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William F. Kirschbaum

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

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Interviews conducted by
Sam Redman
in 2012

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Table of Contents—William Kirschbaum

Interview 1: February 10, 2012

Audiofile 1

Growing up in San Francisco during the Depression—Opinion of FDR—Recalling construction of the Golden Gate Bridge—Escalation of home prices since before World War II—Fishing and eating seafood before the war—recalling the 1939 World’s Fair and Sally Rand’s fan dancing—Reaction to the start of World War II—Rationing—Joining the State Guard—Opinion of the Japanese internment—The housing boom in San Francisco during the war—Joining the Merchant Marine and shipping out—Logistical errors in the military during the war—Opinion about the bombing of Japan at the end of the war—Red Oak Victory Ship—Experience on a Victory Ship—Influential advice from a radioman—Army enlistment and candidate officer’s training—Racial integration of the military after World War II

Audiofile 2

Relaxing on a Victory Ship—Staying in the military—How public views of the military have changed—View of World War II and of war generally

Interview 1: February 10, 2012
Begin Audiofile 1 02-10-2012.mp3

Redman: My name is Sam Redman and today is February 10, 2012. I'm in Novato, California today. I left Berkeley and it was misty and raining, and now I'm in Novato, where the sun is shining and it's quite gorgeous. I'm here with Bill Kirschbaum, and we're going to talk mainly today about his life during World War II. But we'll talk a little bit about what life was like before the war, during the war, and then after, at the end of the war, his life at the end of the war. First I'd like to begin, though, Bill, if you could just state your name out loud for me and then spell it.

01-00:00:47

Kirschbaum: Bill Kirschbaum, K-I-R-S-C-H-B-A-U-M.

Redman: Great. And how long have you lived in Novato?

01-00:00:58

Kirschbaum: Since 1962.

Redman: Since 1962. Now, I understand you went to high school in San Francisco. But where were you born?

01-00:01:06

Kirschbaum: I was born in San Francisco.

Redman: Whereabouts? What neighborhood was your family living in when you were born?

01-00:01:15

Kirschbaum: I was living just above the Haight-Ashbury district at the top of 17th Street, just below the mountain there.

Redman: Okay. Can you tell me what year you were born?

01-00:01:35

Kirschbaum: 1926.

Redman: 1926. Did you have any siblings?

01-00:01:40

Kirschbaum: I had two sisters. One of them is deceased now.

Redman: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents, who they were? Where did they come from?

01-00:01:48

Kirschbaum: My father was born in San Francisco. My mother was born in Eureka, California. She was of Swedish parents. She was sold when she was a young girl. The father brought the mother over from Sweden, had seven children,

and then promptly deserted them. My grandmother couldn't take care of all of them, so she sold my mother off as a bond servant. My father was born in San Francisco; he was a San Francisco police officer. He met my mother in Hopland, California, picking hops.

Redman: Do you know what his background was, his family background, where his family had come from?

01-00:02:42

Kirschbaum: His father was a Canadian. He was actually Prussian, but he emigrated to Canada. His mother was born in Italy. We were very close when I was a child, to the grandparents. I never knew my grandmother, grandfather on my mother's side. But my father, during the Depression, lost everything. He was a plumber, and he lost everything, and we had a pretty rough time during the Depression. He worked odd jobs, until finally he became a San Francisco police officer.

Redman: Tell me what it would be like for someone like your dad to try to find work in the Great Depression. I understand that a lot of people who had been a craftsman like your father, or skilled laborers, would go around from place to place, to try to find any odd work that they could cobble together.

01-00:03:43

Kirschbaum: My father died at an early age because of this problem. He worked night and day. He was a police officer during the graveyard shift, eight p.m. to two in the morning. Then he went to work as a security guard at a local beer company. And he did work also on cars, and he did work as a watchman at the San Francisco Italian American Club in the Mission District.

Redman: Sounds like he's an extremely busy guy.

01-00:04:22

Kirschbaum: He slept very little.

Redman: So you think that stressed him out quite a bit.

01-00:04:26

Kirschbaum: Oh, yes. Yes.

Redman: Did you get to spend much time with him when you were young, or was he away a lot?

01-00:04:32

Kirschbaum: Whenever he was working on cars, I was with him. He did take us camping every summer. We went to Memorial Park, down in San Mateo County. He'd set up in a campsite for the summer, and we stayed down there, the family stayed down there, while he went back to work.

Redman: So those campsites, tell me a little bit about what that might've been like, as a kid in the summer. You would've been there with your sisters and your mother?

01-00:05:03

Kirschbaum: My sisters and my mother. My father came down sometimes on weekends. Memorial Park. It still exists, by the way. Of course, you have to pay admission now, to get in there, I understand. But we stayed there all summer. We had campfires at night. We had probably a quarter of a mile to go to the bathroom and the showers. I remember distinctly the Boy Scout camp down there, and my sisters were kind of enamored with the Boy Scout leaders, one of which was named Divine, Clyde Divine. He was six-foot-seven, which was a giant at that time, and he was a relative of Andy Divine, who in those days, was a very good actor, number-one actor. So it was quite lovely, spending the summers down there.

Redman: Did your father ever tell you any interesting stories about what it was like to be a police officer?

01-00:06:11

Kirschbaum: There were times when I walked the beat with him, as a kid. And I will tell you, in those days, police officers were respected, and you respected people. He walked a beat; he didn't ride in a car.

Redman: Situate me in time. Would this have been in about the 1930s, then?

01-00:06:30

Kirschbaum: This was in the thirties, yeah. The mid-thirties.

Redman: And you would do this maybe as a junior-high-aged kid, or younger or older?

01-00:06:41

Kirschbaum: Ten, eleven years old, yeah.

Redman: Okay. Go on, I'm sorry.

