



CALIFORNIA

# Inspired by Rosie the Riveter, Bay Area women team up to repair WWII ship



(Left to right, top) Melissa Tanzillo, apprentice welder; Jocelyn Mak, structural steel welder; Dori Luzbetak, volunteer; Angel Greer, Boilermakers Local 549 member; (left to right, bottom) Rennae Ross, Boilermakers Local 549 business agent; Maria Inez Carrasco, plumbing apprentice with UA Local 342; Nicci Whetam, retired steamfitter with Local 342; and Margaret Chester, crew member of the SS Red Oak Victory, pose for portraits at the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, Calif.



**By Jessica Garrison**

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Photography by **Gabriela Hasbun**

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- In the spirit of Rosie the Riveter, women welders and other tradeswomen are leading an effort to fix up a World War II-era ship.
- The image of Rosie has become iconic, as she flexes a fearsome bicep and dons a red polka-dot bandanna.

**RICHMOND, Calif.** — In a desolate corner of the Port of Richmond, dozens of women wearing polka-dot handkerchiefs and wielding blowtorches have spent the last two weeks volunteering their time to try to weld a piece of history back together.

The SS Red Oak Victory is the last surviving ship of the 747 that were churned out at the Kaiser Shipyard in Richmond during World War II.

Now a group of women, led by welders who know well what it is like to try to make their way in a male-dominated profession, are volunteering to restore the ship.



Melissa Tanzillo, an apprentice welder, works on a project for the SS Red Oak Victory.

These volunteers are “a testament to women building the ship and carrying the torch forward and showing our youth that the trades are viable professions for women,” said Sarah Pritchard, the executive director of the Rosie the Riveter Trust, a nonprofit helping to coordinate the project.

Like just about every ship that came out of that effort, the Red Oak Victory was partly built by women, who were called in to factory jobs in an industrial frenzy to replace men who had shipped overseas to fight in the war.

Collectively, those women have come to be known as “Rosies,” after the iconic symbol “Rosie the Riveter” who was celebrated in song (“She’s making history, working for victory, Rosie (rat-a-tat-tat) the Riveter”) and in posters depicting a woman in a red polka-dot bandanna flexing fearsome biceps, with the slogan: “We Can Do It.”



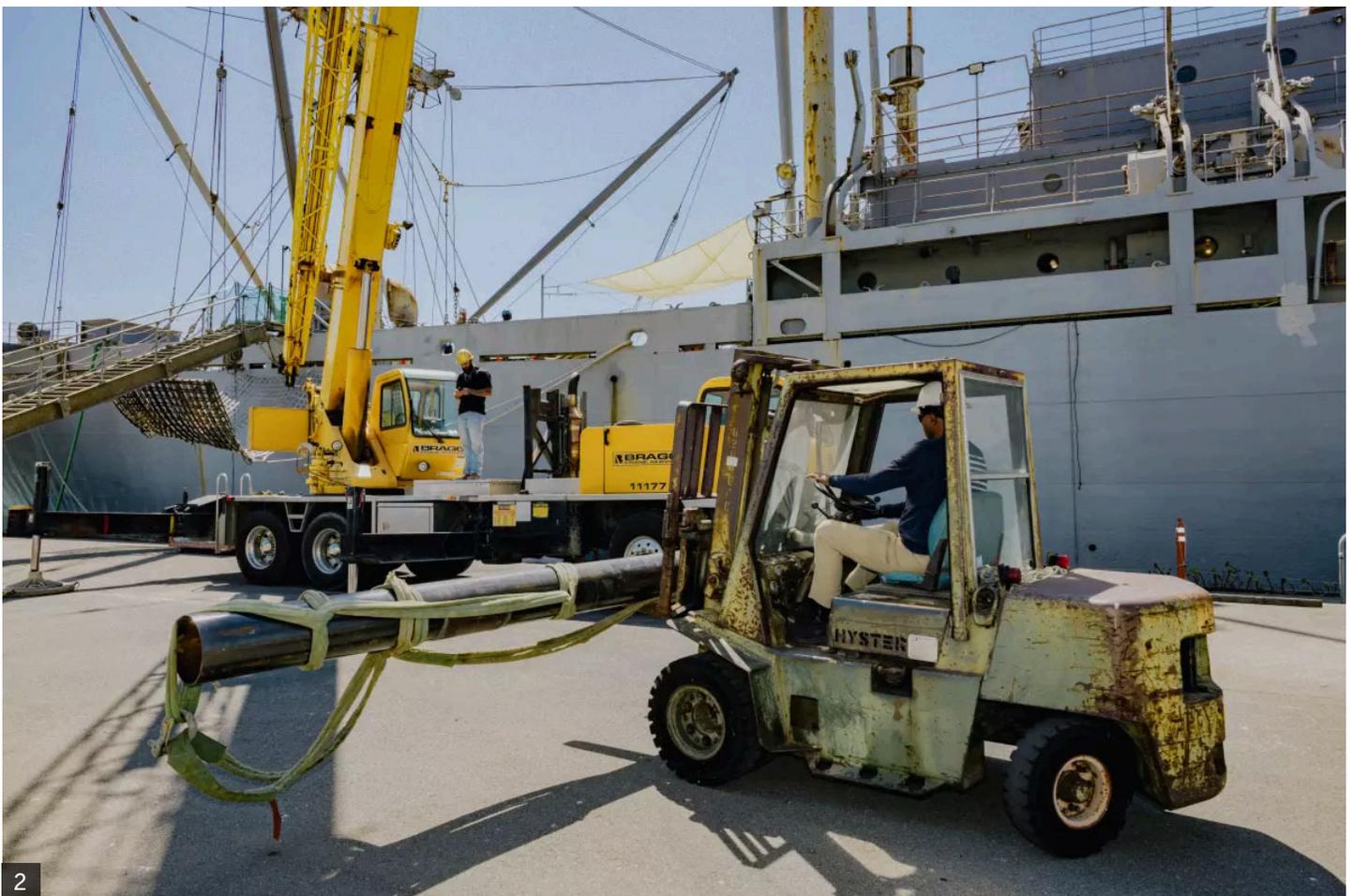
1. The tool room on the SS Red Oak Victory ship. 2. A custom Rosie the Riveter hat for the Victory Ship Revival Project.

