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# 'We're making history': Rosies answer the call to preserve history

Volunteers help repair the SS Red Oak Victory



Volunteers gather to discuss how to cut an exhaust stack while aboard the SS Red Oak Victory ship docked in Richmond, Calif., on Monday, Aug. 18, 2025. The Red Oak Victory ship is currently undergoing two weeks of renovations by volunteers who are mostly female. The Red Oak Victory ship is a Boulder Victory-class cargo ship that was used during WWII to transport ammunition. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

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RICHMOND — Tradeswomen, attired in safety gear and with power tools in hand, have once again returned to the SS Red Oak Victory, breathing new life into a World War II cargo ship built by women in Richmond.

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More than 50 mostly women volunteers have answered the call to repair and renovate the SS Red Oak Victory, the last known surviving ship built in Richmond's Kaiser Shipyard during the second World War.

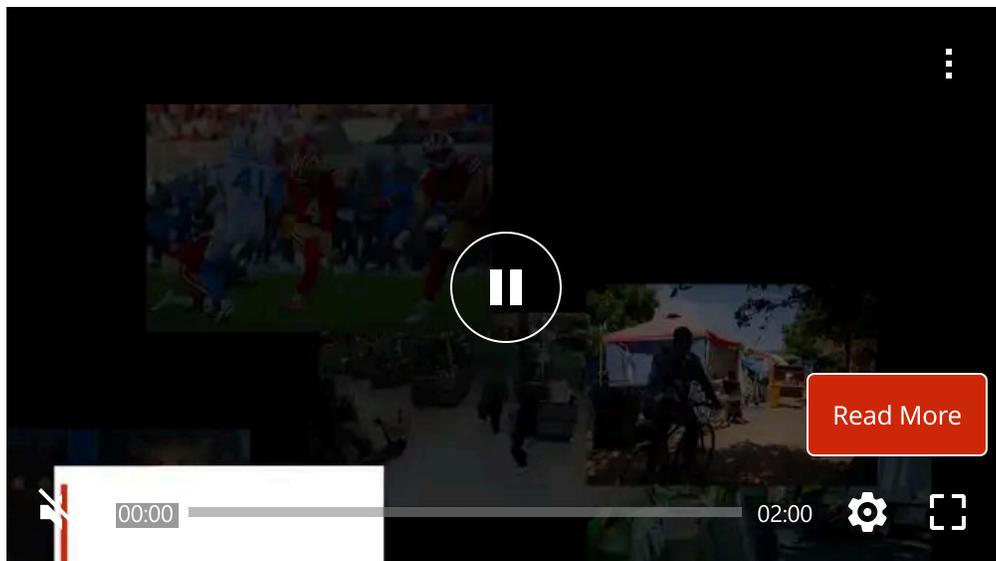
Beyond preserving a piece of history, the mission of the project, dubbed Victory Ship Revival, is to honor the contribution of Rosies, women who stepped up during the war filling jobs typically only open to men.

"I'm beyond humbled to be here," said Salena Durrell, a first-year apprentice with local trades union Boilermakers Local 549.



Boilermaker apprentice Salena Durrell, of Concord, works on grinding gussets aboard the SS Red Oak Victory ship docked in Richmond, Calif., on Monday, Aug. 18, 2025. The Red Oak Victory ship is currently undergoing two weeks of renovations by volunteers who are mostly female. The Red Oak Victory ship is a Boulder Victory-class cargo ship that was used during WWII to transport ammunition. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

The project was the brain child of Rennae Ross, a welder and business agent with Boilermakers Local 549 and a U.S. Marine veteran. Having toured the ship for the first time about two years ago, Ross said she couldn't help but notice the rust and welds that needed repairs.



She got the idea to pull together a team of women to do that work, and pitched the idea to K. Lynn Berry, superintendent of the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park, and Sarah Pritchard, executive director of the Rosie the Riveter Trust. Both organizations, along with the Richmond Museum Association, the parent organization of the Red Oak Victory nonprofit, and Boilermakers Local 549 quickly jumped onboard.

"It's a very exciting project because it's women working on a ship built by women," Pritchard said. "We're making history."