01-00:06:45

Kirschbaum: And he used to keep candy, and the kids would follow and tug his coattails for the candy. Shootings were unheard of at that time. I remember distinctly, one time he caught a robber in a candy store. He was walking by the candy store and couldn't see the owner, so he figured something was amiss. It's kind of a funny story, really. He looked in the window, and he saw the owner laying on the floor behind the counter. So he figured something bad was going on, so he reached for his thirty-eight, and he had left it home. But he carried a twenty-five automatic as a second weapon. He pulled that out and went in, and sure enough, there was a robber in there. The robber had a forty-five, which is about six feet long, I think, as my father saw it. But they faced each other with these weapons, and the robber apparently told my father to get out of his way or he'd kill him. My father said, "You SOB," he said, "I can put six of these in

you before you can pull the trigger once.” I narrate this because there was a big item in the paper at the time.

Redman: Okay.

01-00:08:08

Kirschbaum: And that was a big crime in San Francisco at that time. How it’s changed.

Redman: Robbing a store—

01-00:08:14

Kirschbaum: Robbing a store.

Redman: —with a weapon was a big thing.

01-00:08:16

Kirschbaum: Yeah.

Redman: Yeah, yeah. So you’d mentioned your dad’s side arms there. Did he have to purchase his own—

01-00:08:23

Kirschbaum: Yes.

Redman: —thirty-eight revolver?

01-00:08:24

Kirschbaum: He had his own thirty-eight. Well, I’ll eventually tell you, I guess, about my tour with the California National Guard because the thirty-eight is part of that.

Redman: Okay. So that held a place there.

01-00:08:43

Kirschbaum: Mm-hm.

Redman: So tell me a little bit more about everyday life in San Francisco before World War II.

01-00:08:49

Kirschbaum: Very friendly. Very formal. The women would never go downtown without a hat and gloves. Everybody dressed very, very well. Even if they couldn’t afford it, they were always clean, always properly dressed. I can’t remember too much about those days, until I got into high school. I do remember I had a girlfriend when I was in grammar school, a little black gal named Alice Newman, and I used to walk home with her every day from school. We were kind of sweet on each other when I was probably nine or ten years old.

Redman: The next question I wanted to ask was about the other students in school and, in particular, their backgrounds.

01-00:09:52

Kirschbaum: We were what would be considered middle class, I would think. And middle class certainly suffered during the Depression, no question about—. Well, my father, for example, all the working he did. So one of the things I'd like to say is, in those days, we were just like anybody else nowadays. We got angry at each other and kids fought. The next day, we were friends again. Nobody went home to get a gun and come out and start shooting. We depended on each other, I guess. We all suffered the same problem, food hard to get, what have you.

Redman: So do you think there was some sense of strengthening of community because of the Depression, the real strife that was going on?

01-00:10:54

Kirschbaum: I think so. One of the positive things we had, we had to find things to do. We didn't have electronics and games and so forth. We played football, we played baseball, we played marbles, we shot marbles, we raced each other, we built our own little rollercoasters. And I lived on quite a long hill and we used to race downhill with our little homemade rollercoasters. It was great fun, really.

Redman: You might be a little young to recall Herbert Hoover as a political figure, but did people ever talk about President Hoover? I ask because FDR was such a big—

01-00:11:48

Kirschbaum: Oh, yeah.

Redman: —I assume, such a big political figure over the course of your life.

01-00:11:50

Kirschbaum: Sure. Yeah.

Redman: Hoover maybe less so?

01-00:11:54

Kirschbaum: Less so. You're right, I was too young to really—

Redman: But then FDR, when he becomes a big political figure, what did your parents think about FDR?

01-00:12:03

Kirschbaum: Loved him.

Redman: Loved him. Okay.

01-00:12:05

Kirschbaum: Loved him to pieces, yeah. Well, we thought he was the strength of the country. God bless him. I still feel that way.

Redman: Can you tell me about fireside chats? What were fireside chats, if someone had never heard of those before?

01-00:12:22

Kirschbaum: Well, it was his idea, fireside chats. I guess maybe you'd kind of compare it with the State of the Union nowadays. And people would sit around the radio and listen to him and really—he helped morale quite a bit with his—I can't remember any of them, but I remember being with family when they were listening to them.

Redman: So there were New Deal programs in those days. Like there would be stickers, like a blue eagle with the NRA, "Doing your part"; or the CCC was a big government work program.

01-00:12:58

Kirschbaum: CCC was, and WPA.

Redman: Can you tell me about those? Did you know anyone who was involved with those?

01-00:13:06

Kirschbaum: No.

Redman: Now, growing up in San Francisco in those days, there would've been a couple of big construction projects going on, on either side of San Francisco, one being the Bay Bridge and one being the Golden Gate Bridge. What was it like for a young kid growing up in San Francisco, to have those two structures being built?

01-00:13:28

Kirschbaum: Magic, unbelievable. We walked the Golden Gate Bridge, my daddy and I, the first day. And it was just unbelievable. Of course, we were assured that after the bridge was paid for, the tolls would no longer exist. Yeah, right.

Redman: Right, yeah. [chuckles]

01-00:13:51

Kirschbaum: But one interesting thing I think is, I recently visited my home where I lived as an infant, on Belvedere Street. Well, I lived there all through grammar school. Five thirty-seven Belvedere Street, which I said was just at the top of 17th Street. My grandfather built that home; he was a carpenter. He built that home in 1898, and it was my understanding it cost him a total of \$1800 to build. Full basement, two stories, and a full attic. I recently took the kids, my grandkids, to see where I lived when I was a baby, and there was a black man across the street in a pickup truck. He was loading something. And we were taking pictures of the house, and he come over; he said, "Can I help you?" And I told him that I had lived there as a baby. He says, "Well, I just sold it." He says, "I've lived there for the past twenty-five years." He said, "Would you like to go in?" And God bless him, he took us in, and we looked all

through the house. What's my point? The point is my grandfather, it cost \$1800 in 1898 to build; this black gentleman got \$1.3 million for it.

