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Berkeley, California

Bruce Elliott

Rosie the Riveter  
World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by  
Julie Stein  
in 2010

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Bruce Elliott

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Interview #1 August 13, 2010  
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01-00:00:02

Stein: Okay. Today is August 12, 2010. This is Julie Stein and I'm here with Bruce Elliott for our first interview. So the way that we usually start these is just by asking you to state your name and telling us when and where you were born.

01-00:00:25

Elliott: Bruce Elliott, born Minneapolis, Minnesota 1924.

01-00:00:31

Stein: And then do you remember the time in Minneapolis? I know that you weren't there for very long.

01-00:00:39

Elliott: As a youngster in diapers I vaguely remember some big things but detail, no. My dad was a manager of the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. We had intended to stay there until the cold weather finally caught up. The winters, as you know, could get terribly severe. Everything would freeze up, lock up. If a fire started you had to let it burn because you couldn't get water through the hoses, and things like that. Finally, Dad heard about this beautiful place in California. "We're going to California." So we had a 1927 Model T-Ford and I can see that thing like yesterday. He piled up the running boards in the back and everything else and we took the trip out here in that thing. How we made it I'll never know.

01-00:01:51

Stein: How many family members did you pack in the car?

01-00:01:55

Elliott: It was two at the time. My sister. She was older than I. My brother materialized after we landed in Berkeley. But it was quite a trip, pitching a tent every night, having a pistol by your side in case of.

01-00:02:18

Stein: How old were you on this trip?

01-00:02:21

Elliott: We came out when I was four. I don't remember the exact date or time but that's basically what it was.

01-00:02:28

Stein: Why the pistol? Was it dangerous to travel?

01-00:02:33

Elliott: I didn't know all the problems Dad had at the wheel, but obviously he had them. This Model T-Ford had sixteen horsepower and four pathetic cylinders to bring us all the way out here with all that overloaded weight. But we headed for Berkeley and wound up at 634 Neilson Street in Berkeley.

Immediately the first thing they looked for was a church because mother had been an organist back there and she wanted to continue this once we got here. So we wound up at the First Congregational Church in Berkeley. We were there for a while and eventually she expanded herself and wound up as the church organist and director at the Epworth Methodist Church in Berkeley on Hopkins, 1953 Hopkins. And from that it was an active life pretty much surrounded by the religious atmosphere. Dad got into real estate and was quite busy doing that. Here mother was the organist. My dad became a maintenance man, janitor, you could call him, I guess, and my sister was head of the Sunday School department.

01-00:03:58

Stein: So the whole family was involved in the church.

01-00:03:59

Elliott: So we were grossly involved and then, of course, I was pitched in the middle. I helped whoever needed help.

01-00:04:06

Stein: Do you know anything about how your family ended up in Minneapolis in the first place? Did they have long roots in that area?

01-00:04:14

Elliott: Two things tipped the scale. One was grandma died and that was pathetic in and by itself. And then my little sister, Joyce, she was five years older than I, she passed away and Dad was just absolutely torn to pieces with that. Between that and the weather and everything prompted this big move.

01-00:04:42

Stein: Right, right.

01-00:04:43

Elliott: So everything began in Berkeley.

01-00:04:45

Stein: Great. So what was your neighborhood like that you grew up in?

01-00:04:51

Elliott: It was quite normal. Nothing unusual, I would say. It was pretty average. We were very comfortable growing up. Eventually, after a short time, we moved to 1305 Bonita, which was more into the heart of Berkeley. And the folks were there for 27 years.

01-00:05:15

Stein: Oh, wow.

01-00:05:16

Elliott: And that's where Phil left to go into the service. That's where Ruthie left to get married and that's when I left to go to the shipyards.

01-00:05:26

Stein: So you were on Bonita—is that sort of your childhood home that you think of?

01-00:05:31

Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes. More happened there than any other one place.

01-00:05:36

Stein: So as a child, you were pretty young going to schools in Berkeley. Were there other organizations? Was the church really the center of your community life? Were there other groups that you were also involved in?

01-00:05:53

Elliott: Not really. I went to Garfield Junior High, which is right close to the house there. Went to Berkeley High. I also went to Oakland Tech. That's another story.

01-00:06:08

Stein: What's that story? So you went to Berkeley High. And Oakland Tech was also a high school?

01-00:06:19

Elliott: Yes.

01-00:06:21

Stein: Which one did you graduate from?

01-00:06:24

Elliott: I didn't graduate. Two things happened. Number one, I did a bad thing. We had gone to church in downtown Berkeley, the first Presbyterian Church. The reason we got involved with that church was because Mother needed someone to play the organ when her daughter was getting married. So she had Mary Anderson, the organist downtown come out to Epworth and play. So they liked the church so well that they stayed there and they were members there for a long time.

01-00:07:06

Stein: Now, when did you start playing the organ? Was that when you were also a child?

01-00:07:13

Elliott: I used to carry Mother's music when she went over to practice. I would sit there and listen and watch. At that time you could open the door on the side and go in the back where you're not supposed to go.

01-00:07:28

Stein: Inside the organ?

01-00:07:30

Elliott: Inside the organ and I could sit on the big sixteen foot pipes that were so tall that they had to lay them on the floor. I would sit on them while she played

Bach. And I became so enthused with the mechanics of the organ, as she pulled or stopped, this set would sound or that set would sound, and then the full organ, of course. It was quite an experience. So I got fooling around with the organ, learning how to turn on the board, turn it off, and little things like that. Pulling stops as she pulled for a service. I would reach over.

01-00:08:09

Stein: Cause a little mischief?

01-00:08:13

Elliott: Yes. And so she suggested I sit on the bench and try it, so I did. I took to it like a duck to water. In fact, instead of buckling down and learning to read music and do it the way I should, I had an exceptional ear. I memorized the church hymnal and I could sit down at any time and play, which was good in one aspect but in another it was not the proper way to be an organist. I went to hear Virgil Fox. He played at the Trinity Methodist Church in Berkeley when I was in Berkeley High. He was twenty-four at the time. At that time the Trinity Church had a great big four manual S-D organ which has since been removed. That church failed so they took the organ out and sold it to the San Leandro Catholic Church, which is in place now. They in turn added on to the organ. It's one of our big organs here, church organs in the Bay Area. So I had a chance to play that organ while going to high school.

But I heard Virgil Fox and he made such an impression I thought, "I'm going to be a concert organist." But I was shot down from the get go.

01-00:09:50

Stein: By who?

01-00:09:53

Elliott: When I was five years old I had a mastoid. A mastoid is an infection which enters the body. If it hits your heart or brain it can kill you. It went to my head. It landed in my left rear ear and eventually destroyed it, so I lost the hearing in this ear. In 1941 when I graduated from Garfield Junior High I had my last operation here and they did plastic surgery back here, closing the mess that was left. A person wouldn't notice it now unless you drew your attention to it. And then, as if it that wasn't bad enough, a year later I had an infection that went through my blood system and landed in my right ankle. Strep infection. At that time they did not have antibiotics. They would treat it by using this little cart. I can see it yet. They would put hot steaming towels on it, wrap that around the limb where the infection was most prominent and it would draw everything to that area and then they could operate and drain. That's the way they treated.

01-00:11:13

Stein: Yikes.

01-00:11:14

Elliott:

Today you'd take a pill and that's gone. So as a result, I lost the use of my right foot, which as an organist is a no no. You have to use your toe and heel on the thirty-two note pedal board. And that ruled me out. Well, I knew I couldn't be at the top and so it became a part-time job.

01-00:11:47

Stein:

But it sounds like you were still quite talented, even with some limitations in your foot.

01-00:11:53

Elliott:

Well, when you have a problem like that, you learn to deal with it. I had to use my left foot when it was a no no. I had to substitute. I learned to use the pedal organ quite well. In fact, over Grace Cathedral I got interested. My mother said, "How would you like to hear a big organ?" "Oh, yes, where?" "San Francisco. Grace Cathedral." So we went over and I got very well acquainted with the organist. He saw I was interested and suggested I sit down and play something. So I did. "Bruce, you need to take lessons. Good grief. You have a tremendous talent." Well, it kind of went in one ear and other the other. I didn't buckle down is what I'm trying to say. And so that's been the basis of the organ thing and then, of course, over the years I've got stuff around here that would make the hair come out of your arm to see. The world's largest organs.

01-00:13:13

Stein:

Oh, wow.

01-00:13:13

Elliott:

One's in the Wanamaker store in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia. And the big Atlantic City Auditorium, which was four city blocks long, thirteen stories high. Just to give you an idea how big that thing is, Grace Cathedral, it's a large organ. It's the second largest organ in the Bay Area, 125 ranks. Ranks indicate the size. With the Atlantic City organ. It has seven manuals. The first manual sits at my belt. The choir great, swell, solo, bombard, and fan-fure. Seven manuals. You have to reach way up at the top. The wife took a picture of me. I have it someplace around here. I have pictures in the other room I'll show you later on.

In fact, just on that subject, here. I took a lot of photographs. This is the First Presbyterian organ. [showing photographs]

01-00:14:27

Stein:

Can you hold it up so we can see it on the camera.