The women took jobs as welders, pipe fitters, and other posts that had only ever been held by men, and produced war materiel at a record clip. The Red Oak Victory, for example, was produced in 88 days.

It is estimated that [more than 18 million women](#) contributed to the war effort. After WWII, many of those women were summarily fired to make way for returning men. Women disappeared from trades such as welding in large numbers for several more decades.

Most of the ships they built, too, have long since been scrapped.

But the Red Oak Victory found new life as a museum ship. These days, she sits in this berth in an out-of-the-way spot in the Port of Richmond. She sports a tiki bar and theater in a converted cargo hold at one end and an exhibit about Rosie the Riveter at the other.



1. Tanzillo, and other volunteers, are restoring the SS Red Oak Victory. 2. Evan Hastings helps move a tubular section with a forklift during restoration work.

But her shape is far from ship-shape. The steel on the top deck, for example, is rusted away to almost nothing and is so dangerous museum guests can't set foot on it. History aficionados and Richmond boosters have long nurtured dreams of sprucing her up and then moving her to a new location in the port closer to the Richmond Ferry Terminal, where she can attract more visitors. That location would also be next to the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park.

Not everyone in Richmond approves of moving the ship. Former Richmond Mayor Tom Butt has stated it would be [too costly and complicated to move the vessel](#), arguing those funds would be better spent on other restoration efforts.

But no one disputes that the Red Oak Victory needs some TLC. It took Rennae Ross, a modern-day Rosie the Riveter, to help make it happen.



Volunteers Nicci Whetam, retired steamfitter with Local 342, left, and Rennae Ross, business agent with Boilermakers Local 549, after a day of restoration work.

Ross, 43, is a welder by trade, and came up in the male-dominated profession when it was not unusual for her to be the only woman on a job site.

She gravitated toward the iconography of Rosie the Riveter, and got involved with the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historic Park and its related Rosie the Riveter Trust. The museum, which sits in a fancier location than the Red Oak along the Richmond waterfront, celebrates the war at home.

Through that work, Ross toured the Red Oak Victory and was dismayed to see the signs of its disrepair. She hatched the idea of having women welders fix her up. The idea picked up steam after Ross was part of a group from the Rosie the Riveter Trust who went to Washington, D.C., to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor on behalf of women who worked on the home front.

“We get a chance to honor them and what they did,” Ross said. “They built it and we’re here making sure that it stays, you know, for the future Rosies of America.”

Ross wore her work clothes — because, after all, she was welding on the ship’s deck. But she also sported a polka-dot bandanna and a red polka-dot welding helmet, which was given to the modern day Rosies by the Jessi Combs Foundation, a group that works to get more women into the trades.

Ross added that after she got involved in the project, she learned that her own great-grandmother Helen had worked at the Kaiser Shipyard.

“I didn’t even know,” Ross said. “It really is inspiring.”

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Jessica Garrison writes about Northern California for the Los Angeles Times. She has previously covered Los Angeles City Hall, courts, education and the environment. As a reporter, her work has won a National Magazine Award for Public Service, among other honors. Work she has edited has won a George Polk Award and was a finalist for a Goldsmith Prize. Her book, "The Devil's Harvest," told the story of a contract killer who stalked Central Valley farm towns for years while authorities failed to bring him to justice. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley.