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Donald Progulske

Rosie the Riveter
World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Javier Arbona and David Dunham
in 2010

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Donald Progulske

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Interview 1: August 11, 2010
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Arbona: We are in San Rafael, California. The interviewer is Javier Arbona, and I'm here with Dr. Donald Progulske. And this is tape one, on August 11, 2010. And we're going to be talking about a lot of topics today, but I just thought I'd ask you first about where were you born and what year. Just those facts, to start with.

01-00:00:38

Progulske: Yeah. Well, Javier, I'm a native of Massachusetts, a Yankee, born and raised in Massachusetts. September 3, 1923, so I've got a birthday coming up.

Arbona: Oh, [laughs] happy birthday.

01-00:00:56

Progulske: [laughs] Yeah. Well, I went through the grade schools and high school in Springfield, Massachusetts. At that time, students had a choice of three high schools: Commercial High, Classical High, and Technical High, which I chose to attend because I wanted machine work. After graduating in February '41, I took work in a factory as a milling machine operator helping to make gyroscopic compasses for ships and shell loaders. My older brother graduated from Classical High because he was interested in singing. My younger brother went to Commercial High but did not finish because he opted to work as an electrician.

Arbona: Now, before we go into World War II—we'll definitely get to that topic—can I just go back and ask you a little bit about your parents and what they did for a living?

01-00:02:35

Progulske: Okay. My mother was born in Springfield, Massachusetts in September 1898. She was a homemaker and lived for ninety-three years. My father was born in Meriden, Connecticut in 1895 and reached ninety-nine years. He became a carpenter and during World War I and worked in the shipyard in Bristol, Pennsylvania, to help support his family of six sibs because his father became ill. My mother and father had a marriage of nearly 70 years.

Arbona: Did your siblings also go through a kind of technical education like you did in high school?

01-00:03:22

Progulske: My older brother went into the classical high school. He was interested in singing and performing a little bit. But he did not pursue further education than that. My younger brother went to a commercial high school. And he did not finish, because the war came on and he elected to do something else for the war effort.

Arbona: Just tell me a little bit, also about the last name Progulske.

01-00:03:54

Progulske: Progulske, yes.

Arbona: Where the family comes from and—

01-00:03:59

Progulske: My grandfather, whom I never met, came from Poland. They came into New York receiving center in, I think it was 1890. Let's see. My dad was born in 1895. Before Ellis Island was set up, but they did have a receiving station there. He was a tailor. He was not married until he got over here and found a wife. And that was my grandmother.

Arbona: But it was an East Coast family, pretty much—Connecticut and Massachusetts.

01-00:04:46

Progulske: Yes, it was. Yes. Yes, it was.

Arbona: So with all that background, then, I think I'll ask you just if you could describe a little bit more, then about your work in this manufacturing shop and what tasks you were given.

01-00:05:09

Progulske: Okay. I was hired on as a machinist tool maker, and learning the trade, so to speak. At that time, we were working forty hours a week. And I got hired on at thirty cents an hour, and working, like I say, forty hours a week. And needed instruments to start—micrometer and scale, just little hand tools. So they provided those to me and took a little bit out of my weekly pay. So I was getting \$10.88 a week take-home. And after, let's see, maybe three, four months or something like that, I got a dime raise, went to forty cents an hour, and that was a big deal. But then, like I say, the war effort started to come on. We're talking about 1939, 1940s, fifties, and like that. And I worked there for, oh, two, three years, just about three years, operating milling machines and lathes. We switched to a twelve-hour day, so we were working through Saturday, Monday through Saturday, on that. And the company switched into making gyroscopic compasses for the Navy, mainly for landing craft, and also shell loaders, 40 millimeter shell loaders, automatic, things like that.

Anyway, my older brother went into the Air Force, and eventually was flying B-24s over Italy, doing missions over there. My younger brother was drafted and was in the Signal Corps and was in the Battle of the Bulge area. And then I decided that I'd give up my deferments, industrial deferments, as it was. I think, three months at a time, you could take a deferment or be subject to the draft or something like that. Well, with my two brothers gone and me living at home, I decided to try to get into some service anyway, which I did. At the time, I wanted to do some flying, get into the Navy flying school. And that

was a V-5 program, I think it was. And at that time, they announced a new program, the V-12 program, college training. And so I took the new entrance examination, and luckily passed it.

Now, I had no intention of ever going to college. My folks couldn't afford it so—people just weren't going to college then. I passed the exam, and I decided I wanted to—well, it's for engineering, naval engineering. So they said, "Well, name the college, where you'd like to go." I said, "Okay, I want to go to MIT," as my first choice, okay? Second choice was the Worcester Polytech, where they had a good engineering unit, and then Harvard University. Well, they sent me to Harvard, for which I'm grateful. [laughs]

Arbona: Good for you.