01-00:14:29

Elliott:

The First Presbyterian organ in Oakland.

01-00:14:36

Stein:

Okay. Great.

01-00:14:39

Elliott: And I can use that organ anytime I want. And then it goes on and on and on. Then the wife and I became grossly involved in the First Methodist Church. I don't know if you remember or not. In 1981, the big fire at this church?

01-00:14:57

Stein: No, I wasn't here.

01-00:15:01

Elliott: It destroyed the church. They had to tear it down. The fire got into the dome and fell in on the organ and destroyed everything, so they had to tear it down. But I enjoyed that organ very much. It was a great sound!

01-00:15:17

Stein: It looks beautiful. What a nice legacy from your mother, that you could share that with her.

01-00:15:22

Elliott: Oh, yes. In Saint Paul's Episcopal Church down by Oakland, I played off and on there. I gave a concert. I spent about fifteen years on and off playing that organ.

01-00:15:36

Stein: Wow. So you've been part of many churches in this area?

01-00:15:41

Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes. I have been. Even this organ here, for heaven's sake.

01-00:15:49

Stein: My goodness.

01-00:15:50

Elliott: You know what that is?

01-00:15:51

Stein: No, but it's huge.

01-00:15:53

Elliott: That's the Mormon Tabernacle.

01-00:15:54

Stein: Oh. Have you been there, too?

01-00:15:55

Elliott: In Salt Lake City. And I was there for one of his concerts and before the concert I went up and talked to Alexander Schreiner. He saw I was interested. And he was a very strict German. "You will do exactly what I say" kind of thing. I sat down at this big organ and I was shaking but I had five minutes to play on this organ.

01-00:16:23

Stein: That's fantastic.

01-00:16:25  
Elliott: It was just awesome. It would shake the whole church.

01-00:16:27  
Stein: I imagine.

01-00:16:30  
Elliott: It was an enormous experience. Here I am in high school.

01-00:16:36  
Stein: Oh, wow. Is that at Berkeley High?

01-00:16:38  
Elliott: That was Oakland Tech.

01-00:16:43  
Stein: Okay. I'd love to hear about some of the differences, having been a part of two different high schools, seeing the culture in both of them. Did you notice any major differences between the two schools?

01-00:16:55  
Elliott: I wish I had finished. I had many regrets. I made a lot of mistakes. I'm no different than anybody else. I'm starting to tell you. The folks and I went to the Berkeley Church in Berkeley and I took the car. I shouldn't have. I had my own key and I took it to go down to see my friend. He wasn't in the church. He lived several blocks away. Went down and saw him. We had a nice visit and everything and then I thought, "Well, I better get back to church before the folks miss me." On the way, a taxi cab came flying through an intersection and hit me broadside.

01-00:17:41  
Stein: Oh, no.

01-00:17:42  
Elliott: Destroyed the car. I was just devastated. That was Dad's little car. He had it recently overhauled. This is when the war broke out and I thought, "I better get a job." And most people had at least one job. A lot of them had two or three.

01-00:18:06  
Stein: While in high school?

01-00:18:07  
Elliott: Yes.

01-00:18:08  
Stein: And still going to school.

01-00:18:09  
Elliott: So that's how I broke into that.

01-00:18:13  
Stein: And that was when you were sixteen? Something around there?

01-00:18:16  
Elliott: I don't remember the ages and the times exactly. But yes, I was—

01-00:18:22  
Stein: Something close to that?

01-00:18:23  
Elliott: I was a wet teenager.

01-00:18:24  
Stein: What do you mean by that?

01-00:18:27  
Elliott: I was a human dynamo and folks had a rough time keeping track of me, I guess. [showing photographs] This is the San Pablo Church where the people built the church with their own hands. All they did was hire a contractor.

01-00:18:39  
Stein: Yes. It's amazing.

01-00:18:40  
Elliott: He told them what to do, what nail to hit, and they did it. And this is a result of it. And then they wound up buying the organ I had in my home.

01-00:18:48  
Stein: Oh, wow.

01-00:18:49  
Elliott: Yes.

01-00:18:49  
Stein: That's amazing.

01-00:18:51  
Elliott: This is when the wife was in the choir at the Berkeley Church.

01-00:18:59  
Stein: Is that when you met her?

01-00:19:00  
Elliott: The Berkeley Presbyterian Church one day was condemned. It was all wood. It's got to go.

01-00:19:10  
Stein: And this was your family's church?

01-00:19:11  
Elliott: Yes. It's got to go. But for years I used the organ and the wife sang solos there. This was when they had the Messiah. And in 1973 this was the last

thing as the tower was pulled over. And, of course, the church that stands there now is quite a bit different.

01-00:19:33

Stein: So that's probably too far away for you to still be in that congregation.

01-00:190:39

Elliott: Two days ago I got a phone call from a stranger. I didn't even write the name down but that doesn't make any difference. She said, "Would you be interested in having your picture taken? This is so and so at the First Presbyterian Church." I thought, "What on earth are they calling me for? I haven't been a member of that church for years and years and years." How did they ever get my name. And she said, "Well, we found your name and would you be interested?" I said, "Well, I'm not involved with any church right now. I'd probably better just leave it like that."

So after that I went over to the First Christian Church—

01-00:20:19

Stein: And played there.

01-00:20:20

Elliott: I played there. We joined in 1953 and it was choir and organ and I was responsible. Up behind all this latticework here is a very large organ. It went from twenty-nine ranks to fifty-eight, and many hour of work.

01-00:20:40

Stein: Okay, so much bigger.

01-00:20:42

Elliott: But now today the organ is destroyed and there's no money. The church used to hold 600 people. Now they're lucky if they seat ten or twelve people on a Sunday. It may collapse. It may be torn down. I don't know what the future holds for this church.

01-00:21:01

Stein: Right.

01-00:21:02

Elliott: [showing photographs] And then this is when we had another organist and director. He was there for a short time and finally left with this family. And the 1950 exposition organ. It wound up in the auditorium of San Francisco. It was there for a while and finally it was taken out and stored. So there's nothing there now. And this is the organ I had in my home that the church had put in. This is when we were building up the organ there at the First Christian Church. Some of the latticework up at the top. And I also got the organ for the church, another organ for them, out there. I played out there for two years.

01-00:22:02

Stein: That's great.

01-00:22:02

Elliott: Then this is First Presbyterian again. So that's the story of my music.

01-00:22:07

Stein: Well, I'd love to hear a little bit more about your life in Berkeley before the shipyards. A lot of people characterize this time, historians, as the Great Depression. That was sort of the major characterization. Was that something that you experienced with your family or what was your experience of the Depression?

01-00:22:29

Elliott: Oh, yes. Dad got into real estate and real estate was very difficult. Eventually he got into commercial real estate and towards the end of his life he got to be good friends with the owner of the Mark Hopkins Hotel and some of these big names and would go out for lunch with them. But his age prevented him from taking off. That should have all happened many years before. But it was very rough. I can remember him borrowing money. People were destitute. In fact, a lot of millionaires would just climb a tall building and jump out the window. They lost everything. There's nothing left.

01-00:23:13

Stein: Yes. Did you have friends who had parents who lost jobs?

01-00:23:19

Elliott: I heard a lot of talk over the years of so and so just passed away from his fall.

01-00:23:27

Stein: That's terrible. But it sounds like your family managed to stay together pretty well, even though it was a little bit of a challenge.

01-00:23:36

Elliott: The faith was solid. The glue was solid.

01-00:23:39

Stein: Yes. And do you think that that came from your involvement in the church or just from your family?

01-00:23:44

Elliott: I think the church was the center around it. Yes, yes. Very definitely. If we all lived by the Ten Commandments, we wouldn't have any trouble today. But we don't. We're in denial and that's a no no. So what do we do? We're struggling with it. Same sex marriage, for one of them. I stopped taking the paper. It was daily shootings and drive-bys and some terrible, terrible things.

01-00:24:24

Stein: Do you remember some of your favorite subjects as a student? Were there classes that you loved or classes that you hated?

01-00:24:34

Elliott: I didn't like history. Why do I have to remember this date that goes way back to what I don't know. I was in denial but I was fighting it. You've heard it

before. If I only had it to do over again, it would be an entirely different story. I frittered away a lot of time, I have to admit. But I sold newspapers. I worked in a little market store. I did those small things. Couple girlfriends and so on. One of the girlfriends, I almost got hitched up with her. She wound up marrying a sailor. She contracted infantile paralysis. The last I saw of her she was in a wheelchair. She had two boys by him. I don't know where she is or if she's around. I don't know. All these things seem to have a way of working out. But Charlotte, like I say, why she married me I don't know.

01-00:25:53  
Stein:

Where did you meet her? Or how did you meet her?

01-00:25:57  
Elliott:

She was in Christian Endeavor Berkeley High. First Pres Berkeley.

01-00:26:01  
Stein:

Okay. So you met her in church. And was she also in Berkeley High?

01-00:26:09  
Elliott:

Yes. Oh, yes.

01-00:26:10  
Stein:

So you knew her both from high school and from church. What type of social activities would you do as a teenager?

