw is wonderful. You, in '45, left this industry, and then you were gone. How long before you went back?

Otto: Oh, from '45 to '51, I did other things. I worked in an office, which drove me nuts, so I started doing some waitress work and car hopping. And then, I got a chance to work at Ryan, and I worked there for fourteen years until they stopped making airplanes. And yet, I was off for ten months, and then they called some lady that I knew. I was in San Diego and she came up to Long Beach, and she said, "If you want a job, you better get up here because they're—Douglas—is hiring women for the first time since the war." So, seven of us came up here and got hired, just like that. And they promised me ten years of work. I've been there forty-nine-and a half years.

Webb: That's amazing.

Otto: Can't complain about that.

Webb: No, not at all. What had changed, if anything, in that period that you were away from it? I mean, suddenly Douglas was hiring women instead of just needing women to...

Otto: I mean, there was so many women, yeah. And so many people hired; about 40 something thousand. We couldn't even find our cars after work. It was so crowded. We built commercial planes then, ya know. And so, I thought, "Oh, great, commercial

planes, we don't have to worry about a war now," and all that. So, I built the DC10, DC-Nine, DC11, DC, ya know, all those. I started with the DC8.

Webb: What is it about...you said that office work drove you nuts.

Otto: I don't like to say I'm hyper, but I get nervous and I want to keep moving. That's why I like to get on with my rivet gun and go place to place and do this. I feel better being active. They used to laugh at me for that.

Webb: In...well, last year you got an award from American Veteran Center.

Otto: From where?

Webb: From the American Veteran Center.

Otto: Oh, yes. I've got so many awards, I don't know where to put them.

Webb: Let's talk about some of your awards. What are some of the awards that you have received?

Otto: Well, the Senators and council people have sent me beautiful awards from Long Beach, and 'course that award was so important. Well, I did go to Sacramento with Bonnie Lowenthal. She was a council woman, and so I went to Sacramento, and they made me...she was nominating me for Woman of the Year, which was lot of women of the year. They all need somebody to nominate 'em, so that was so interesting. So, I got that and stayed there for a couple of days. Was so much fun. Then, another Senator—who lives in Long Beach—he gave me a beautiful trophy, and it says the dates on the Women of the Year, and also the dates he gave me that beautiful trophy. Let's see...that was Woman of the Year—that was Amazing Woman or something. I don't know, some kind of something. The veterans back in November of 2014, on the 8th of November, they gave me a special award. When I walked in that room, there was a great big picture of me. I was gonna get an award. I couldn't believe it. I thought I was just going there to meet the veterans. They gave me a special award they've never given to anybody outside of the military. I went up and made a speech, really talking about the veterans all the wonderful things they have done. 'Cause I was up there just talking about them, you know. There was a lady astronaut there, too, and I feel bad. She should've got more attention than me. She was up in the air. I wouldn't do that. But I met her, and it was so interesting. She sent me some pictures when she was up in space. She didn't go to the moon or nothing, but she was up in space somewhere, I don't know. I wouldn't go up in space. So, these women are just proving themselves right and left. They really are.

Webb: And do you feel like you helped pave the way?

Otto: They tell us we did. CEO women I've talked to...I've sat in lunches with CEO ladies saying, "I wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for you women," all us Rosies. So, that is so

nice to hear. I mean, I was never expecting to hear it. I never thought anything about it. So, it's an amazing thing to get old and get this attention. It is, it's wonderful. I've met so many beautiful people, so many wonderful people. Even you people here are just loveable, just everybody.

Webb: Well, that's great.

Otto: Everybody.

Webb: Well, speaking of being here, my understanding is you were here to do some work to help commemorate the end of World War II and pay special attention to what was happening on the home front. You...can you just talk a little bit—maybe in closing of this interview—of what it is that you're up to now, what you're trying to...

Otto: Oh, we're...what was it...aging in America today, and I told 'em that I have a sister that has dementia. I'm ninety-five—she's younger than me, and I know of a lot of friends that are in homes and can't walk and whatever, so I'm humble about and grateful that at my age, I'm still driving and doing all the things I've always done. So, aging isn't bad to me because I can still be my independent self. With others, we want to help them, and at least visit them, and show them we care because they paid their dues. Young people don't realize these people paid their dues. They raised families, they did all these things, and then, all a sudden, they put 'em in a home and nobody goes to visit 'em—especially their families. So, we gotta do something about that. And then, also Warren and I was talking about trying to help and find out about the people that have dementia and Alzheimer's because my nephew died from Alzheimer's as a football player. He played for twenty years, and then he was a coach for twenty years, and many of his buddies got Alzheimer's, which the public isn't aware of...they don't read about that, but that have special places for the guys that go there, yes, when they get Alzheimer's. Because of the helmet they wear, it's still hard [doesn't always help].

Webb: Yeah. Do you think staying active, doing the riveting, doing the...helping build the airplanes has...I mean, you say you're ninety-five and you're still doing all the stuff that you've always done. Do you think that has played a part in it?

Otto: Yes, I do.

Webb: That always being active and working has played a part in keeping you young.

Otto: I think so. See, I was the only one of my sisters...I have three sisters: two of 'em died in their eighties, and my youngest sister and I was the only one who made our nineties—even though she's got dementia, but I was the only one active. That very active because when I was seven, eight years old, I was active. I took care of the house while my mom worked. And I always wanted to be busy and doing this, and washing windows, and whatever it took. And they were always mad about me doing these things. I had a kind

of energy. And guys at work used to laugh at me, "You're working too hard, you make us look bad." Well I said, "Go to work." Just a lot of fun, ya know. I mean they did it out of love.

Webb: What have you done with yourself since you [were laid off]?

Otto: Ask Warren. He's always got something planned for me. But anyway there's things to do at home, and then I'd meet the gang that we used to work together. We get together every once in a while, and I go shopping with people, and my friends, and not too many older friends left. In fact, my best friend just passed away. On the way to go visit her, she was on her death bed, and I knew it up in Lake Arrowhead. We had a car accident on the freeway. A truck turned sideways right in front of us going 70 miles an hour. What could you do? So, I never did see her again. She died two days later, but that's part of life. I realize at ninety-five, I'm still living. God wants me to do something. Inspire people in some way. So, if I can inspire one or two people. I get letters that I have...a lot of letters. So, that's what I'm doing.

Webb: If you can't inspire somebody, I can't imagine the rest of us have any chance at all. You're a pleasure to talk to.

Otto: Thank you.

Webb: It's been very nice to get to know you.

Otto: Oh, I'm so glad.

Webb: Is there anything else that you think that we should know about your life experience?

Otto: I don't know. People ask me, "What's your secret?" Well, I never smoke, I never drank. I have a positive attitude, and I have a terrific sense of humor. I get in trouble a lot at work—I used to. They think we couldn't work as hard if we had to laugh all the time, ya know, things like that. But I don't know. I have to accept things in life as they happen. I lost my son two years ago, and that's hard to get over, but I realize mothers have lost their sons much younger than my son—was in a war, or plane crash, or whatever happens. You lose people, and you just gotta go on. They say life is for the living, and you have to go on and do the best you can. And I've tried to accept all phases of life as they've come to me, ya know. Sometimes it's been hard, but I've managed and survived when I lost my son. My grandson always said that if something happens to pop, I'm gonna come down with grandma, or if something happens to grandma, I'm gonna go help be with pop. So, the very day it happened, he was visiting my grandson up in Lake Tahoe—500 miles from where I live. So, that very day, when they finally got the body out of there and everything, nine o'clock at night, he was at my house in Long Beach.

Webb: That's fantastic.

Otto: So, we got a house together, and now he's living with me and he's working, and he says, "Grandma, it's my turn. You've took care of all of us all these years, now it's my turn."

Webb: That's fantastic.

Otto: We're very close. He's been to a lot of events with me. He's been with me to New York, he's been with me to Washington, and, ya know, I depend on him a lot.

Webb: That's great.

Otto: Yeah.

Webb: Well, thank you for taking the time to be here today. I know that you've got more events scheduled, so I won't take any more of your time, but we greatly appreciate it.

Otto: Well, I appreciate you. You people supposed to leave earlier, I know. I thank you. It's been a pleasure.

[Ends at 29:05]