01-00:09:05

Progulske:

So anyway, it was a brand new program, and it was on three semesters a year, so you'd get a year and a half if you had one year of basic courses. And I'd taken all the engineering courses and so on like that and had passed them. And then the pattern, I guess, was that you'd go on for a little bit more, one more semester, and go to officer training school. But for some reason, I passed all the courses and so on, like that; and then I, with others, was separated and sent to Sampson, New York. Now, mind you, it was crazy, because I had all the basic information on the Navy; you'd get Navy lecturers and all the rest of it. Well, let's see. Physical education and all the basics for going into the Navy as an apprentice seaman for a whole year.

Then they sent me to Sampson, New York basic training. And then they said, "Well, you were in the V-12; you can have your choice of service schools." I said, "That's great. Okay, I want naval aviation, navy ordinance" or navy ammunition; I've forgotten what the choices were there. They said, "Okay. So you go have your leave, your ten-day leave, after you're finished up at Sampson, and go back to Sampson, then we'll assign you to one of these schools." Well, I got back there, waiting; they never sent me to school. You know where they sent me? To Newport, Rhode Island.

Arbona: Newport, Rhode Island?

01-00:11:12

Progulske:

Yeah. Doing what? Scullery? Peeling potatoes and stuff like that.

Arbona: So this didn't make much sense to you.

01-00:11:19

Progulske:

Oh, it didn't make any sense. And then I said, "Oh, well, I want to get aboard ship." So then I started pushing for that. I went and checked at a submarine base in New London, and there was nothing there that I could get into. So then they shipped me out to Camp Shoemaker, California.

Arbona: A question about that, because I'm curious about this experience that you're talking about. You talked to perhaps an officer or—when you were trying to research other positions that you could try to get into, was that like a formalized request that you could put in? Or were you just trying to talk to officers to see if there was any position for you?

01-00:12:04

Progulske: Javier, I can't remember exactly how that went. It was probably some of both. But it just disgusted me because at that time my brother was running through the Battle of the Bulge, and my other one in the Air Force; and all my friends had been either drafted or joined up, like that. So I was sort of disgusted.
[laughs]

Arbona: And you wanted to see combat.

01-00:12:35

Progulske: Well, I wanted to get aboard ship, at least. So that's why I was happy when I got out here to Shoemaker.

Arbona: When you talk about wanting to be aboard a ship, were you interested in that position more for the challenges of the job, or was it a sense of duty about what you could accomplish on a ship?

01-00:13:00

Progulske: Oh, I think it was a sense of duty, and also a challenge as to what I could reach for and get. But here I am. At that time, a first-class seaman. And that's only as high as I went. After I had a year and a half at Harvard, with all the basic physics, engineering, architectural courses, and so on like that. So I set up to—or move on, but it did not work that way. Ended up here in Port Chicago.

Arbona: Wow. Well, before we get to California, I wanted to get a few more details about the machine shop and your work there. I was just curious; had you joined a union when you were—?

01-00:13:54

Progulske: Yes, I eventually had to join the union.

Arbona: Had to?

01-00:13:57

Progulske: I was not for it, but I did.

Arbona: Oh, really?

01-00:13:59

Progulske: We had to.

Arbona: Tell me a little bit about that. How did it come about that you were made to join the union?

01-00:14:10

Progulske: Well, there was a transition from the non-union status to a union status while I was there, actually. So everyone in the machine shop and the assembly units had to belong to a union. It was that pushing of the unionized programs throughout the country, throughout industry. So we had to join up and pay dues. I've forgotten what the dues were, but minimal.

Arbona: Was that more or less when the war manufacturing was really ramping up? Or before or after?

01-00:14:52

Progulske: When it was ramping up. Yeah. Yeah. The Package Machinery Company was the name of it. Nothing modern about it; it was in an old mill building, with the electric motors and the big, long pulleys overhead and like that, to get power to each of these old machines, and so on like that. So it was nothing that was outstanding. [chuckles]

Arbona: Were you opposed to joining the union on just the basis of the dues? Or was there another concept about it that you didn't like?

01-00:15:39

Progulske: I just didn't like the idea of it. And anyway, we had to join and pay dues or leave, I guess. [laughs]

Arbona: Had there been a strike or something that made that—do you remember any specific event that sort of triggered the larger unionization at that point?

01-00:16:05

Progulske: Well, I think the success of the union programs in getting better wages established and so on like that was there.

Arbona: And the manufacturing shop was ramping up—this is before, actually, the United States had entered the war. But the factory was, indeed, producing material for entering the war, I suppose?

01-00:16:36

Progulske: Yes. They started manufacturing the war effort materials before I got there, before I went on as a regular employee. So I was happy to get that \$10.88 a week. [laughs]

Arbona: And is this where you met your today wife?

01-00:17:03

Progulske: Yes, you heard about that one. [they laugh]

Arbona: Well, I've been talking to your daughter a little bit on the phone.