Redman: Wow!

01-00:15:15

Kirschbaum: I passed it not long ago again, and I don't even know why I went by, but I see that they're completely remodeling it. So it probably cost over \$2 million for the current people to move in.

Redman: What people talk about often, with the completion of the Golden Gate Bridge, is what that did for property values in Marin. And all of the counties going up the West Coast, it increased property values. But I assume in San Francisco, it must've had some sort of an impact, in terms of connecting it to—

01-00:15:50

Kirschbaum: Yeah, I really can't address that. I do know that we moved to the Sunset district, 27th Avenue, and my folks paid \$14,000 for that home, so I'm sure that's in the millions now, too.

Redman: Yeah. What about the Bay Bridge? Can you speak about that at all?

01-00:16:09

Kirschbaum: I can't really speak to that, no. I do recall they had a train up on the second deck, but—

Redman: So the Key System, right? The train? So that's something that's changed quite a bit, obviously.

01-00:16:22

Kirschbaum: Yeah.

Redman: How about for a young kid growing up in San Francisco, would there be times where you'd go over to Oakland or Berkeley or the East Bay at all, or were things mainly—so you mainly stayed in the city.

01-00:16:34

Kirschbaum: Mainly the city. Every once in a while, we would go up to Tomales Bay, take the ferry over and drive up to Tomales Bay on a Sunday to pick up oysters. We got a sack of oysters for a dollar.

Redman: I see.

01-00:16:51

Kirschbaum: And it's funny because I was intrigued by an old man—to me, and old man—who stood there shucking the oysters. All he did all day long was shuck oysters. In 1952, I married my wife in France, brought her over to this country. One of the places I took her was up to Tomales Bay, to get some

oysters. I swear to God, that same old man was standing there shucking oysters. True story.

Redman: [laughs] Still. Still there.

01-00:17:17

Kirschbaum: Still there.

Redman: You brought up oysters, and that reminded me of food. I want to ask about what people might've eaten in the days before the war, and if it was any different from the food we see nowadays.

01-00:17:34

Kirschbaum: We ate a lot of abalone. My daddy would go out after he finished work, at two—no, four o'clock in the morning; I said two; it was four o'clock in the morning—he'd pick me up and we'd go down to—oh, down south. Not very far; I can't remember the name of the town. And he'd go out for abalone, and within thirty minutes, probably, he'd have his quota of abalone. And we ate a lot of abalone. I can't afford a piece of abalone now, of course. We ate a lot of fish, what Daddy caught. He used to take me fishing off the pier in San Francisco. I caught a body once.

Redman: [laughs] What is that?

01-00:18:27

Kirschbaum: Yeah, I hooked something, and I yanked it up, and it was a great big piece of flesh. That was quite a story, too.

Redman: Oh, wow.

01-00:18:35

Kirschbaum: I never knew what it was; he wouldn't tell me what it was, just that it was a body.

Redman: Wow.

01-00:18:40

Kirschbaum: Never knew how it got there or what sex it was.

Redman: Wow. Wow, that's amazing.

01-00:18:45

Kirschbaum: Yeah.

Redman: Yeah, so interesting memories of fishing.

01-00:18:48

Kirschbaum: Used to fish off Aquatic Park all the time.

Redman: I see. Do you have any sort of recollection of seeing the Golden Gate as a space before the bridge was there and then—

01-00:19:02

Kirschbaum: Oh, yes.

Redman: I imagine it must've been an amazing sight to see, when it was going up.

01-00:19:05

Kirschbaum: The bridge, after nothing, yeah.

Redman: Right, right.

01-00:19:09

Kirschbaum: I'll tell you—yeah, I'll say it. One of the most horrible sights in the world is going out under that bridge, on a troop ship. One of the most beautiful sights in the world is coming back from overseas, on a ship.

Redman: Underneath it.

01-00:19:29

Kirschbaum: Going underneath.

Redman: That's a terrific point, and I want to get back to that and ask you about that again. Before that, I want to talk about the '39 fair, the World's Fair in 1939.

01-00:19:38

Kirschbaum: Loved it.

Redman: What can you tell me about that?

01-00:19:32

Kirschbaum: [chuckles] I don't know if some of this could be printable.

Redman: [laughs] That's fine.

01-00:19:47

Kirschbaum: I was a traffic boy as a student. In those days, the students took care of the traffic, the way the adults do now. We wore uniforms. We were responsible for the safety of the kids going across the crosswalks. I and a dozen or so other kids were traffic boys, and they had a special day at the fair for traffic boys. Grammar school it was, not high school. And we went over there to the World's Fair. We spent several days at the World's Fair as a family. I remember the first time I drank a Coca-Cola. They had a Coca-Cola bottling plant. I remember the first time I saw a blip on a TV station, channel. All they had in those days was a blip, which became a line, and it was fascinating to see this line on the screen. And I remember the good snacks and food. I remember my sister was a rodeo queen in 1939, so I remember the rodeo. Most of all, I remember Sally Rand's Nude Ranch. Have you heard of Sally Rand?

Redman: No.

01-00:21:21

Kirschbaum: Sally Rand was a fan dancer in those days, and she had a show over there called Sally's Nude Ranch. My buddy and I climbed up the rear of this building and peeked into the window, which—well, Sally Rand used her fans so that nobody ever saw her nude body. She'd hold her big fan in front of her, and then she'd switch fans; she'd turn around and switch fans. Well, we were up looking through this window, where we were getting the sight when she was without a fan.

Redman: Exciting for young boys, yeah. [laughs]

01-00:22:03

Kirschbaum: *Oh, my God!* I almost fell off three times.

Redman: So those are some pretty vivid memories. It sounds like the '39 fair, the site, the fairgrounds, it was something that you could go to again and again, as a young person.

01-00:22:17

Kirschbaum: Oh, absolutely. And never get enough. Never get enough.

Redman: You'd mentioned that there was a special day for crossing guards, for young boys who were crossing guards. So were there those types of theme days, where certain people were invited and there would be special groups, but that it was maybe open, as well to the general public?

01-00:22:35

Kirschbaum: The only other one I remember is, it was closed; it was open to servicemen only. I don't know if this was '39 or '40, but one of the last days of the fair, they opened it only to servicemen. Servicemen free, and free everything.

Redman: So it seems like people in San Francisco had generally a very positive experience with the fair and that it was a good thing for the city.

01-00:22:59

Kirschbaum: Oh, absolutely! We couldn't understand New York, how they could have a fair. And certainly, it couldn't have been as good as ours.

Redman: Okay.

01-00:23:10

Kirschbaum: Just think of it. A man-made island and the effort that went into that. My God!

Redman: And then on top of these new two bridges that are there.

01-00:23:20

Kirschbaum: On top of the two bridges, yeah.

Redman: Yeah, that's fascinating. Let's get to the start of the war. I'd like to ask what your memories are about December 7, 1941, the day Pearl Harbor was attacked. Before I do that, however, I'm going to move your microphone about one inch.

01-00:23:38

Kirschbaum: Okay. I'd like to pick up some papers on the table.

Redman: Oh, sure. Here, let's just pause this. [audiofile stops & restarts] All right, I'm back with Bill Kirschbaum. And I wanted to ask about the start of the Second World War. I wanted to ask about your recollections about Pearl Harbor.

01-00:23:58

Kirschbaum: I was in high school at the time. I was a freshman, as I recall, in high school, and we were taken to the auditorium, where we heard President Roosevelt announce Pearl Harbor and announce the beginning of World War II. Shook us up completely, of course, even at a young age. In those days, we had ROTC. Well, they still have ROTC, but in those days, we were trained with rifles—twenty-twos, but rifles—and we had rifle teams. And our team was the best in the city, by the way.

Redman: All right!

01-00:24:44

Kirschbaum: And my first inclination at that age was, "What can I do?" Well, I'll come to it. Before, let me say that the government put out calls for certain items—foils, tin foils, they wanted very badly; burlap, for some reason. My daddy, as I said, was a cop on a beat. And one of his things was to go through two theaters after they closed, to go through them completely. And he used to spend time at those theaters, picking up candy wrappers, foil, and we made up balls of tinfoil to—I don't know where he took them, but to the government someplace. That's how much people jumped in. Gas rationing, of course; everybody was rationing gas. What did I do? I couldn't do anything until I was fifteen. And at that time I joined the California State Guard. It was the State Militia at that time. [phone rings]

01-00:26:26

Kirschbaum: I joined the State Guard, the State Militia, which became the State Guard, which became, eventually, the National Guard. We reported to duty at the Armory on Mission Street. I think 14th and Mission.

Redman: Sure.

01-00:26:47

Kirschbaum: And we didn't have any positions to take up, but we stayed in the Armory on alert for movement to any position where we might be required to fight. It sounds funny now, but we were terribly sure—we were confident that the Japanese would come ashore on the coast, and our job was to respond. I mentioned my daddy's thirty-eight. Initially, the militia was armed with 1918

Enfields, British rifle. These were taken away by the Regular Army. Because they were so short of weapons they needed these weapons in basic training camps, to train regular soldiers. And I think that says something pathetic about our readiness at that time. So we had to furnish our own weapons. My daddy had a thirty-thirty, which I took, and this thirty-eight revolver. So those were my weapons. Became a corporal and was discharged as a corporal in 1943 or '44; I forget which. I've got the discharge here.

Redman: So tell me about how the coast was set up in that time, in terms of fortification. Because I understand that there were not only anti-aircraft units stationed along the Bay Area—I know my grandpa was in one of those—and then they also had, around the bay itself—and this is just the bay—there were, I understand, machine gun nests. Tell me a little bit more about that.

01-00:28:38

Kirschbaum: The Presidio and the—we had big guns. They were good for twenty-two miles, as I recall. And they were located across the bay, on—I forget the name of the hill over there. Bunkers still exist, of course. And then the Presidio. And they'd fire these suckers off every once in a while, training. And I'll tell you, we lived on 27th Avenue; it just rattled the windows with these big guns. I don't know about any machine gun emplacements. I'm sure they were secondary, covering these big guns. But on the beach or anything like that, I don't know. We always figured if we were deployed, the Guard, we would be deployed on the beach. First logical place.

Redman: I see.

01-00:29:37

Kirschbaum: But I don't really know about any of the other armaments.

Redman: I understand that in those days, there were volunteer programs for people to monitor the skyline, to see if—

01-00:29:49

Kirschbaum: Oh, yes.

Redman: Tell me a little bit about those.

01-00:29:52

Kirschbaum: I can't tell you much. I do know that they had teams, and they were there to identify aircraft. That's all I can tell you. Volunteers. My daddy joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary. He was an air raid warden at night. We had air raids, alerts, of course. Everybody did something. Everybody did something. Everybody pitched in. And it could be laughed off now. One of the things that bothers me is the constant bickering about the internment of the Japanese in the Bay Area. We were scared to death. We were scared. We knew damned well we had infiltrators. What can I say? I get angry when it's termed such a violation of rights. Hell, so was Corregidor, the death march in Bataan. They

were a violation of rights. It happened in those days. God willing, it'll never happen again.

Redman: So tell me a little bit more about some of those feelings. I'm interested in that because it's certainly, like you say, a hot issue, an issue that goes on till today, of course.

01-00:31:32

Kirschbaum: My grandfather and grandmother had a Japanese gardener. He was arrested, and we never knew what happened to him. But he was arrested as a—gee, I forget what they called them in those days. Not an infiltrator, not a terrorist. Doing with espionage.

Redman: Some sort of a spy, yeah.

01-00:32:02

Kirschbaum: Some kind of spy. And they did exist. We weren't prepared for anything like this, of course. God knows, we weren't prepared for World War II. And one of the only legitimate things they could think of at the time was, take them away. Because if the Japanese did come in, how many supporters would they have? Nobody knew. Now, on the other side of the story, those poor people had to sell their furniture, they had to sell their cars. It was a horrible situation for them, for the good ones. There were very few bad. So it was a bittersweet thing.

Redman: The Bay Area changed a lot during World War II. The Kaiser Shipyards, in particular. The Kaiser Shipyards alone brought in maybe 100,000 people.

01-00:33:11

Kirschbaum: Oh, yes. Oh, every person from Oklahoma and Arkansas that could make it came in.

Redman: Tell me about what it was like for the Bay Area, as a Bay Area native.

01-00:33:22

Kirschbaum: Now, you see, I can't tell you too much, because when I was sixteen years old, I joined the Merchant Marine, and I went off to sail into the Golden Gate. So I really can't address that, I'm sorry.

Redman: No, that's fine. That's fine. And we'll get into the Merchant Marines in just a moment. My guess is that when you came back, the Bay Area was a very different place, in terms of how it had been built up.

01-00:33:49

Kirschbaum: Oh, yeah.

Redman: Can you just speak to that for a moment, before we get back into the Merchant Marines?

01-00:33:53

Kirschbaum: Well, when I was in high school, my brother—yeah, my brother-in-law and I—he was a great horseman. He was in the rodeo that I mentioned before, at Treasure Island. He had a couple of horses, and we used to ride all the time, all the way down San Mateo area. And there was nothing but sand and desolation. Oh, I guess, God, in as far as where 19th Avenue, is—very, very little construction on the ocean side of 19th Avenue. And it was all sand dunes that we rode in. And when I came back, it was built like crazy. Probably as far as 30th Avenue, 35th Avenue. So that was all brand new.

Redman: And I imagine that housing boom continued after—

01-00:35:04

Kirschbaum: Oh, yes.

Redman: —the end of the war. All the GIs come home; it probably just keeps going and going.

01-00:35:10

Kirschbaum: Absolutely. And the GIs, in those days, got some pretty good loans, and they were able to get into homes. Of course, San Francisco, as you well know, is only so big, and there's only so many places to go. But it filled up pretty well.

Redman: You'd made a comment earlier that one of the worst sights in the world is leaving the San Francisco Bay, heading overseas and traveling under the Golden Gate Bridge. Can you tell me what that feels like, for someone who hasn't experienced that?

01-00:35:49

Kirschbaum: A sixteen-year-old kid—well, I didn't do it when I was a kid; I sailed out of Seattle when I was a kid. When I went to Vietnam—it's tearful. You're never too old to shed a tear. And just seeing that land go away, all those young people out there in their boats having fun. It was a bad feeling.

Redman: Okay.

01-00:36:24

Kirschbaum: Down to Puget Sound, it wasn't so bad because—it was the first time I shipped out in the Merchant Marine—because it was chow time. So we were eating. [laughs]

Redman: Tell me about why the Merchant Marines. Why did you join the Merchant Marines?

01-00:36:40

Kirschbaum: In 1942, late '42 or early '43, there was a film produced by the name of *Wake Island*. Now, Wake Island was a little bastion that was held out by a handful of Marines and a construction crew. Did you ever hear of the movie?

Redman: I have heard of this movie.

01-00:37:04

Kirschbaum: Okay. William Bendix and oh, another great actor played in the film. I think to this day, it was more of a propaganda film to raise people's spirits, to raise American spirits, because of the story of this little Marine detachment of a couple of hundred men and a construction crew, who were there to build an airfield, holding out against the Japanese armada. That's the first piece of American land the Japanese took that was fortified. And my best friend and I, Louie Thornton, went to see that movie. Next day, we went down and tried to join the Marines. We were told to grow up and go home. Very nicely, though. And that year, Louie was killed in a forest fire, fighting a forest fire. But it was just the thing to do, to do something. So I tried to join the Marines; the Army wouldn't take me, so I went in the Merchant Marine.

Redman: Whose age requirements were younger. Sixteen.

01-00:38:20

Kirschbaum: Yeah, sixteen. Well, I was just going to turn seventeen.

Redman: Okay.

01-00:38:25

Kirschbaum: I was sixteen.

Redman: What did your parents think about you joining so young?

01-00:38:32

Kirschbaum: Tears were shed, but they understood. My father would've joined, if he could have. It was the thing to do. People didn't go to Canada. People didn't hide out. People wanted to protect their families, their country.

Redman: Tell me a little bit about your experience, then, leaving Puget Sound. What happens to you when you travel over into the Pacific?

01-00:39:01

Kirschbaum: Large convoys. Again, there's no sight like a hundred or so ships, as far as you could see on the horizon.

Redman: Did you have some sort of an awareness of what sorts of things you would've been shipping? What were the important things that needed to go over the Pacific in those days?

01-00:39:18

Kirschbaum: Spare parts. We didn't have any ammunition. We had spare parts and food, food items. My first trip was on a troop transport to Saipan. It was a transport, and we carried a lot of extra perishable items. Big, big freezers. This is one of my bitter points. We took the troops to Saipan. They were just mopping up, so these were replacement troops. The captain figured, what the hell—we

cracked something in the shaft on the ship, and we couldn't proceed farther. We were supposed to go on to other islands. We couldn't; we had to come back to San Francisco to get repaired. We had a massive amount of perishables in our refrigerators and freezers. So the captain decided, why take them back? Why not give them to the troops ashore? So we formed a chain line and we [were] passing these troops the stuff. I don't know where they got the guys to take them, but we're passing these perishables, these food items, and down to the beach comes a jeep with a colonel in it. And he says his troops are not to be mollycoddled. We don't want that stuff, put it back aboard. We brought it back aboard ship. We got halfway back to San Francisco, and the steward said that the union wouldn't pay for those items if we brought them back. So we formed another chain line and threw everything overboard. And I still think of the times when I was hungry in combat and would've loved to have had something.

Redman: Right.

01-00:41:29

Kirschbaum: But of course, most of the troops never knew about it, so that's the good news.

Redman: Yeah. How many times on a convoy, would you go back and forth? How long would that trip take during the war? I imagine it was heavily dependent on—

01-00:41:48

Kirschbaum: Yeah, my second ship, I stayed for the duration. That was a Victory ship, cargo ship. We were out seven months. That's got some funny stories. From island to island. We ended up at a little atoll called Ulithi. Ulithi's about 150 miles off the southern tip of Japan. And at Ulithi, they were staging invasion ships in '45. So on the day that the bomb was dropped, first bomb was dropped, I was aboard ship at Ulithi. About 300 ships there at the time, staging. All kinds of Army, Navy, or military transport, Navy ships. And we were supposed to go in on the initial invasion of Ryukyu. So there were 300 ships full of men that were glad to see that bomb dropped because we turned around and headed home.

Redman: Yeah, that's one of the next questions I wanted to ask. I wanted to ask about the end of World War II and, from someone who was stationed over there at the time, the perspective of the decision to drop bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, what your thought is on that.

01-00:43:25

Kirschbaum: Cheers, cheers, cheers. I mean cheers, from all of these ships. What can I say? It saved thousands and thousands and thousands of lives.

Redman: So those men were very happy to hear that news.

01-00:44:54

Kirschbaum: Oh, God, yes. Oh, God, yes.

Redman: Ready to go home.

01-00:43:46

Kirschbaum: Yeah. I don't know if it's true, but I heard stories about how the Japanese were even arming their women and children with spear-like devices, to suicide attack the invading troops. No, we were excited. It's hard to describe the feeling, it was just so wonderful.

Redman: I'd like to hear a little bit about that Victory ship. Did you have a sense, being on the Victory ship? There're a couple of things. One is that so many Victory ships and Liberty ships were built during the war. Many of them were built really, really quickly. And also many of them were built by this new group of individuals, the Rosie the Riveters, that came to symbolize homefront workers. But I understand there might've been different attitudes about being on the ship or being away, or homefront workers. What did you think? Did you have any sort of awareness of the whole thing going on?

01-00:44:50

Kirschbaum: First let me say. you mention Rosie the Riveter, and you mentioned Richmond, initially. Did you know about the ship over there, Richmond?

Redman: Yes. The Red Oak?

01-00:44:58

Kirschbaum: The Red Oak Victory.

Redman: Right. Yeah.

01-00:45:01

Kirschbaum: They're hoping to put her in the water, to sail her next year, by the way .

Redman: Wow, that's great.

01-00:45:06

Kirschbaum: Yeah. And oddly enough, I went aboard that ship over there. I took the kids and we took the five-dollar tour, and ended up on the bridge. This guy pulls out these charts. He says, "This is where the Red Oak Victory was at the end of the war." It was Ulithi.

Redman: Oh, really? Okay.

01-00:45:29

Kirschbaum: Yep. When I told him I was aboard this Victory ship at—

Redman: Ulithi.

01-00:45:36

Kirschbaum: —Ulithi, also, well, I became a prima donna. [Redman laughs] But I'm sorry, the question—

Redman: Oh, just being on a Victory ship, that experience, what that might've been like. Describe that, for someone who hasn't been on one of those overseas.

01-00:45:56

Kirschbaum: Okay. I was what they call a utility man. I was the officer's mess man. I served the officers. I cleaned their cabins. I also had a position on one of the guns. We had a Navy crew of eight or ten people; I forget how many. And their job was to fire the guns. We had twenty millimeters, a three-inch on the bow, a five-inch on the stern, and a couple of twenty-millimeters on each side. I was loader on a twenty-millimeter, with the Navy crewmen doing the firing. I wrote a letter to the editor one time about that. Some people were complaining about—they were in the Merchant Marine during the war—and they were complaining about not being considered military, et cetera. So I wrote a letter to the editor. And I said, "As a sixteen-, seventeen-year-old kid, I was drawing \$3-, \$400 a month. The Navy guy that was on the gun that I was loading was drawing \$50 a month." I said, "Don't give me any garbage about being considered military."

Redman: My next question was going to be how the Merchies and the Navy crew might've gotten along on that trip, on different—

01-00:47:30

Kirschbaum: We got along. We got along fine. We really didn't associate with each other too much. They had their daily routines, we had our shifts to—. The only one I really remember is they had a Navy lieutenant, and he hated the Merchant Marine. Just for the reason I'm saying. And he was very difficult to me. I respected him, and he wouldn't smile.

Redman: Right.

01-00:48:05

Kirschbaum: It really hurt me, as a kid, because I adored those guys.

Redman: Was there some sense, being such a young Merchant Marine, of looking up to these slightly older guys who were in the Navy, at first?

01-00:48:19

Kirschbaum: There was a radioman—not in the Navy, a Merchant seaman radioman—who was about twenty-three years old, I guess. And of course, we were not permitted up in the officers' decks. So we congregated, when we were off duty, down on the main deck, sitting on the hatch covers. I've got hemorrhoids to prove it. [chuckles] But this kid called me up on the officers' deck one time, and we talked. The age difference was not too much. He said something to me that changed my life. He looked down, and he saw these guys horsing around down there. He says, "Bill," he says, "Tell me, do you want to spend the rest of your life down there? Or do you want to be up here?" Meaning, did I want to advance myself, or did I want to remain down below? Changed my life.

Redman: Wow.

01-00:49:16

Kirschbaum: Changed my life. He never knew it.

Redman: Okay. I want to hear, then, how life changes for you at the end of the war. Let's talk a little bit about that, how maybe those words might've then been applied for you in your life.

01-00:49:37

Kirschbaum: I was going to go to take advantage of the GI Bill, but I couldn't, because I hadn't been in the service. So I joined the Army, so I could qualify. Well, I found a home. And I went to OCS, and I retired as a lieutenant colonel, after twenty-four years. And I think that those words helped me—

Redman: Absolutely.

01-00:50:10

Kirschbaum: —make my mind up.

Redman: Okay. So how old were you when you enlisted in the Army?

01-00:50:17

Kirschbaum: Nineteen or twenty. Twenty, I guess.

Redman: Okay. So then what was the experience of officer candidate school like for you?

01-00:50:25

Kirschbaum: Hell, man, hell.

Redman: Hell. [laughs]

01-00:50:27

Kirschbaum: Hell.

Redman: Lots of running?

01-00:50:30

Kirschbaum: Oh, God! Well, initially, I think it was 280 who initially started out the first day. First thing they did was, the first day, they put us full pack, weapon, and off we went on a speed march, what we called a speed march, running. It was about three miles. At the end of that march, over a hundred of them just kept walking to the [orderly room – company headquarters], to quit. And we graduated in the high thirties. So about what, 10 percent?

Redman: That's unbelievable. Okay.

01-00:51:20

Kirschbaum: It was six months at that time, and it was absolute hell until about the fourth month. But something I'll never forget, of course.

Redman: Tell me a little bit, if you would, about how the military changed immediately after World War II, when so many of these young GIs who'd been drafted for the war. Ultimately, they get their discharge papers, they're going home. We sort of have this portrait of that post-war America—the expansion of the suburbs, people going home to their wives and having kids. You would've been in the military much after that. How did it change, right after World War II, do you think?

01-00:52:08

Kirschbaum: Right after World War II, it didn't change much. Between 1948 and 1949, the segregation ended. This, of course, caused personal problems on both sides. My first duty assignment—oh, God! You can still see. My first duty assignment was lieutenant, commanding a platoon of black soldiers, Fort Eustis, Virginia. The first month I was there, our company commander required, before passes were given out on the weekend, on Friday, Friday afternoon, after work, the platoon leaders had to get their platoons together and ask for any problems that existed during the week. I got my platoon together—first time I'd seen them all together—in their barracks. And my words were, "Okay, boys, you know what we're here for." The minute I say boys, one of them jumped up. He says, "I ain't a boy, I's a man." If it wasn't for a platoon sergeant named Proctor, I think I would've been hurt.

Redman: Okay. So there were still tensions.

01-00:54:07

Kirschbaum: Oh, God!

Redman: There were absolute tensions.

01-00:54:08

Kirschbaum: Well, especially you call a black person a boy now; it's still a saying. And in San Francisco, God, it was a term we used. Everybody was, hey, boy. White, black, Mexican, whatever. But I had never associated with a group of blacks before. My little girlfriend, Alice Newman wasn't a boy. And oh, God, I'll never forget the look on that man's face. Because he was probably a veteran, and here's this kid coming in and calling him boy. But I woke up fast. I learned fast.

Redman: That's really interesting. I'm going to stop this tape and put on one more, if that's all right.

01-00:54:49

Kirschbaum: Okay.

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Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and today is February 10, 2012. This is my second tape today with Bill Kirschbaum. We left off talking about life in the military following the Second World War, being in the Army. So you stayed in the Army for quite some time. One of the questions I was going to ask was actually a Bay Area military question that I'm guessing you have no familiarity with on a first-hand level, because you were away, in the Pacific. But in 1944, there was a massive explosion at a place called Port Chicago. I'm wondering, do you have any recollections about hearing about that later on?

02-00:01:00

Kirschbaum: Yeah, I heard about it, yeah. But I don't even know how I heard about it. I had no involvement at all.

Redman: Stepping back, if you would for a moment, if you could put me on a Victory ship again during the war, what sorts of things would people read? I know in the Army, I often talk to Vets about *Stars and Stripes*. What about when you were in the Merchant Marines? Were there things that people would read, other than, of course, letters from home?

02-00:01:33

Kirschbaum: No, and very few of those. Just magazines and books. Most of the time we played poker.

Redman: Okay, so there was a lot of playing poker.

02-00:01:45

Kirschbaum: Yeah. It would seem like you had a lot of time, but you didn't really by the time you pulled your shift, and then you slept a lot.

Redman: I see.

02-00:01:59

Kirschbaum: So poker was a big item, yeah.

Redman: Okay. So then now, jumping forward a few years, you were in the service, but you decided to stay in for some time after that. How many years did you say you were in the US Army?

02-00:02:18

Kirschbaum: Twenty-four.

Redman: Twenty-four. That's a heck of a run.

02-00:02:22

Kirschbaum: Yeah, it seemed like it when you start out; but, by God, now it doesn't seem like it was very long.

Redman: What made you decide you wanted to stay in? Especially when so many young men of that era were taking, as soon as they were eligible for the GI Bill, perhaps getting their discharge.

02-00:02:42

Kirschbaum: No, I think it was so hard getting through OCS, and I just— I had been semi-military. I was in ROTC, which I loved. I went to the Maritime Academy to get into the Merchant Marine, which was at Santa Catalina Island, by the way, and I spent a month in training there. And I just was militarized, I think. And I saw opportunity for advancement, and I liked the adventure. And I certainly loved the people around me, officers as well as troops. I just had a feeling of camaraderie that I don't believe I ever could've gotten anyplace else. Nor had since.

Redman: Your parents were proud?

02-00:03:39

Kirschbaum: Oh, yes.

Redman: You stayed in; they were okay with that?

02-00:03:42

Kirschbaum: Yes, my mom and dad came back to Fort Benning when I graduated from OCS, and we drove out together.

Redman: What was it like to be in Fort Benning in those days?

02-00:03:53

Kirschbaum: Hell. [They laugh]

Redman: Hot?

02-00:03:56

Kirschbaum: Oh, it was hot, yeah, and the red clay, of course. And when it rained, that red clay become glue.

Redman: [laughs] Okay.

02-00:04:05

Kirschbaum: It was pretty tough.

Redman: Okay. Okay. Tell me, then, what brings you eventually back to the Bay Area?

02-00:04:17

Kirschbaum: My home.

Redman: Okay. You wanted to come back here.

02-00:04:20

Kirschbaum: Yeah, with the rest of my family, yeah. And I was very fortunate because my last duty assignment was Vietnam, and I retired from there. And I wrote the Department of the Army—I only had a couple of months left on my career—I wrote the Department of Army and asked them if they could assign me close to San Francisco. Put me in the Presidio, so—

Redman: That worked out.

02-00:04:47

Kirschbaum: That worked out.

Redman: That worked out. I have the sense that prevailing attitudes towards the military have changed a lot, not only of course since World War II, but especially since Vietnam. I understand being in the military in the Vietnam era was a very different experience. Can you talk a little bit about what that would've been like?

02-00:05:11

Kirschbaum: Yeah. First thing comes to my mind, right here in San Anselmo. I have a sticker on the back of my car, says, "US Army Retired." Right here in San Anselmo, a lovely young thing came alongside the car and screamed "baby killer" at me. I could've killed her, but my wife was with me. It was interesting because when I went over there was this attitude already. You can edit this, can't you? Take out? When we were going out on the ship, I took an outfit over, and we were going out from Oakland through the Golden Gate. There was, I mentioned earlier, a bunch of boats with kids in them having fun. All the troops, of course, were yelling at the girls. In one of these boats, two girls spread their legs like this. And I could've killed them. So that was the attitude.

Redman: Okay.

02-00:06:40

Kirschbaum: It was bad. Spitting. Nobody spit on me—they wouldn't do it a second time—but I know it existed. And calling people baby killers and murderers and this kind of stuff. I read a letter to the editor in our Novato paper. She was proud of her protesting during the Vietnam War. And she closed her letter, "If you ever see a little old lady standing on a street corner waving a flag and holding a Vietnam anti-war necklace around her neck, please wave to her." So I wrote a letter to the editor, and I closed it out, "Yes, Miss So-and-so, if I ever see a little old lady standing on a street corner"—or she said, "Please give her the V-for-victory sign." I said, "Yes, Miss So-and-so. If I ever see a little old lady, I will give her the victory sign. But trust me, I'll only be using one finger." [Redman laughs] And he printed it.

Redman: Wow!

02-00:07:56

Kirschbaum: But that's the way it was.

Redman:

So there was some tension there, certainly, without a doubt.

02-00:08:02

Kirschbaum: Well, we were advised not to wear uniforms. Yeah. And I was very proud of my uniform.

Redman:

Right. Yeah.

02-00:08:10

Kirschbaum: I didn't fight the problem.

Redman:

Now, let's talk about some of the positive changes that have happened in this region, do you think, over the past—. It seems like there's been a lot of economic growth and there are some good things and bad things, in terms of this buildup that's been happening. What do you think about how many changes have happened since then, since when you retired from the Army about that era?

02-00:08:43

Kirschbaum: Production. The construction, the airline industry, the auto industry. Everything's grown so very much. Population increase. Everything's been positive until the past few years, I guess. And I don't know when we'll get back to being positive, as long as we're spending money in Afghanistan, Pakistan conflicts like that!

Redman:

By way of wrapping up, I like to ask a big question. And it's all right if you want to take a moment to think about this before responding. We've talked about a lot of topics today. We started off talking about what life was like growing up as a kid in San Francisco in the Great Depression; thinking about the new bridges; the 1939 fair; serving in the militia, the ROTC, and then eventually into the Merchant Marines and the Army. But I'd like to ask if you could think about the Second World War II as an event in your own life story, in your history, what do you think back about the war, in retrospect?

02-00:10:05

Kirschbaum: What do I think about the war? Same thing I think about any war; what a waste. We didn't prepare soon enough. We almost lost our best ally, Great Britain, because we didn't get in. We saw it coming. We were just too much of an isolationist country. I really don't know how to answer. I just wish it had never happened. [they laugh]

Redman:

Yeah, yeah.

02-00:10:56

Kirschbaum: That's not very intelligent answers, but I really don't know how to respond.

Redman: No, that's fine. We talked about what it was like to leave. We talked about what it was like to go under the Golden Gate—. Was that a shock, coming back into civilian life? Or was it something that you felt like you were ready for?

02-00:11:22

Kirschbaum: Oh, no, I was ready for it.

Redman: Okay.

02-00:11:24

Kirschbaum: Yeah. I didn't want to go back to Vietnam. I didn't want to see anymore. I didn't want to see the suffering. I didn't want to see the poverty. I wouldn't change it, but I sure didn't want to go back. And I don't know how these kids, these wonderful, wonderful kids, can go back *again and again and again* to these countries. God help them. They are so wonderful. Geez, God!

Redman: There it is. Well, I want to say thank you so much for sitting down and talking with me today.

02-00:12:21

Kirschbaum: Well, thank you.

Redman: I appreciate your time.

02-00:12:24

Kirschbaum: I just appreciate so much that something is being retained for the young people to know about. My God. I have a wonderful young kid, I have hired. My Vietnam experiences caused me problems and I find it very hard to, for example, take the garbage out. I've got a wonderful young student. I pay him a few bucks every month to take my garbage out. And he has absolutely no knowledge of anything. Vietnam? He doesn't know what the hell Vietnam was all about.

Redman: Right.

02-00:13:07

Kirschbaum: And I think it's too bad. I think so many people gave so much of their lives that they ought to be remembered. I had an uncle. He was a submariner during World War I. And, gee, I always had so much respect for him, because he— can you imagine being on a World War I sub? I wouldn't want to be anywhere but there!

Redman: [laughs] Right? Yeah. Well, with that, I'd like to say thank you very much.

02-00:14:40

Kirschbaum: Well, thank you.