01-00:26:20  
Elliott:

A couple of school dances. I didn't go out of my way for these things but they came along and I took them as they'd come. Nothing special, really. Church activity. I remember going to a number of camps at Feather River, for example, and there there would be over 300 kids and you would sit in a great big circle with this great big bonfire in the middle and you would talk. You would sing hymns or different types of music. It was great. This fellowship, this communication of people. How beautiful they are.

01-00:27:11  
Stein:

You got out into nature to do that.

01-00:27:13  
Elliott:

Yes.

01-00:27:14  
Stein:

Yes. Did you go hiking other times? Were there other—

01-00:27:17  
Elliott:

I did a lot of hiking. In fact, I never could stand still. I made the mistake of taking the kids to Yosemite.

01-00:27:35  
Stein:

Wow. Oh, what a great picture.

01-00:27:38  
Elliott: Rich enjoyed it so much that when he had his house built, the whole living room wall on one side is Yosemite.

01-00:27:46  
Stein: Wow.

01-00:27:47  
Elliott: The kids—

01-00:27:51  
Stein: There you go.

01-00:27:51  
Elliott: —absolutely loved Yosemite and, of course, I was a favorite fan of cars. I had some cars. If I had those today, I'd be a millionaire. This is a 1941 Packard. Reno sells those for a quarter of a million dollars.

01-00:28:12  
Stein: Oh, my goodness.

01-00:28:13  
Elliott: Little did I know.

01-00:28:17  
Stein: Yes, yes. So while you were living in Berkeley you said you had another brother who came along.

01-00:28:23  
Elliott: Philip. Philip Elliott. Yes.

01-00:28:48  
Stein: So before the war broke out, do you remember hearing anything about the conflict that was going on in Europe or in Asia? Was this something people were aware of before it came to our shores?

01-00:29:03  
Elliott: Oh, yes. The war was on everybody's lips. Oh, yes. It didn't take much to stir up a fuss once you'd bring up one of those subjects. The room would shake with people wanting to be involved or having an opinion.

01-00:29:23  
Stein: And this was all before Pearl Harbor?

01-00:29:24  
Elliott: Yes. We were quite aware that the Germans were up to no good and invading Poland and all of these other things. We knew we were headed for trouble.

01-00:29:39  
Stein: How did you find out about the news? What was—?

01-00:29:42

Elliott: Pearl Harbor, I was on my way to Christian Endeavor one Sunday and we heard Roosevelt over the radio.

01-00:29:52

Stein: You were in the car?

01-00:29:54

Elliott: No, this was at home. "These days will live in infamy." And, of course, there were Fireside Talks after that about how we were going to have to roll up our sleeves and really get with it. "This is a case of life or death now." And there were several times during the war that we came pretty close.

01-00:30:24

Stein: And being in California, it must have been all the more frightening.

01-00:30:28

Elliott: Oh, and we were right on the coast here and could be attacked ourselves. And then we worried about these submarines that came in close to New York and all the rest of it. It could have turned.

01-00:30:43

Stein: Right. So you say that you remember Pearl Harbor on the radio, you remember that moment. Do you remember reading about it in more detail or finding out more? I'm just curious what type of information did you have right when it happened and then how did you learn more?

01-00:31:02

Elliott: Well, from then on the papers wrote headlines just day after day after day about all these major things that were taking place. And one of the big cries went out that we need ships and we need them now. And to that I saw this enormous surge of humanity on the shipyards. We had trains with ten, fifteen cars in route to shipyards. They were all standing up there were so many. The mass of humanity that participated in the shipyards, knowing full well that they'd better get these ships out. And you never saw such activity in your life. When I think of the thousands of tons of material I hauled through tractors and trailers. We had one big trailer empty. That trailer weighed forty tons.

01-00:32:02

Stein: Oh, my goodness.

01-00:32:03

Elliott: It had sixteen wheels at each end. You would drop a pin in the one you didn't want to turn and then you'd back your tractor up to the other end.

01-00:32:13

Stein: What was that trailer for?

01-00:32:15

Elliott: And this was used for hauling the entire front section of a ship or the three levels of deckhouse, 175 tons. I remember hooking up to that. I got the signal.

We would have fellows on either side to guide you. That tractor would jump up and down, these enormous tires. They would be this big around and be six feet high. Enormous power from these tractors. But it would pull this trailer over to the base, then the big gantry cranes, they used to go up and down all day long. They would get together and team together and pick up this 175 tons and carry it to the ship and set it in place and then the welders would be called in. It was a trip.

01-00:33:14

Stein: Let's back up for a second, because this is so fascinating. How did you end up as a teenage boy working in the center of this shipyard?

01-00:33:24

Elliott: I've often wondered that very thing, because when I went out there I was pretty raw. Basic commonsense told me basically what to do but nobody had to tell me when something unusual came along. In fact, I got an order one day they needed at yard two the forty ton trailer. I took it over there all by myself. If I had been a foreman of me, I would have fired me.

01-00:33:57

Stein: What were you supposed to have done?

01-00:34:00

Elliott: I should have waited for help. You're supposed to have guides because this trailer took the entire street. I pulled that trailer from yard three over to yard two. I delivered it. There was no incident but it wasn't my fault there wasn't. I had a pretty good feel of horsepower and weight. You know what a heister is?

01-00:34:28

Stein: No.

01-00:34:30

Elliott: Heister is that vehicle that's shaped like a U, has wheels, and you climb up here and drive it. It's seventeen feet. And you would haul these racks. And the racks were built like this. You would slide over it and then I had a lever on the left side there that would bring clamps underneath the rack and pick it up and you could carry it to where it was needed. But the plate shop made thousands of plates. These made up the hull of the ship.

01-00:35:11

Stein: So you would essentially drive on top of it and then hook it in?

01-00:35:15

Elliott: You drive right over it like this and clamp it and then you had a lever on the side of your seat that you pulled up and the engine would pick this plate up and you would take it over. But you had to deliver these plates very, very carefully. When you went around a corner, for example, if you weren't careful one of these plates would fall over on the other side and your wheel would come off the ground.

- 01-00:35:41  
Stein: And that would not be good.
- 01-00:35:42  
Elliott: There was a couple of scary moments. I never had an incident but, again, it wasn't my—I took to mechanics and motors very well. Later on, through life, I did all my own car work, even putting in engines and transmissions, rear ends, drive shafts, brakes, by myself.
- 01-00:36:02  
Stein: So this was when you decided to leave high school and get a job. Was the job that you found the shipyards?
- 01-00:36:10  
Elliott: Yes, everything swung. Roosevelt said, "We've got to get involved." Everybody, I don't care who it is, if you can walk, if you can raise your arms, you better get out to the shipyards or the plane factory or whatever. It was essential that everybody respond with no questions asked.
- 01-00:36:32  
Stein: Did you consider enlisting or were you too young?
- 01-00:36:37  
Elliott: I tried to enlist and they wouldn't take me because of my foot and my ear. They gave me a 4F.
- 01-00:36:46  
Stein: Were you relieved or disappointed? I'm so curious of what that experience would be like.
- 01-00:36:55  
Elliott: I guess I kind of shrugged it off. Well, that's the way it is.
- 01-00:36:59  
Stein: And found another way to help.
- 01-00:37:01  
Elliott: Out to the shipyards, yes.
- 01-00:37:05  
Stein: Yes. So the shipyards were in operation before Pearl Harbor because they were building some ships to send to England.
- 01-00:37:12  
Elliott: Right. They were getting bays ready. There was a lot of work going on in preparation. They knew what was coming.
- 01-00:37:19  
Stein: Okay. And then when Pearl Harbor happened they could just ramp up.
- 01-00:37:24  
Elliott: When that hit, I never saw such activity in building something in my life.

01-00:37:31

Stein: Can you describe what it looked like?

01-00:37:34

Elliott: These enormous cranes that could pick up thousands of tons. We're throwing this stuff around like confetti almost. I remember this one truck. I had a helper and I had two great big levers on the right hand side of me. These trucks were used to go around and pick up these bins that were strategically placed around the yards. In it they would throw scrap metal. Well, every time you were called, this thing would be heaped with scrap metal and it was so heavy the truck could hardly pick it up. Now, the two levers, one would pull the arm, lift it, and then the other arm would pull it onto the truck. Then when you got to the north yard, where you dumped these piles, it became a mass scrap yard. This was all salvaged material out in the north yard. North yard was a busy place. We were always running out there, back and forth, for lumber and cable and steel, depending on the jobs.

01-00:38:44

Stein: Okay. And that's separate from the shipyards, from one, two and three? The north yard?

01-00:38:48

Elliott: Well, each yard had a scrap yard of some kind, a destination for material that would be later used.

01-00:39:00

Stein: Okay, okay. Do you by any chance remember your first day on the job, seeing these shipyards for the first time?

01-00:39:09

Elliott: Oh, yes. I was working with a couple of guys. They were in my category pretty much.

01-00:39:17

Stein: And what was your category?

01-00:39:20

Elliott: We were trying to learn what was going on, who would I report to. We were constantly being yelled at to go get me some cable, go do this, go do that, go help Joe Blow. I was very agile then. Nothing bothered me. Wasn't anything I couldn't do.

01-00:39:44

Stein: What was your position when you started?

01-00:39:47

Elliott: Electrician helper.

01-00:39:50

Stein: Did that mean that you were—

01-00:39:51  
Elliott: That means that you would work alongside of somebody that knew what he was doing.

01-00:39:57  
Stein: Okay. Except for that first day it sounds like you were on your own almost.

01-00:40:01  
Elliott: Well, I had enough sense to know what I was doing. I'm here to help him. "Okay, what do you need?" I found myself running up and down the ladder that would be from the main deck clear down to the bottom of the ship. They had built this great big ladder out of wood using four two by fours from the top to the bottom and then they would put rungs across. So you could literally run up and down that ladder—

01-00:40:33  
Stein: How was that?

01-00:40:34  
Elliott: —carrying stuff, everything.

01-00:40:36  
Stein: That sounds a little bit dangerous. Or a little difficult.

01-00:40:39  
Elliott: I defied so many laws of gravity that it's a wonder I'm still here.

01-00:40:44  
Stein: Maybe that's why they wanted young workers, because they had no fear.

01-00:40:47  
Elliott: I think so. Fearless. Good sense didn't prevail yet.

01-00:40:56  
Stein: So most of the people that I've talked to so far were working outside of the ships. They were either welding in the yards. But it sounds like you actually were inside these almost complete—

01-00:41:07  
Elliott: I was inside more than out.

01-00:41:11  
Stein: Of these half built ships?

01-00:41:15  
Elliott: Yes. Once a ship was in place, then we needed all of this eternal work. They had a cork material. After all the work was done, they would spray it with some kind of a glue or some kind of a compound. And the cork would be damp and they would put it on with a blowgun. They could blow on the corners and this cork became an insulator.

01-00:41:45

Stein: Cork. Like the material?

01-00:41:46

Elliott: Yes, just regular cork material.

01-00:41:50

Stein: And that became insulation?

01-00:41:53

Elliott: They would insulate these steel beams and walls and all that sort of thing after all the cable was in place.

01-00:42:00

Stein: Okay. To cover it up and give insulation. So these may sound like silly questions, because I've never been inside one of these ships, but what type of electricity did they have? Were you mostly putting in light bulbs? What type of things were you wiring them for?

01-00:42:20

Elliott: Well, everything electrical that went outside the ship had to have watertight plugs. I'll be able to show you later on from some stuff I have inside here. Inside, of course, all of these cables had to go to a main switch box that was fused and that would go to the various cabins, various places throughout the ship. Then, of course, everything had to be labeled. You had to know pretty much what you were doing. You had to know the proper length of cables that make these runs. All of this would eventually be attached to main cables going into the bowels of the ship near the engine room where they had generators that were running 24/7. It was a constant flow of direct current.

01-00:43:21

Stein: Were you able to explore the ship?

01-00:43:24

Elliott: Oh, yes. I made sure I explored.

01-00:43:28

Stein: Tell me about that. I'm so curious.

01-00:43:30

Elliott: I knew all the corners. The shaft alley. That's where the shaft goes with the propeller, which was at the very bottom of the ship, and way back there you're underwater with all of this machinery. And even when they were testing the reciprocating engine in the engine room on its first day they would run it slow to break it in. If everything checked out, then they would add a little speed to it. By the third day, everything checked out good so they would put extra ropes onto the ship to hold them in place and then full power. The ship would shake under this enormous power, torque power, and being way in the back by the propeller with that going on and you're passing all these great big huge

gearings that have to have a certain amount of oil pouring in, otherwise they would burn up. I learned a lot of things just by being there.

01-00:44:37

Stein: Yes. So you were right by the propeller or down sort of in the entrance?

01-00:44:42

Elliott: Just on the other side of the propeller.

01-00:44:44

Stein: And so you could see the—

01-00:44:46

Elliott: I was on in the inside of the ship and the propeller was on the other side and I was right there by the main bearing as it was turning.

01-00:44:51

Stein: Were you putting oil into it or just making sure that it was all okay?

01-00:44:53

Elliott: Oh, no. No, no. I was just looking.

01-00:44:59

Stein: Just looking around.

01-00:45:02

Elliott: But it was fascinating. I find it very fascinating now. I go aboard the—

01-00:45:09

Stein: The Red Oak Victory?

01-00:45:10

Elliott: —Red Oak quite often. They tried to recruit me. They knew that I had been on ships and they wanted me to come out there. I told them no, it was too long, too far.

01-00:45:23

Stein: Did they want you to give tours or explain it? That would be fascinating.

01-00:45:27

Elliott: Well, they tried desperately to get me involved in something and I kept saying, “No, it’s too far.”

01-00:45:33

Stein: Right.

01-00:45:34

Elliott: But they are struggling out there with these fellows that are eighty, ninety years old, for heaven’s sake, trying to put this last ship together. I have a couple of very pretty pictures here that I want to show you.

01-00:45:50  
Stein: Of the ship?

01-00:45:50  
Elliott: Oh, yes.

01-00:45:52  
Stein: Okay, yes. Let's take a look. [looking at photographs] Pause for a second.

01-00:46:10  
Elliott: Self-guided tour of Red Oak. Liberty ship remained as history has forgotten. Red Oak going down the ways.

01-00:46:33  
Stein: Was the Red Oak a really typical ship?

01-00:46:38  
Elliott: That came after the Liberty ships. The Liberty ships were powered by a reciprocating engine.

01-00:46:45  
Stein: Oh, reciprocating?

01-00:46:47  
Elliott: You know what that is?

01-00:46:47  
Stein: I know nothing about that.

01-00:46:48  
Elliott: Oh, okay. That's the big steam engine that has rods that go down and turn a crankshaft. But the Red Oak Victory is turbine driven.

01-00:47:01  
Stein: And how does a turbine driven ship work?

01-00:47:07  
Elliott: Much stronger.

01-00:47:19  
Stein: So when you were watching the propeller, were you right down there?

01-00:47:26  
Elliott: Well, the propeller is on the outside of the ship and I would be right inside.

01-00:47:30  
Stein: Right. So you were just on the inside.

01-00:47:32  
Elliott: By the bearing. The big main bearing here. And there would be bearings along the way here, depending on how long the shaft was, through this great turbine drive.

01-00:47:50  
Stein: And so you probably explored all around the inside of the ship?

01-00:47:54  
Elliott: Oh, yes.

01-00:47:55  
Stein: What were some of your favorite places to check out?

01-00:47:56  
Elliott: I liked it all. I was fascinated by everything I saw.

01-00:48:03  
Stein: Did you see the quarters where people would stay when they were on there?

01-00:48:06  
Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes.

01-00:48:08  
Stein: What were those like?

01-00:48:08  
Elliott: In fact, some of those cabins are down now and the fellows that are working there full-time are sleeping on the ship.

01-00:48:16  
Stein: Really?

01-00:48:17  
Elliott: Oh, yes.

01-00:48:18  
Stein: They must be very small, though. I imagine that they built the ships mostly for cargo and that the people were sort of a secondary? Is that right?

01-00:48:27  
Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes. It was designed to haul freight and to pack them with tanks and jeeps. You name it. They hauled absolutely everything. And then, of course, they had the big winches on top where they could pick up a tank, swing it over the hold, put it down.

01-00:48:50  
Stein: Did you ever go onboard when they were loaded?

01-00:48:55  
Elliott: I had one trip out the gate with the Liberty ship.

01-00:48:58  
Stein: Oh, can you tell me about that?

01-00:49:01  
Elliott: Fascinating.

01-00:49:04

Stein: How far did you go?

01-00:49:05

Elliott: It was fascinating. Of course, I've been on the O'Brien a number of times since because they give periodic trips to the public.

01-00:49:13

Stein: Right. How did you end up on that Liberty ship on the launch?

01-00:49:20

Elliott: Scared of everything, really. To be on this thing and be involved in all this major, major activity where you didn't know one minute to the next what was coming off was quite an experience. And ships I've never—. There is a Queen Mary. Queen Mary again as it came into the Bay. Did you ever see that?

01-00:49:51

Stein: Yes, I've seen it.

01-00:49:54

Elliott: Yes. Rich and I were over there. [reads headline from newspaper clipping] "Seniors Race to Restore a Ship Within their Lifetime." That's what they—

01-00:50:06

Stein: Okay. That's what they wanted you involved in, I imagine.

01-00:50:07

Elliott: That's what the Red Oak Victory is involved in now. The last I heard they were trying to get the boilers done so they could get up steam.

01-00:50:19

Stein: So they can actually—

01-00:50:20

Elliott: So they can actually turn the turbine and see what needs to be done there. There's so much work outside of what you see that has to be done to do any of this. The average person looks at this now and is just a mass of pipes and levers and what do you do. But it's all work that has to be done in order for it to be successful. Here's your specifications of Red Oak. Weight, size and power. You name it.

01-00:51:00

Stein: When did the ship yard switch over from Liberty ships to Victory ships? Do you know when that—?

01-00:51:09

Elliott: From yard two I went to yard three. And there I got involved in Liberty ships for a while. But then we went to the C4SA1 troop ship (19,500 tons and turbine drive).

01-00:51:23  
Stein: What is that?

01-00:51:24  
Elliott: That's the big troop ship.

01-00:51:26  
Stein: Oh, okay. And so that was built for transporting people?

01-00:51:30  
Elliott: Yes, troops.

01-00:51:30  
Stein: The CA—sorry. What is it?

01-00:51:35  
Elliott: It was designed to haul people. Later on I understand it became hospital ships. Let's see. Oh, here, let me show you one of these. Here's a picture of the wife and Mary and Rich out in Richmond.

01-00:52:01  
Stein: Oh, wow. Oh, this is actually a great—so this picture is in wartime housing.

01-00:52:10  
Elliott: That's when we lived at 360 South 45<sup>th</sup> Street in Richmond, apartment 1F.

01-00:52:16  
Stein: Okay. So that was war housing. That was for ship builders.

01-00:52:20  
Elliott: Yes.

01-00:52:20  
Stein: How did you end up moving there?

01-00:52:23  
Elliott: Well, I knew I had to get out there in order to work there.

01-00:52:29  
Stein: You didn't want to do the commute from Berkeley.

01-00:52:29  
Elliott: So why don't we get an apartment out there. Yes, that's a good idea. And so we did.

01-00:52:34  
Stein: Now, was it subsidized by the Kaiser shipbuilding?

01-00:52:37  
Elliott: What the total thing was behind it I'm not sure. But we went to Richmond Housing and it was all tied in together really.

01-00:52:47  
Stein: Okay, so it's sort of a part of the job?

01-00:52:50  
Elliott: Because it became part of the job. You had to have a place out there where you could come to our gate here every morning at seven o'clock.

01-00:52:49  
Stein: Right. Do you remember your hours?

01-00:53:04  
Elliott: Frankly, no.

01-00:53:06  
Stein: But you were working during the daytime? Not—

01-00:53:08  
Elliott: Daytime, yes. Worked during the day. At times it was overtime, depending on what you were involved in, hauling and so on.

01-00:53:18  
Stein: Yes. When you hear about some people working all through the night, or certain shifts where they had these running all day and all night.

01-00:53:25  
Elliott: Absolutely. Depending on the job, you respond.

01-00:53:30  
Stein: Okay. So it was important that you were close by.

01-00:53:31  
Elliott: Oh, yes, you respond. No questions. I remember we were laying cable and I climbed the mast. I look back on that now and I should have had my head examined. I climbed that mast. Oh, god, I don't know how it was. I got up there and it looked like I was on top of the world.

01-00:53:59  
Stein: You went all the way to the top of the ship? The top of the mast?

01-00:54:02  
Elliott: Almost to the very tip top of the mast.

01-00:54:05  
Stein: There was a ladder?

01-00:54:06  
Elliott: Not where the pilot light was but I was just below that and looking down and measuring from straps and cable placement.

01-00:54:17  
Stein: Wow, you must have known every inch of these ships.

01-00:54:20  
Elliott: Pretty much, pretty much.

01-00:54:23  
Stein: Are there any other places?

01-00:54:29  
Elliott: [showing photographs] Got two things to show you here. Oh, here's where the big pictures are. I'll show you that, too. Rosie the Riveter. Here's Rosie the Riveter, a picture taken not too long ago. I'm in the front row there.

01-00:54:57  
Stein: Yes. I'll just flash that. Yes.

01-00:55:07  
Elliott: There's me there.

01-00:55:18  
Stein: Were you aware of the idea of Rosie the Riveter at the time that you were working there?

01-00:55:22  
Elliott: Not really. Not really. Not really. I got acquainted by accident.

01-00:55:31  
Stein: How so?

01-00:55:34  
Elliott: "Bruce, get a welder up here. We need her for two to three hours." So I had to go find a welder and as a rule we would go to the welding machine that was on the main deck and follow the cable to find out where she was and then you would have to sell yourself.

01-00:55:56  
Stein: You'd have to tell her that—

01-00:55:58  
Elliott: And she'd have to be willing to break what she's doing and come up.

01-00:56:02  
Stein: Okay. So were all of the welders women?

01-00:56:07  
Elliott: A large majority of them were. Yes. Yes.

01-00:56:14  
Stein: Now, what was that like? I imagine that most people expected that people working in a shipyard were going to be men and you've got this huge operation going on with lots and lots of women.

01-00:56:28  
Elliott: This enormous change that we weren't used to or had seen before was upon us. These things have to be done. I can't express strongly enough how important it was. There is to be no questions asked. If you had a job, you did it because now we were in that position that it's life or death. Really. And I look back on those times, the few times that you came terribly, terribly close. These are a few incidents of fellows that had various jobs on the ship.

01-00:57:17  
Stein: [looking at a photograph] Where are these from? These photographs?

01-00:57:22  
Elliott: They all had a job to do.

01-00:57:25  
Stein: Do you know what this is?

01-00:57:30  
Elliott: This is a burner that is set to follow a track for cutting out a steel plate.

01-00:57:39  
Stein: Would you ever use a machine like this?

01-00:57:42  
Elliott: I didn't use it myself but yes, I know what it is. Yes. The plate shop was responsible for cutting plates that would fit the ship when it got there.

01-00:57:56  
Stein: [referencing a photograph] And is this inside a ship?

01-00:57:58  
Elliott: Yes, oh, yes.

01-00:57:59  
Stein: Can you hold that up?

01-00:58:03  
Elliott: Yes. Oh, yes. Sure.

01-00:58:04  
Stein: So this. Yes.

01-00:58:03  
Elliott: Each person had a very important function. For example, here's a whole plate.

01-00:58:15  
Stein: So this is part of—

01-00:58:18  
Elliott: That would be a plate right across the hull at the bottom of a hold.

01-00:58:25  
Stein: Okay. This was essentially the walls of the—

01-00:58:25  
Elliott: That would be lowered into place and then welded.

01-00:58:27  
Stein: And you can see a woman in the corner of the photograph. She's doing some welding there.

01-00:58:33  
Elliott: And then here is the way cable was. Cable had to go the length of the ship to supply power where needed.

01-00:58:41  
Stein: So this is exactly what you would do.

01-00:58:43  
Elliott: Yes. A lot of that stuff. And a driller. Here's another plate cutter. And here's the big troop ship. That was the—

01-00:59:05  
Stein: Okay. So what did you say this was called? That type of ship?

01-00:59:10  
Elliott: C4SA1.

01-00:59:13  
Stein: A C4SA1. And which yards were these being produced in?

01-00:59:13  
Elliott: Yard three.

01-00:59:16  
Stein: Okay. And so yard three, were they only C4SA1s?

01-00:59:22  
Elliott: I don't know if we were the only ones or not.

01-00:59:27  
Stein: But that was the main production when you were there?

01-00:59:28  
Elliott: But this was the main thing [looking at a photograph] and here the top of that pole.

01-00:59:34  
Stein: That's where you climbed. So you're saying that you got all the way up to there.

01-00:59:40  
Elliott: Well, Bruce, you lived through it so what more can you say.

01-00:59:45  
Stein: Wow.

01-00:59:50  
Elliott: Here's another ship being lovingly restored.

01-00:59:50  
Stein: Yes, restored.

01-00:59:51  
Elliott: Okay. Now, you needed a welder, you'd find the welding machine, then you would follow the cable and she would be in another hole or down three decks or whatever.

01-00:60:07  
Stein: So these are the welding machines?

01-00:60:08  
Elliott: Welding machines. They would be lining the outside and the cables would go to the work source.

01-00:60:13  
Stein: Okay. So they were attached by cables so you could always find the Rosie, the Wendy the Welder by following the cable, huh?

01-00:60:22  
Elliott: Yes.

01-00:60:23  
Stein: We're almost out of tape here. I'll switch up the tape.

01-00:60:27  
Elliott: And that's steam. Here they are when they first got talking about the Red Oak. They found this ship and they were going to restore it.

01-00:60:40  
Stein: I'm going to have to pause here to switch out the tape. Okay?

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 08-13-2010.mp3

02-00:00:00  
Stein: Okay. This is tape two with Bruce Elliott.

02-00:00:08  
Elliott: We're still here.

02-00:00:10  
Stein: We're still here. August 12, 2010. So you were just talking a little bit about the tractors and the trailers that you were driving. How did you transition from being an electrician's helper to being a driver?

02-00:00:26

Elliott:

That even amazes me, because, again, I was very familiar with horsepower and weight. Those are two factors that not every guy has. I spent sixteen years driving heavy equipment for the telephone company. Big tractors, three axel tractors pulling forty foot semis or pulling doubles. And I took to it like a duck to water. The big DW20 tractor. Awesome tractor. I don't know what that thing weighed. It was used to pull 19,000 tons around the side of the dock and pull it up against the dock.

02-00:01:16

Stein:

What would you carry that would weigh 19,000 tons?

02-00:01:19

Elliott:

The ship. And the ship would come out of the Bay and would have to come around to the outfitting docks where they'd finish off the ship.

02-00:01:28

Stein:

You would haul the entire ship?

02-00:01:30

Elliott:

You pull it in the water.

02-00:01:33

Stein:

So you were in a truck that was right on the side of the water?

02-00:01:36

Elliott:

As soon as everything was fastened and I got the signal. I had to follow the fellows that were on the deck because, after all, they were looking out at strategic points and they knew whether you had to go left, right, or whatever. As soon as I got the signal, I would engage this big tractor and it would jump up and down. The first big pull, it wouldn't pull it. It had to gain that first momentum of this 19,000 tons. All of a sudden, you'd look over and the ship was moving like a half an inch at a time. You had to have complete control of what you were doing, because if you didn't and that ship hit the dock, it would wipe the dock out.

02-00:02:26

Stein:

How were you attached to the ship?

02-00:02:28

Elliott:

Great big cables. Great big cables.

02-00:02:31

Stein:

That were attached to the back of your—

02-00:02:32

Elliott:

Tractor.

02-00:02:35

Stein:

Wow. Do you remember the first time you did that? You must have been terrified. I would have been terrified.

02-00:02:40

Elliott:

Not really. I'd realized that it was going to require all the power I had. I was fully aware of that. We went around the yard pulling various trailers full of material and that one tractor I had, it was all engine. It had this little cab and I crammed myself into that. And on the side were these enormous tires. They were about so big around, six feet high, four of them. And you would sit in this little tiny cabin. There's this awesome horsepower.

02-00:03:17

Stein:

There are four in the front and four in the back? Four tires?

02-00:03:20

Elliott:

Yes. Oh, yes.

02-00:03:21

Stein:

Or four on each side?

02-00:03:23

Elliott:

Well, four tires. Four tires. Two front, two back.

02-00:03:26

Stein:

Okay, okay.

02-00:03:28

Elliott:

But you had total control over them. You could steer them any direction you wanted depending on what you were doing.

02-00:03:35

Stein:

So you could drive sideways if you had to.

02-00:03:38

Elliott:

Another thing that gave me great interest were the cranes. The gantry cranes, of course, were these awesome cranes that teamed together and they could pick up the whole side of a ship. I was toying with the idea of doing that. I don't know why I didn't, because it was kind of fascinating. Much like the Port of Oakland now. They have similar cranes. It's a little different kind of a setup. I love that sort of thing.

02-00:04:10

Stein:

It sounds great. Was there a lot of training before you were allowed to drive that big tractor pulling the ships?

02-00:04:20

Elliott:

Not that much. You would have a helper and he would be somebody that was sharp. If you had the commonsense to do what you were told and you could respond effectively. I did. Like I say, for whatever reason, I took to that sort of thing very, very well. I drove a sixteen wheel heavy equipment for the film company and they had me training some guys. They would give me this new guy and he wants to drive a truck. Can you show him the ropes? Yes. So I'd take him out and I could tell within an hour, two hours at the most, whether he

was going to do it or not. If he was all thumbs and did some terrible mistakes and things I would simply tell him. I'd give him some more time.

02-00:05:20

Stein:

What other vehicles did you drive on the docks in the shipyard?

02-00:05:25

Elliott:

Oh, what didn't I drive? It all started out with simple pickups. I should say company cars, then pickups, then it became a flatbed, then a bigger flatbed, then a three axle, then a three axle with maybe a winch on the back and they had the great big steel cable like this. We hauled a lot of lumber, so what you had to do is pull this cable out, wrap it around the lumber that's on the ground, engage the winch and the winch would pull it up. There was a plate on the back of the truck like this and it would reach that and then it would follow around that plate, end right up on the bed of the truck. You would leave it hanging there until you got to your destination, then you would reverse the process and drop it off for work that had to be done that day.

02-00:06:24

Stein:

When you would show up to work in the morning, did you have any idea what you were going to be doing that day?

02-00:06:30

Elliott:

Not really. You had your choice of vehicles. I drove everything. "What are you driving today, Bruce?" "Oh, I'll take number four." "Okay. Here's an order."

02-00:06:44

Stein:

Okay, okay. So it would be attached to the vehicle.

02-00:06:48

Elliott:

So we had orders and we had a little cup by our left side here and we could let that cup down to the bottom. You'd put an order in that, then you'd pull it back up and read it and as soon as you got to your destination the guy would sign the thing so that office could see that you did the job.

02-00:07:10

Stein:

And so you would haul all kinds of things?

02-00:07:13

Elliott:

Everything.

02-00:07:15

Stein:

From?

02-00:07:17

Elliott:

I can't think of anything I didn't haul. I remember the phone company. I did as much work for the phone company as I did the shipyards. At one time the phone company did all of their own hauling. No outside help. We did everything.

02-00:07:49  
Stein: Were you part of a union when you were on the shipyards?

02-00:07:52  
Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes.

02-00:07:54  
Stein: Which union was it?

02-00:07:54  
Elliott: The Teamsters Union. Seventy was it? I forget offhand. Oh, yes.

02-00:08:02  
Stein: Was that an important part of the job or was that something that—

02-00:08:05  
Elliott: Oh, yes, it was required. Yes, it was required.

02-00:08:12  
Stein: A lot of people talk about the shipyards being this place where people came together who had never been in the same place before. There were—

02-00:08:23  
Elliott: Some wild stories went around. I don't know how true they were. People would come from Oklahoma and they didn't know a left from right. They'd get out there and they knew they were to show up to do something. They weren't sure what. At the end of the workweek, they got a piece of paper. "What's this for?" "Well, that's your pay." "Oh, okay. What am I supposed to do with it?" We heard crazy stories like that. We saw all kinds of people. We saw all kinds of conditions. We used to have an old bus that they had taken apart and it became a place that the fellows could go in and play cards, read, snooze, eat, whatever until they're called. They would get their paychecks and play poker. I saw a lot of guys go home without any money and I thought, "I won't be one of them. No way. Good grief." That's financial suicide. So yes. I think I saw just about everything there was to see.

02-00:09:48  
Stein: In this time there's a lot of migration, too, from the South. There were black farmers who used to be sharecroppers who came?

02-00:09:57  
Elliott: I never saw such a mixture.

02-00:09:58  
Stein: Really?

02-00:10:01  
Elliott: All walks of life. Astounding. I was as overwhelmed the day as I was the first day really.

02-00:10:18

Stein: Did black and white workers ever work together or were they doing separate tasks?

02-00:10:23

Elliott: Oh, yes. I guess the best way to describe it is you worked to tolerate the conditions. You knew that if you fought or did anything off the cuff you could be dismissed right now. You will do these things and do what's expected.

02-00:10:56

Stein: Were there ever fights that you knew of or disagreements?

02-00:10:59

Elliott: If there was, I didn't see them. I'm sure there was. There had to be, because I know I did see, at a distance, some very explosive moments.

02-00:11:15

Stein: Do you know if it was because of people from different backgrounds?

02-00:11:20

Elliott: That I don't know. I don't know. I remember one time being on the dock and there was a shutoff moment. There wasn't much going on but they were getting ready to test the fifty ton boom. And that was accomplished by bringing fifty tons (block). A big crane would bring it over and put it right alongside the dock. The crane was supposed to drop its boom, tie on to this and the test was to pull it up to the height of the first deck, swing it over the hold and then reverse the procedure.

02-00:12:07

Stein: What is the hold?

02-00:12:08

Elliott: The hold of the ship where all the material would be stored and shipped.

02-00:12:14

Stein: And this was a crane that was on the ship that was being tested?

02-00:12:18

Elliott: Yes, right. Testing its cables, its pulleys, its motor and all that sort of thing. It grabbed a hold of this fifty tons and as it took a strain on it, the ship that was level would tilt way over. It finally was leaning like this and as they were bringing it back and started to lower the block, one of the U-bolts, one of the main supports, it was that big around, about so high, and just that one bolt itself weighed something like twenty-five pounds. It was embedded in the railing of the ship and had been welded. Well, at this particular moment it tore loose. When that came loose, it allowed the boom to swing and it swung around and all the tensions built up and finally the boom was off-kilter and it dropped that fifty tons. It came down, hit the dock and went partially through it. Of course, when the weight was released from the ship, then the ship rolled back and forth there for like ten minutes. Nobody was hurt or anything. But it

was scary. There was a lot of people around. So that's just one of many, many things I saw. It was so very, very interesting.

02-00:14:02

Stein: Were there other accidents where people got hurt?

02-00:14:07

Elliott: Yes. Yes. I remember the guy that grabbed an electric line. How he was up where he was, he had no business being up there. And at the last minute, apparently he reached out to grab something and he grabbed this line. It killed him instantly. He became a straight ground, right straight to ground. Yes, there were accidents. That's for sure.

02-00:14:39

Stein: The health care system that was meant to be the safety net for that, as we know, became the beginnings of Kaiser Permanente. Were you a part of the health plan when you were working there?

02-00:14:55

Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes.

02-00:14:56

Stein: Did everybody join it?

02-00:14:58

Elliott: I joined the Kaiser first aid station there at yard three. I've been a member ever since. I wound up with a sore on my foot. It looked like a little growth or tumor, I don't know what you would call it, but they looked at it and the doctor said, "We'll use radiation," which they did. They take the X-ray machine and apply a certain power. You have to know what the heck you're doing to calculate the proper amount of power that's going to be concentrated on this one area. It simply penetrates and kills the root. It did. I was thankful for that because it had been giving me a lot of trouble to walk on. As soon as it killed that root, that was the end of that.

02-00:16:02

Stein: So what year did you get married? Were you married while you were working in the shipyards?

02-00:16:10

Elliott: Like '42. Yes.

02-00:16:13

Stein: Okay. So you were a young groom.

02-00:16:14

Elliott: Young whippersnapper. Yes.

02-00:16:22

Stein: And then did you have children soon after?

- 02-00:16:26  
Elliott: They were roughly a year, year and a half apart. Three. And then that was enough. Wonderful kids. I've been very grateful. No smoke, no drink, no drugs.
- 02-00:16:43  
Stein: Great. That's lucky.
- 02-00:16:45  
Elliott: It's a scary time these days with everything that's going on.
- 02-00:16:51  
Stein: Yes. So you were living with your young family in Richmond during the war years and this was a time of huge change in Richmond.
- 02-00:17:00  
Elliott: So fast, so hard, so terribly important. It was survival. That's what it meant.
- 02-00:17:11  
Stein: What were the people like? Your neighbors. The people you were living with who were also in the shipbuilders housing.
- 02-00:17:20  
Elliott: Everybody did their job and then came home. Movies, the corner ice cream, social life, dancing. Nothing unusual. It was, I daresay, pretty normal. But you had to make sure you got your sleep so you could tolerate the next day.
- 02-00:17:51  
Stein: I'm sure. Did you notice all of the people pouring into Richmond? Was it noticeable that there was a housing shortage, that people were sleeping here, there and everywhere?
- 02-00:18:05  
Elliott: It was so mass and overrun you couldn't make out hardly what was going on.
- 02-00:18:10  
Stein: In the town even?
- 02-00:18:12  
Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes. It was crowded downtown. They were buying everything. I've never seen that many people in my life at one time.
- 02-00:18:24  
Stein: Wow. And this wasn't just in the shipyards. It was also downtown.
- 02-00:18:28  
Elliott: Yes. Between the three yards, it was just a mass of activity.
- 02-00:18:35  
Stein: Did your children go to school in Richmond, too, or were they too young?

02-00:18:43

Elliott:

They started out but it was short-lived. It was interesting. Towards the end of 1945, when things started to slow down and get ready to hang it up, we would get a notice in the mail that said—the apartments were upstairs and downstairs. At the end were little studios for the single guy. We had apartment 1F, which was the lower, one corner downstairs. They sent me a letter stating that the studio next door was available and I wanted it, what they would do is cut a door in our living room and that could become ours. So we did that and added an extra dollar or two to the rent. Big deal. All of a sudden we had three full bedrooms.

02-00:19:50

Stein:

Wow. That must have been a nice change.

02-00:19:51

Elliott:

And all that extra stuff and bathroom and everything. It worked out fine for the last few months we were there.

02-00:20:05

Stein:

Did you have to leave the apartment when the shipyards slowed down?

02-00:20:09

Elliott:

Oh, yes. We were told that they would be closing. I don't remember if it was a special date or what. My dad, being a real estate agent, worked with several other people in Berkeley that knew of a little two bedroom cottage for rent. Dad suggested that we take it to get out of that area now that I was going to be a bus driver. So we took it. It wound up being two little cottages, the one on the corner, Derby and Telegraph. That was the owner and then the house next to it was ours. We paid thirty-two dollars a month rent.

02-00:20:58

Stein:

That's amazing.

02-00:20:59

Elliott:

And even at that time we thought thirty-two dollars was a lot of money. Which it was at that time. Of course, that same thing today would probably rent for who knows.

02-00:21:12

Stein:

Who knows.

02-00:21:13

Elliott:

Eight, nine hundred dollars, whatever.

02-00:21:17

Stein:

So I imagine that you were probably spending most of your time at work. But did you notice sort of cultural differences when you moved from Berkeley to Richmond and then back from Richmond to Berkeley? Did you notice how those communities were different?

02-00:21:36  
Elliott: If it was, we didn't notice it. Again, mass movement. They were there one minute and gone the next. It's hard to say. I guess wherever they went. Did they go home? Did they find a place to live? I don't know.

02-00:21:58  
Stein: These are mostly the newcomers?

02-00:22:00  
Elliott: Pardon?

02-00:22:02  
Stein: These are all the newcomers, you mean?

02-00:22:03  
Elliott: Yes.

02-00:22:04  
Stein: Do you know what happened to the housing that you had been living in? Did that continue to be apartment housing?

02-00:22:14  
Elliott: Richmond housing? No, little by little, they tore them down. You go out there now and there's nothing there to remind where we once lived. That was all leveled and now there's new housing out there.

02-00:22:31  
Stein: Was that housing especially built for the workers? Was it put up right before you came?

02-00:22:37  
Elliott: Oh, yes. The housing for the workers was very special indeed. Yes. Get these people housed. Get a roof over their heads.

02-00:22:48  
Stein: So they just built them.

02-00:22:49  
Elliott: They got to work in the morning.

02-00:22:50  
Stein: Okay. So they built them, I imagine, really quickly.

02-00:22:53  
Elliott: Yes, yes.

02-00:22:54  
Stein: Were they okay? They weren't falling apart?

02-00:22:56  
Elliott: They were okay. They were thrown together and it was a long ways from the Waldorf. They were kind of thrown together. We had an ice box and stuff like that. Wow. I look back on those days. Good grief.

02-00:23:16  
Stein: It sounds like a huge adventure, huh.

02-00:23:18  
Elliott: How did I ever survive all that?

02-00:23:24  
Stein: Yes. Were you aware of some of the racial shifting that was going on in Richmond?

02-00:23:34  
Elliott: We saw so much good and bad. It was hard to pinpoint anything. But the masses were testing each other, for sure.

02-00:23:50  
Stein: In what ways?

02-00:23:52  
Elliott: Feeling each other out. Knowing what to do and what not to do and what can I get away with and that sort of thing.

02-00:24:00  
Stein: I guess people talk about there being a lot more arrests or the police going a little crazy. Did it seem like a crazy time or an unstable time?

02-00:24:18  
Elliott: I don't know. When you're growing up with it, going right along with everything, you kind of just take it for granted. Going along like the leaf in the river.

02-00:26:09  
Stein: When the war was winding down, do you remember VE Day, VJ Day? Any of the big celebrations at the end of the war?

02-00:26:31  
Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes. Everything was chaos then.

02-00:26:37  
Stein: Really?

02-00:26:38  
Elliott: Absolute chaos. The pressure's off. Now we can do this. That appears to be the beginning of the beginning.

02-00:26:53  
Stein: The end of the war.

02-00:26:54

Elliott:

Yes. All of a sudden, all of these new ideas. People getting houses, getting married. We're free now. A lot of fireside chats and all the rest of it.

02-00:27:12

Stein:

Yes. That must have been a really exciting time.

02-00:27:15

Elliott:

Yes, it was. Yes. In fact, my first days with Key System, I hauled a lot of the end workers. The cab around me would be so crowded with standees. Forty-two people seated and another forty people in the aisles. I'd try to get them to move to the rear of the bus. It'd go in one ear and out the other. I could hardly turn the wheel. At that time I had ten cent fares. Seven tokens for a dollar.

02-00:27:53

Stein:

Where was everyone going? Where were you taking them?

02-00:27:57

Elliott:

I was taking them home from the shipyards. The little old lady that would get on, she could hardly stand. She'd give me a twenty dollar bill for a ten cent fare. "Lady, go sit down. Go sit down, lady. I'm running fifteen minutes late now."

02-00:28:18

Stein:

So there were still people going to the shipyards even after?

02-00:28:20

Elliott:

Oh, yes.

02-00:28:22

Stein:

What were they doing? They were taking it down or what?

02-00:28:24

Elliott:

Oh, shut down, the take down. It probably took us as long to tear it down as it did to build it up. Oh, yes, yes. I can go out there now and I can hardly relate to anything. The only thing that's standing as a monument is the big—what is that, four story, five story—Yard #3 warehouse. And for a while they had the Red Oak Victory down there parked out in front in the water and now it's moved over to yard three in the new spot.

02-00:29:06

Stein:

Yes. Well, are you getting tired?

02-00:29:11

Elliott:

No, no, no.

02-00:29:15

Stein:

Okay. Because we've been going for an hour and a half. I don't know if you want to take a break or something.

02-00:29:17

Elliott:

Julie, my head is so full of this thing here. So many things that went on unnoticed, unmarked, not written down. But behind all of these things that did go on were thousands of other little moments.

02-00:29:37

Stein:

Are there any stories in particular that you want to make sure get captured?

02-00:29:47

Elliott:

Well, I was so terribly impressed with that one thought about this thing and it scared everybody really. The Japanese have come over and have violated our ground and have destroyed. Indeed, is this the end? We talk about Christ was coming and is he ticked. It proved to be a joke but it's not so funny when you stop and think about it. Now that I'm up to date, I've been updated from that terrible, terrible time starting in 1939 and 1940 up to seeing this thing on TV. I've got this in for that film. That's all there is to it. On those submarines. Those submarines scare the bejesus out of you. Because that's what we have now and all of these guys, they're carrying up to 200 men in these great big submarines and they are programmed within an inch of their life to do this. So one job relates to another, depends on another. And we are facing some terrible things between Israel—we don't know what they're up to—Iraq, Vietnam, North Korea, South Korea. These places that are powder kegs and they're giving their right arm to get a hold of nuclear bomb so that they can destroy United States. Aren't they aware of our submarines? They've got to know something. But the general public doesn't realize, even right now, they're out there. God knows, maybe they're a thousand feet underwater and patrolling with the total intent. Anything out of line and if that phone rings from the White House.

02-00:32:15

Stein:

Do you remember your reaction to hearing about the atomic bombs in Japan?

02-00:32:22

Elliott:

Well, first of all, I had a lot of Japanese friends that I went to school with. Beautiful people. My brother came back from the war and he was stationed in Japan. He says, "I don't know what you think but as far as I'm concerned the Japanese women put ours to shame." He was taken in by their politeness. The Japanese people themselves are beautiful people. In fact, there's a little Japanese young lady I know right now, her name is Carol. She's fifty-two. She worked for Cavanaugh Liquor Store and she tells me stories about what she felt. She grew up after the war but hearing stories from her folks, who now live in Hawaii. She left Hawaii. She said, "There's nothing in Hawaii to do. No, I don't want to go back there, I want to stay here." But she told some pretty wild stories about things that they had to tolerate.

02-00:33:48

Stein:

Right. Did you know anyone who was sent to an internment camp?

02-00:33:53

Elliott:

Not really. Not really. Through my music I heard stories about, “Oh, did you hear about Joe Blow passed away,” kind of thing. Every now and then I get that. I knew so many people. There was a time when we were real active members out at First Christian Church. Come Christmas time, I would send out 200 cards. Charlotte says, “No, no, you write the best hand.” “No, you take care of that.” So I did. And now there’s nobody. I send my three kids a card. The grandkids know about grandpa. That’s history.

02-00:34:51

Stein:

Yes. Times change quickly.

02-00:34:53

Elliott:

Times have changed for ever!

02-00:34:55

Stein:

I imagine. When you look back on the Bay Area over the past sixty years, are there things that stick out? You’ve seen the transportation change? You were driving up and down this area. Are there things that stick out to you in terms of the geography or the transportation that have really changed?

02-00:35:19

Elliott:

I think what worries me now, Julie, I’ve seen so much. After seeing this submarine that is posed to destroy the world, really. If it erupts over there what’s our tomorrow going to be, then, because each year we have new technologies, new purposes, new political figures. The power struggle continues on and off. I wouldn’t bet my lotto dollar on tomorrow with the things I see today. It’s that serious.

02-00:36:04

Stein:

Yes. For so many years, obviously, we had FDR as our President and people talk about him as one of the most popular figures and the most trusted figures in American history.

02-00:36:17

Elliott:

But now he’s being hit hard.

02-00:36:20

Stein:

What were your thoughts on him?

02-00:36:25

Elliott:

I think he’s doing his best but he is so surrounded, first by his own color. That’s a big thing to conquer right there.

02-00:36:37

Stein:

Oh, Obama.

02-00:36:38

Elliott:

But now with everything thrown at him, everybody’s looking at an excuse to blame and he’s up in front there. He should know better. And yet I think he’s

trying his best. But, indeed, are we being pushed into socialism? That's a big issue now today.

02-00:37:04

Stein: What were your thoughts during the war on Franklin Roosevelt?

02-00:37:08

Elliott: I was very impressed by the very fact that he was crippled. He had been through so much. His personal life was fireworks all the time. And to be thrown into all of these terrible decisions that had to be dealt with. I admired him greatly for standing up as he did and, of course, you look back at Truman. We never thought we would see nuclear in our time but he simply said if he don't do this thing against Japan, they're going to fight to the end and that means that they're going to kill most of our men. I don't have a choice.

02-00:38:08

Stein: And I guess with your brother over there you must have been—

02-00:38:10

Elliott: And my brother. I miss my brother like crazy. He and I used to talk all the time. When he was flying the big L1011s, he'd bring the phone. "I'm on my way. I'll land in 'Frisco at 11:30. See you for lunch."

02-00:38:26

Stein: That's great.

02-00:38:28

Elliott: I would ride over there in the car and I'd come up to the window. At that time we could go upstairs. You know what the L1011 is?

02-00:38:38

Stein: No.

02-00:38:40

Elliott: That's our biggest passenger plane. Has the two big engines on the side, plus the one on the tail. I remember sitting in the seat when he took me on a tour of Miami where they had the plane based. They were changing an engine one time. He said, "Come on, I'll take you. The plane's yours for an hour." I had a chance to sit in his seat, the number one seat, and you looked out the window at the tip of the wing. It's a half a block away. It is just so awesome. He was in seventh heaven. He didn't deserve to go when he did. He had a beautiful home in Miami. Not Miami, Melbourne Beach, which is in the middle of Florida. We made several trips down there to see them. We were all extremely close for such a long time and then he went for his physical one year. Doctor says, "Phil, you're through flying." He was in a rest home for nine years and he too passed on, the same year as my wife. He at the beginning, the wife at the end. So that was a big chunk out of my life. I guess I kind of threw in the towel after that. I shouldn't have this attitude but I do. I just don't have much faith in the future. What's left?

02-00:40:37

Stein: Well, I think there—

02-00:40:37

Elliott: What's left I don't like. It's too dangerous.

02-00:40:40

Stein: If anything, though, your generation proves that we can make it through crises and shows the way that people came together who didn't know each other, who came from really different backgrounds, that to me seems like one of the real amazing lessons of the shipyards and of the Rosie the Riveter time and of World War II. It certainly gives faith to our generation, I would say.

02-00:41:09

Elliott: I've lived through so many things knowing that I had to tolerate.

02-00:41:17

Stein: Yes. Are there any other times in the shipyards or in the war years, things that you would like to get on record?

02-00:41:30

Elliott: Julie, I never wrote anything down. Had I, I'd probably talk three times as much. Like I say, so much has happened on scene that relates to things that did happen. And I just absolutely will never forget the shipyards and the mass of people. To think I drove through that and did all the things I did. I shouldn't be here.

02-00:42:09

Stein: It sounds like you've got someone looking over you, looking after you.

02-00:42:15

Elliott: I've had more people say that to me.

02-00:42:17

Stein: Really?

02-00:42:18

Elliott: God's not through with you yet so go play the organ some more. Because the churches have become so bad. Like the First Pres Church said, "Bruce, you can use the organ anytime you want. Why don't you become a member?" I don't want to become a member unless I can be involved and I can't be. It's too far. My eyes, my hands. I can't be involved. Therefore I have no right using the organ. That organ is massive. I know their budget just for the organ alone is probably in the neighborhood of five or ten thousand a year. So I bought a keyboard.

02-00:43:04

Stein: That's great.

02-00:43:06

Elliott: I can tinker with that.

02-00:43:09  
Stein: Yes.

02-00:43:11  
Elliott: I don't know what else.

02-00:43:12  
Stein: I think we've covered a ton. May God bless us all.

02-00:43:13  
Elliott: I don't know what else to tell you.

02-00:43:17  
Stein: I can't say thank you enough. You've got such remarkable memories and were part of something so fascinating and exciting.

02-00:43:28  
Elliott: I'm much encouraged with the fact that the kids, at least, they're holding their own. I can only hope that it gets better. But on the news I understand Medicare and Social Security is under attack again and if those things collapse it's going to just set off a deck of cards. If we think what's collapsed now is bad, wait until that happens. I just don't know. I just don't know.

02-00:44:07  
Stein: Well, all we can do is cross our fingers. Hope for the best.

02-00:44:10  
Elliott: Yes.

02-00:44:10  
Stein: Yes. Well, I think you really covered a ton. Certainly everything that I have notes on. So—

02-00:44:23  
Elliott: I don't know what else to tell you, hon. I really don't. Being a person that, shall I say, did go to church, my hope is that things will turn out a lot better than they have. It's funny. As we look back on all our wars, as terrible as they've been, we know better. It's not the answer. That will never solve these problems. And here we are faced with god knows what.

02-00:45:08  
Stein: Well, I just want to say thank you.

02-00:45:21  
Elliott: I sit here, Julie, and I wish to hell I could do more for somebody, anybody, anything. I've done a lot of volunteer work. I've done so much of it over the years down at the church and hauling people. So many things and it's all gone now. It's all gone.

02-00:45:46  
Stein: Well, your work lives on and the good that you do lives on.

02-00:45:51

Elliott:

Now I take rides. Once in a while I go around the estuary and I watch them load and unload cargo ships and that sort of thing. Just things to kill time. I am trying to stay away from the church because I know only too well the First Pres Church has a budget of something like \$253 thousand a year after they've cut off salaries and things. They desperately need funds to carry on or they'll be closing their doors. I should help but I can't. I'm not a millionaire. All I have is a small pension and Social Security. I wish you luck.

02-00:46:56

Stein:

Thank you.

02-00:46:56

Elliott:

You, it occurred to me, are just starting out and getting your feet wet and learning and absorbing and so on. Good luck to you.

02-00:47:08

Stein:

Well, thank you and thanks to you, too.

[End of Interview]