How significant the proposal would be didn't dawn on Ross at first, but as she learned more about the history, her attachment to the mission grew stronger.

The project is also personal for Ross, who grew up in the area. Her great-grandmother, Helen Davis, worked in the Kaiser Shipyard. Ineligible to be a union member because she was a woman, she helped her husband, Clyde Davis, who was a Boilermaker and "had her doing everything."

"There's something to be said about how far we've come and this really is just a highlight of what they did back then. They all answered the call for a greater cause and we need that now. America needs that, to have people come together and do something for the greater good," Ross said.

The two weeks of volunteer work are only the beginning, Ross said. The ultimate goal is to get the ship into tip-top shape before moving it closer to the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park Visitor Center in Richmond's Marina Bay.



Steamfitter Melissa Tanzillo, left, measures an exhaust stack as Project leader Rennae Ross advises while aboard the SS Red Oak Victory ship docked in Richmond, Calif., on Monday, Aug. 18, 2025. The Red Oak Victory ship is currently undergoing two weeks of renovations by volunteers who are mostly female. The Red Oak Victory ship is a Boulder Victory-class cargo ship that was used during WWII to transport ammunition. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

While the SS Red Oak Victory was built over a period of 88 days in 1944, completing repairs and getting it relocated will likely take years, but it's a vision Ross and other stakeholders are committed to.

"If we put the Red Oak Victory over there with the Ford Plant, with all of that over there, that's a shot for the people of Richmond, to see their legacy and that it's still continuing," said SS Red Oak Victory Ship Director Mark Epperson.

Jeanne Gibson knows exactly what it took to build ships during World War II. The 99-year-old welded destroyers at the Todd Pacific Shipyards in Seattle at the age of 18 after dropping out of nursing school in Minneapolis to travel west with a friend and Esther Harri, a fellow welding Rosie.

Gibson has lived a full life since the Allies defeated the Axis powers in 1945. Refusing to be pushed back into the home, Gibson moved to the Bay Area where she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology, and a master's degree and Ph.D. in educational psychology from UC Berkeley,

Though retired, she's remained busy sharing her stories. Friday at the

Sitting with two other Rosies, Marian Sousa and Ernestine Wean, in front of the SS Red Oak Victory during a Thursday morning celebration of the revival project, Gibson shared appreciation for the modern-day Rosies who've dedicated time to preserving a piece of history, a mission she said is vital.

"I'm very happy to meet the ones that are carrying on (the legacy)," Gibson said during the celebration. "We learn from history. I'm a firm believer in learning from our mistakes because it's silly to make the same mistake because you didn't know it happened before."

It's that tenacity that Angel Greer, a welder with the Boilermakers Local 549, said has paved the way not just for women like her who now fill union-protected jobs in the trades, but also women in other fields and men in roles traditionally held by women.

Greer, who's grown close to a handful of original Rosies including Gibson, said she couldn't imagine being pushed out of the career she's built to make way for a man and carries their stories with her as a reminder of the progress that's been made.

It's that progress that she intends to continue to move forward. Greer currently serves on the Boilermaker Women at Work Committee and as a board member with Tradeswomen Inc, an organization focused on the recruitment and retention of women in the trades.

"Just knowing them, hearing their struggles and their stories made me want to do more," Greer said. "What they told me and taught me let me know that whatever I think I'm going through now as a woman in the field, I can't imagine the things they went through."

Progress for women in the workplace hasn't been linear, said Tradeswomen Inc. founder and Executive Director Juanita Douglas. As a near 45-year veteran in the trades, first as a commercial carpenter and then as a land surveyor, Douglas said she was often the only woman on a work site for years.

Tides have shifted over the years, Douglas acknowledged. She credits that change to newer generations of women being less afraid to advocate for themselves. It's a trait that Douglas said helped her throughout her career but would have cost women of Gibson's time their jobs.

Now the next frontier is convincing young women and girls that they have what it takes to work in the trades, and projects like the Victory Ship Revival can help do just that, "because women then see that it's really possible," Douglas said.

"We kind of lost the whole Rosie thing and I'm glad it's coming back. I'm glad they're now finally realizing that women can do this work as they showed them back then," Douglas said. "We don't take shortcuts. We finish it right the first time."

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