01-00:17:09

Progulske:

Yeah. That was interesting, because while I was there—we all knew at that time that there was a shortage of young men going into service, but the draft was being expanded. So then different companies, manufacturing companies, started hiring women. And it turned out that there were several young women in the machine shop where I was working, and I got to know this one little girl [chuckles] who became my wife.

Arbona:

How did you meet?

01-00:17:47

Progulske:

How did we meet? I was actually in the Navy then, and I had a leave, ten-day leave or something—I've forgotten the exact sequence, anyway—and I visited the shop to see some of my buddies that were still there, the older people that were just not young enough to be drafted. So I was talking with one of my buddies and he said, "Well, gee, there's this girl over here; why don't you take her out?" Looking for a date, and so I did. That's the way it happened.

Arbona:

So you were actually outside the facility itself; you were sort of on break, or on a ten-day leave, you mentioned?

01-00:18:36

Progulske:

It could've been even a weekend leave from the V-12 program. No, I'm sorry, it was after that. It was when I was out here at Port Chicago. I can't remember some of these dates exactly. But the reason it caught my eye is that the women were in uniform, overalls and proper attire for working around machinery. You can't have loose cuffs or anything like that; too dangerous. So anyway, I decided to check on it and ask her out for a date, and then—yeah.

Arbona:

Do you recall what year it was? You think it was when you were actually on leave from Port Chicago and had gone back to Massachusetts?

01-00:19:38

Progulske:

Yes. Yes. Yes, that was when I came out here. Let's see. I went in the Navy in 1943. July 1, 1943, went to go to Harvard. So '43 to a—what date am I looking for?

Arbona:

Well, we can look it up on the bio form later on. But I was asking a little bit about that just because I was kind of curious how men and women socialized back then, and how it worked with women coming into the factory space. I don't know if there's anything else you say to that, but that's where I was coming from, at least.

01-00:20:28

Progulske:

No. Well, this girl worked in a machine shop for over a year; she had an aunt who thought that she could help the war effort by becoming a nurse. So that's when she joined the Cadet Nurse Corps, in New York City, working on Welfare Island, New York. From then on, I was in constant touch with her, and she with me, from Port Chicago.

Arbona: Over letters or telegrams?

01-00:21:07

Progulske: Yes. Letters, letters. Telephones just weren't used then very much, you know, like that. So anyway, I was discharged from the Navy in May of 1946. Decided to not go back to the machine shop. I wanted to do something outdoors, and thought I might make a living trapping. Well, there was another fellow who came into the machine shop while I was in the Navy, and he had been at the University of Massachusetts, in a two-year program in wildlife biology, and I talked to him. He said, "You're crazy." He said, "You'll never make a living trapping." Which I never would, I'm sure. Kind of a crazy idea. So I accepted the 20-52 Club's membership. Do you know what that one was?

Arbona: No. I don't.

01-00:22:23

Progulske: During the war, Congress passed a bill that gave returning military \$20 a week, for up to fifty-two weeks, 20-52. So it was called the 20-52 Club. To help you adjust. So I took that. And eventually, well, I stopped by the machine shop. No, they heard that I was discharged. I was discharged out of the Navy, through the Boston office; discharged in Boston. Took a train across the country, from Treasure Island—

Arbona: Oh, wow.

01-00:23:16

Progulske: —leaving Port Chicago, into Treasure Island, and out to the Boston—what do they call it—the Fargo building, I guess it was, something like that. So I decided to not go back in the machine shop. And then also decided to look into the GI Bill, and took that. I graduated from the University of Massachusetts in 1950. We were married, my wife and I, in 1947. August 2, if I got the date right. If it's not right, I'm going to catch it. [they laugh]

Arbona: We'll compare notes, since right now your wife is doing an oral history in another room. [they laugh] It's like a game show, a little bit.

01-00:24:13

Progulske: Yeah, you better check these out.

Arbona: [laughs] We'll certainly go back to the discharge; I think we want to get to that point. Before we move on, I just wanted to quickly check if you're comfortable there with that cable, if it's not in your way. [comments between them about that] Okay. So you were telling me more about the kind of post-military life. But I wanted to see if we went back to the military life, and if you could walk me through your deployment, how you came from New York to California, to Camp Shoemaker, and made your way eventually to Port Chicago. Tell me about that story.

01-00:25:17

Progulske: Just a matter of being assigned. You mean after Harvard stint?

Arbona: Yeah. Sure.

01-00:25:28

Progulske: Well, I don't know. You just went from one outgoing unit to another.

Arbona: How did you hear about your assignment, where you had to—did an officer just tell you? Did you receive it on a piece of paper, or how did that work?

01-00:25:57

Progulske: Well, I just got a letter saying I passed the examination and was eligible to enter the officer training program, which then I went to Harvard for that. And then when the first year was up, they transferred quite a number of us, actually. I don't know if they loaded or what. But I know other universities around the country also had the V-12 program. And so it's just going from one appointment to another. [chuckles] There's not any choice in it. That's what disgusted me, really; after putting in a whole year, year and a half of great university courses and so on like that, they didn't take advantage of what I had.

Arbona: How many of you were at Harvard, more or less, in that officers training program? Sounds like that was about 1942, just about before—

01-00:27:08

Progulske: I don't know how long that program lasted, either. Because it was a two-year program, and getting commission and being sent out aboard ship, most of them getting ready for the invasion of Japan and so on like that. So that's the perspective I had, anyway. Yeah.

Oh, I was going to answer your question, which I didn't do, really. It was just assigned. Like when I finished up with Sampson, New York, you returned from your ten-day leave and then are assigned to something else. That's when I was assigned to the draft coming out to the West Coast. We took the trains going across the country. Nothing elaborate, because some of the cars and that were World War I—almost like cattle cars, but they had bunks in them. So most of us in that were—at least I was in a train that was going that way, and using one of these old antique railroad cars. So that's where I ended up, at Fort [Camp] Shoemaker.

Arbona: First Shoemaker.

01-00:28:32

Progulske: Yeah.

Arbona: What did you have to do at Shoemaker first?

01-00:28:38

Progulske: Wait until something was assigned to you. Now, I made a point that I wanted to do something different. I didn't even know about Port Chicago, nor the explosion or anything like that, until after I got there.

Arbona: So when you got to Port Chicago, the explosion had happened but you didn't know that that had occurred there?

01-00:29:10

Progulske: Let's just come back to Shoemaker for a little bit. Then I think I spent about two weeks there waiting for a draft going somewhere, I don't know. There were two busloads of us that were sent over the hill to Port Chicago from Shoemaker. It was in January of '46—let me see. '45. I can't remember; January of '45, I think it was.

Arbona: Probably. The explosion happened in July of '44, so—

01-00:29:56

Progulske: Forty—'45, yeah. Yeah. The explosion happened in '43, wasn't it?

Arbona: July '44, as I recall.

01-00:30:08

Progulske: '44? '44?

Arbona: Yeah.

01-00:30:11

Progulske: Okay. Well, the transfer then was by bus. We lined up in front of the administration building. It was a rainy day. And the base commander came out and welcomed us aboard and gave us a little story about how things are, or what happened, but nothing detailed; not very meaningful, the way he was doing it. And we were reminded or admonished that if any white boys came up with a problem with a black, that there'd be leniency for the black, but not for the white. He says, "When you come up before me, it's Captain Mass, for any problem like that, why that's the way it's going to be." So that's the way it was. That's the way I thought.

Arbona: The captain said that there would be leniency towards a black sailor versus a white—

01-00:31:21

Progulske: Exactly.

Arbona: —solder, if there was some kind of confrontation?

01-00:31:25

Progulske: Yeah, actually. The base had been rebuilt. When we got there, the barracks—they're two-story barracks—were brand new. And the white men, we were in one barrack. So—

Arbona: You might have photos there of that, actually.

01-00:31:49

Progulske: This is a photo of—the brig was the best building on the base. And my barrack that I lived in was just across the street from it. I lived up on the second floor.

Arbona: But isn't the brig where they would send people if there was a problem?

01-00:32:10

Progulske: Yes.

Arbona: And that was the best building. [they laugh]

01-00:32:14

Progulske: Exactly.

Arbona: Wow.

01-00:32:21

Progulske: So anyway, we were assigned then to work in the dock area and help load the ships in there. Of course, I was under supervision of the chief petty officers and higher officers. They were all white, of course, because at that time, there was a practice that the blacks could not gain any advancement for doing what they're doing. And they were working around the clock. I was one of those that were assigned to the dock area. And let's see. I was on the dock area for—I can't remember—for several weeks, and then transferred into the inland area, where much of the ammunition was stored that came in from Nevada.

Arbona: Right.

01-00:33:41

Progulske: I think that's where that was. So while I was out there, we were working in the different bunkers and transferring ammunition out of the railroad cars. Each of the bunkers had railroad track in front of it, so that the whole pattern is that you could move it quickly into the bunkers from the manufacturers, then aboard ship, as it's called for. You want me to talk a little bit more about—

Arbona: Sure, sure. Yeah, please go ahead. I don't want to interrupt.

01-00:34:24

Progulske: Okay. I was just looking at the type of ammunition we had. Everything from sixteen-inch projectiles for the battleships down to twenty-two for practicing,

whatever they did for all that. But there were a lot of torpedoes and bombs we handled. And out there in the inland area, we couldn't have any electricity. Too dangerous. So any time there was a thunderstorm coming up, we had to vacate the area. And we were brought out each morning on a truck, like an old semi truck that was cut down and seats in it, so it was more like a bus with the engine on the front, which was a truck engine, taking us out to wherever our assignment was. And like I say, we handled all kind of ammunition and different sizes. We used some machinery for stacking ammunition cans into pallets and strapping them, and then stacking them in the bunkers and so on like that. Well, some of those bombs had to have a special type of a lift, like a front loader. And so I was sent to Mare Island for—I think it was two weeks I was there—to learn to operate those particular machines for working with those particular materiel.

Arbona: We're about thirty-five minutes into this and I wanted to just quickly check with you if you feel like you need a break or anything.

01-00:36:36

Progulske: No, I can go on.

Arbona: If you're doing good, okay. Because I have a lot of questions about Port Chicago and the base. And you were talking about how the captain sort of spoke to you when you arrived. Did he talk about the explosion at all? Or was there anything conveyed to you about what had happened?

01-00:37:00

Progulske: I can't remember, other than just saying it was a dreadful explosion and it was rebuilt, and that there was a change of attitude now about having blacks working alone on the docks. And that the white boys are going to be mingled with them, so to speak, only in different small groups. So I did not see whites and blacks or personally see or work with black fellows rather than white fellows. I don't know; it was an eye opener to me. I'll have a statement a little bit later about that, what my attitude was about that.

Arbona: Sure. But then it sounds like there was an official policy of segregating smaller work units, so there were actually white and black work units loading?

01-00:38:02

Progulske: Yes, that's the way I saw it, yes.

Arbona: But you could actually see African-American loaders—

01-00:38:09

Progulske: Oh, yes.

Arbona: —but just afar; you weren't working with them.

01-00:38:13

Progulske: That's correct, yes.

Arbona: Was there ever any other encounters with them?

01-00:38:21

Progulske: I've been asked that a couple times, and I can't remember ever seeing any real problem. I know it took time for re-healing after the explosion and that there was a problem, a mutiny. And the ones that did the mutiny were willing to come back on the base and work, which they did. So that's the ones that I saw, rather. Some of them were willing to come back. Could've been some new assignments entirely, though. Yeah.

Arbona: So none of that came out in conversation, a distinction as to who had been through the explosion and who had maybe been newly assigned.

01-00:39:04

Progulske: No. No. No. I had a pretty good—

Arbona: Photo? I will actually, at the very least, take a pan of these with the camera at the end, to get some visuals of these.

01-00:39:21

Progulske: Oh, okay.

Arbona: But feel free to say anything about those, if they awaken any kind of specific memories or anything.

01-00:39:31

Progulske: Okay. Well, I enjoyed more working in the inland area. We had good food out there, and separately. And it meant that we would not be working at night time; we could not have electricity in those bunker areas. But it was better duty than that. Jumping ahead a little bit, the war was getting tight, going to the Southeast Pacific. And I remember hitchhiking from Port Chicago into San Francisco for just an evening of fun. And that Richmond area, there were acres and acres of landing craft stacked three high, as I remember, getting ready to be sent off down to the South Pacific, because they're anticipating an invasion of Japan. Of course, you walk the streets of San Francisco during those times, it was just nothing but, almost, quote, "almost" just military, from admirals on and generals and peons. But all in uniform.

Arbona: When you mentioned Richmond, I just wanted to make sure that you were talking about the shipyards? Was that actually the Richmond shipyards where these—

01-00:41:20

Progulske: I don't know. I don't know. Somebody with knowledge told me that they're getting ready for the invasion. And let's see. Okay, so the invasion did not happen; Japan surrendered in nineteen-forty—

Arbona: Isn't it late '45? Sometimes I lose track of the date myself.

01-00:41:57

Progulske: Yeah.

Arbona: But going back just a moment, as you were, you were just mentioning, also San Francisco and nightlife or socialization. I was wondering if just you had any other stories about that. Even if there was some kind of interaction between these higher ups and the soldiers on how that socialization took place.

01-00:42:17

Progulske: Well, being from the East, we didn't know anything much about the American Indians, nor—well, of course, the black people were living all over the country and so on like that. But you go into a bar at that time, there's a big up sign, "We do not serve blacks or Indians." So that struck me as being wrong. And it brought things to a head, I think. But I was then discharged, like I say, in May of '46. And after that, why, the Navy was discharging, Army discharging personnel, and so things were getting back sort of to a different scale than what they had been during the war years.

Arbona: When you say scale, tell me a little bit about that. You mean in terms of the ramping down of the war and everything?

01-00:43:37

Progulske: Well, the ramping down of the war, getting adjusted back to the different economy. And I didn't mention it before, but we know that once the war effort really started, there was a shortage of gasoline and meat and milk and butter and things like that. And it was run through food stamps and gasoline stamps that you had. And the gasoline was only like two gallons a week. And it mainly meant so that you could get to work. But then when the war was over and boys and women were returning to civilian life, we sort of get the build up of a better economy.

Arbona: Now, historians today write so much about how, of course, the war changed everything, in a way; that the industries and the word "scale" itself is something that we can use to look at how everything jumped to a bigger scale, in a sense. But did you expect to maybe go back to some kind of previous state of life? Or were you looking forward to some of the new, say, suburban lifestyles and everything else that historians like to point to today, as how it changed?

01-00:45:15

Progulske: Okay. When I got discharged, in the immediate timeframe now, looking to get back into life as it was, with more abundant foodstuffs, more abundant automobile tires for cars and so on like that. During the war, you ran your car down the tires, until they're smooth. And then we had a little hand tool with a little—it had a hot end to it, with a little cutter. So you'd cut more grooves in the tires so that you can [chuckles] run your car with a little traction. So that was, of course, one of the things, too. But the meat was short during the war

and so on like that; but after the war, things were starting to return to normal. Luckily, I was on leave from here, from Port Chicago, home in Springfield, Mass. And at that time, my wife-to-be was in training in New York City, and she had a leave; and I had maybe a fourteen-day leave or something like that. So we were together during the cessation of the war, when Japan surrendered. So Eunice and I were together, celebrating that.

Arbona: So when the Japanese surrendered, you just happened to be on leave at that moment?

01-00:47:14

Progulske: Yes. Yes.

Arbona: Did I understand correctly? Okay. And so then you didn't have to go back? Or did you have to return to—

01-00:47:21

Progulske: Oh, I had to go back, yes. I had to go back, but there was a system set up for discharge, with a point system, where the military—those that were overseas and so on like that, they had more points than what I had, for instance, as just being on a shore base, like that. And one thing that struck me as being—I don't know how it struck me, but I got back on the base and sooner or later after that, very soon, we got a commendation saying that the Port Chicago had a definitive part in ending the war. And I can remember that one of the days that we were out working in the inland area, I and three or four others were sent in to have early afternoon supper. And so we did, and we went by pickup truck, onto the main base to get food and then come back out. Went to one of these bunkers, and it was high security, very high security, with a shore patrol. And I can't remember if it was the base commander or not, but there were several high-ranking Navy officers there. We drove up and the assignment was to go into the bunker and whatever you see, bring it out here. Which we did. And then we had boxes, wooden crates, all sealed up, sort of. Some were small, some larger. I can't remember all the details of it. And then so we loaded it all up in a truck, and away they went. And it was not too many weeks beyond that that we got a commendation back about the operation of Port Chicago.

Arbona: Was it just the three or four of you that got that commendation?

01-00:49:52

Progulske: No, no, the whole base did.

Arbona: Oh, the whole base.

01-00:49:54

Progulske: The whole base did.

Arbona: And you had no idea what was in those boxes.

01-00:49:59

Progulske: We had no idea. No. Didn't know anything about the atomic bomb at that time.

Arbona: Even to this day, you don't know what was in those boxes for sure, but—

01-00:50:10

Progulske: No. No.

Arbona: But we can deduce that—

01-00:50:14

Progulske: My understanding is that these components were sent out aboard ship, for assembly; that some of the parts were sent out of San Diego and onto aircraft carriers out in the Pacific.

Arbona: Do you happen to remember any of the names of the base commander or any of those—?

01-00:50:36

Progulske: No, I don't. I have no idea.

Arbona: [chuckles] Let me just see. Okay, we're doing pretty well on time. We still have probably ten minutes on this tape. But let me know if you need to stop or anything. There's so much about Port Chicago that's just so interesting to go into. I was even wondering if some of the special training that you received on Mare Island—do you know if it was somehow related to this assignment that you received, this top secret assignment?

01-00:51:13

Progulske: No, I don't think so, because that happened quite a bit earlier. Because we were—you're asking whether that machinery might've been something specialized for handling this other?

Arbona: Mm-hmm.

01-00:51:29

Progulske: I'd say no, because we were almost daily using the same machines.

Arbona: And I was also curious if you had recollections about Port Chicago, the town. Did you ever go into the little town at all?

01-00:51:47

Progulske: Yes, went in, and there was a pizza parlor there, or a restaurant that had pizza at night. I had not been—I didn't know what a pizza pie was. But it turned out that one of my buddies, John Palmisano in my unit, was from Chicago. And this one night, he was in the barracks, and he and I and other one went up the road a little bit to this pizzeria to get a piece of pizza. And I remember him eating it after and saying how good it was and so on like that. Another thing

we used to do, though, we went over to Mount Diablo, to the park area. There was a swimming pool there. A small one, but it was about the only place in inland that we could get to go swimming a little bit.

Arbona: With civilians, also? This was off base, or was it also a military facility?

01-00:52:55

Progulske: There were civilians there, too, yeah. Yeah. But practically every which way we went in California and the whole coast, we had military on leave or having fun or whatever. So we used to hitchhike out there to Mount Diablo.

Arbona: Was there a sense somehow on the base, whether it was conversations with the officers or anything else, that something had changed in terms of the safety precautions on the base at Port Chicago?

01-00:53:34

Progulske: Oh, I think so. I think so. We were made aware of what had happened. The extent of the explosion was so bad and so on like that. But I never had an opportunity to talk to more than one local person or resident. Whether true or not, but they said that during the explosion, there was an auxiliary anchor on one of the ships and that was blown about a half mile up into the hills.

Arbona: Wow.

01-00:54:07

Progulske: Now, that's just conjecture. But it was the talk of the town. There was a good rapport between Port Chicago and Camp Stoneman, which was an Army base towards Sacramento. So there was dancing, there was a little bit of recreation, going to changing over. Navy people going to Camp Stoneman and the other way around, the Army coming onto the base a little bit.

Arbona: Was that organized by the USO or—

01-00:54:51

Progulske: Yes. Let me just jump ahead a little bit. I said that the war had been ended they started sending the people home that had more points and so on like that. So there was an adjustment period there. And everything was scaling down. And even in the inland area. There were new assignments made, and I was assigned or had the choice—I can't remember exactly how I did, but I ended up as a base photographer. There were two of us, became base photographers. The others were going home. So I spent my last weeks and days there at the base as a photographer, working with USO troops to make records of the performers. So that happened to be my last extent of association with the Navy.

Arbona: Do you remember who any of the performers were?

01-00:56:18

Progulske: [laughs] No. No, I don't. No. But they were good programs. Yeah.

Arbona: And even after the explosion, were those also still segregated, so basically it was white soldiers and there were none of the black sailors or soldiers at them? Or did that change at all after the explosion?

01-00:56:45

Progulske: I think it was starting to change; the attitude was starting to change. Because I think that's one thing that came out of the explosion itself, was that this is the beginning of desegregation that was to come in later years. So it was that.

Arbona: Were there news reports or other discussions about the mutiny trial that was happening sort of around, I guess, late '44 and early '45?

01-00:57:24

Progulske: Well, I'm sure it was in the newspaper some, but I don't know, we just ignored it. People weren't, I don't think, reading and as knowledgeable as they are now. But of course, one thing that came out of the war then was the desegregation program. And the other, really, one, for me, was the GI Bill, so I could go to college.

Arbona: We probably have about five minutes left on this tape, and I just want to ask, you mentioned before that there was a statement that you wanted to make, or say something, I guess, related to—maybe it was race relations. So I don't know if you're ready to do that now or if you want to do that later.

01-00:58:24

Progulske: Well, just briefly, looking back on it now, it was right at the grassroots of the desegregation program that we have experienced up to this date now in our country and with the minorities having as much freedom and experiences and opportunities as non-minorities. And the other great thing is the GI Bill. And I don't know if you've got enough time to talk about that. I'm just wondering—

Arbona: Well, we could talk about the GI Bill. If you want to take a little break and if we can pop in another tape, if you have time, that would be great. Even if we don't have to take up the whole tape, but we can maybe talk a little bit more about that. How does that sound?

01-00:59:23

Progulske: Okay.

Arbona: Okay, let's stop this one because we're almost at sixty minutes, so we'll be out of time in no time.

Begin Audiofile 2 08-11-2010.mp3

Arbona: This is tape number two of the oral history with Donald Progulske, and Javier Arbona is in the interview's chair. And it is August 11, 2010. We were just sliding into the topic of life after the military. So I was wondering, just as a

general question first, what did you expect out of life after you came out of the military?

02-00:00:41

Progulske:

I expected a life where I would have some kind of a training, technical training. I always liked architecture. My father was a carpenter, and as I was growing up under him he would let me and my brothers work with him, with hand tools, making things out of wood and so on like that. So I was going somewhere in that area. But had never had the money to go to school, go to college and so on like that. When I was going to high school, see, my graduating class was 2500 or something like that; probably less than a dozen would be heading on to college. So after the war, when the GI Bill was passed, I said, "Hurray, here we go." And so I decided to go to the University of Massachusetts and major in wildlife biology, because one of the fellows that worked in the shop, came and told me, and I reviewed that before with you, that he convinced me that I couldn't make a living trapping and selling muskrat pelts. [they laugh]

Arbona:

Had you had experience with muskrat pelts as a child or something else, and for some reason that attracted you?

02-00:02:16

Progulske:

Well, I was always outdoors minded and went fishing, but never hunting or trapping, no. The only association was taking a course in wildlife techniques, making museum mounts, skinning the animal out or stuffing them for—like a bird, for display and so on like that.

Arbona:

Yeah.

02-00:02:52

Progulske:

So after the war, then, I was married. Eunice and I were married in August, 1947. That's the reason we're here, celebrating this vacation here in California, because it's our sixty-third wedding anniversary.

Arbona:

Congratulations.

02-00:03:16

Progulske:

Yeah, so it's been fun.

Arbona:

That's great.

02-00:03:19

Progulske:

But Eunice finished her nursing, and I was able to take the GI Bill for two degrees, undergraduate degree in wildlife biology. And Eunice worked in the infirmary to help us a little bit along the way. So when I got out in '47—immediately after we got married we became students. And so we spent the rest of the days at the University of Massachusetts, for our bachelors degree. And we got that in 1950. Had some GI Bill left. Didn't know enough to quit. [they laugh] Decided to go on to graduate school because there weren't that

many jobs. And most of the time the jobs were state fish and game departments or the US Fish and Wildlife Service or the Forest Service and so on. But they were not abundant, so I decided to ride the tide and go on and get a masters degree. So we went to Virginia Polytechnic Institute, down to Blacksburg, Virginia, for a two-year program. I did field work studying the bobcat in the Southern Appalachians. Eunice was still working. And while we were there, our first daughter was born. Then we decided, well, let's go for the end point, to go for a PhD. So we went to the University of Missouri. I did four years of study on white-tailed deer and all the associated courses to take and so on like that. And then ended up taking a job at South Dakota State University, in Brookings, where—a professorship, assistant professorship. And the pay then was \$5,000 for the year, for nine months.

Arbona: Wow.

02-00:05:59

Progulske:

But we got by, anyway. We moved there to South Dakota, and I eventually became head of the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Studies, and got to be full professor. Then in 1972, there was an opening at the University of Massachusetts, where I did my undergraduate work. They wanted a department head, so through competition, they chose me. Anyway, so we moved from South Dakota back to Amherst and I became head of the Forestry and Wildlife Department there, with a full professorship. And had that until we retired.

In 1990, I retired. So while I was there, in 1982, Eunice and I took a sabbatical to Taiwan so I could study the giant flying squirrels, which they wanted done. So that was kind of fun. Like I say, I worked on deer and worked on raccoons and pheasants and putting radio on pheasants in South Dakota. There was a variety of things over the years.

Arbona: So it sounds like range studies, almost like population of the species and how they—

02-00:07:43

Progulske:

Oh, absolutely. Yes. Habitat and range, yes.

Arbona: There are so many interesting things I want to ask you about, but I'm almost tempted to just—I wanted to just get a few details out of the way. So while you were studying, did you have more than one child? Because as you were doing your masters, I think, you mentioned, you had your first daughter.

02-00:08:06

Progulske:

Yeah. Good point.

Arbona: When were the others born?

02-00:08:11

Progulske:

We had three others. We have two daughters and two sons. The later three were born in South Dakota. Again, through the GI Bill, it allowed me to do it; we became more education-minded. And our older daughter is now a full professor, at a special—what do they call it? It goes higher, anyway, than the PhD.

Arbona:

Oh, she has a postdoc?

02-00:08:57

Progulske:

Oh, she had a post-doc, yeah. Yeah. And that was in Connecticut, the University of Connecticut Medical Center. So she's on the faculty of the University of Florida. Because she did her undergraduate in South Dakota State, and then went on to the University of Massachusetts for a PhD in microbiology. And so now she's a full professor with special recognition. I've forgotten what the term is they use for that. And she has one boy. The whole family's here with us.

Arbona:

Wow! I don't think I even met everyone before.

02-00:09:49

Progulske:

No, you didn't, no.

Arbona:

And it's a packed house already. [they laugh]

02-00:09:53

Progulske:

But her son is a sophomore up at Ohio—Union? Not Ohio State, but a smaller college up there. Anyway, the younger daughter, they have three children. One, she's going third year, to Central Florida. And the other one is just going to enter the college in—I keep getting mixed on these things—in Gainesville.

Arbona:

Okay, yeah.

02-00:10:49

Progulske:

Santa Fe College. And he's starting this year. He'll be a freshman. And so there's three of those in college. And our younger granddaughter is quite a performer. She's a high school senior, and she's probably going to go to Florida State University, in performing arts.

Arbona:

Oh, wow.

02-00:11:19

Progulske:

But my whole statement about the college work, it came through being in the service. And my whole family has been really tied in. It's very important. Because again, like I say, my dad and mother, we lived up through the Great Depression. Never had to go in the breadline, but we were just on the edge of it all the time. And never, indeed, never thought I'd go to college, until my buddy decided that I shouldn't go to trapping. [they laugh]

Arbona: But I'm struck by the fact that the very common or popular image is of—the GIs get out of the war and then go buy a house, often in the suburbs, and just start a family. But it's so interesting that you moved around so much. And I was going to ask you to describe that a little bit more because I was curious, were you renting apartments? How do you move about with kids and how did that work out for the family?

02-00:12:43

Progulske: Well, one reason we moved from South Dakota to—We lived there for seventeen years, and loved it. Loved it. And had a lot of friends. We felt that part of their education should be learning how other parts of society are working. So that's why I went back to Massachusetts, where they were exposed to the black and white responses to the advent of black people being professors and men and women both being black or mixed, and minority races and whatever. So that's part of the reason we went back to Massachusetts. And it was important, very important. And they had friends that were black and Latinos and whatever. And what was the other part of the question?

Arbona: Well, I think I was interested in how your experience contrasted that of maybe the GI that just kind of goes and has a suburban life.

02-00:14:10

Progulske: Very much so. My moving around on purpose was that. We were willing to take chances. We were willing to rent houses instead of buying one right after we got out of service and then got married and like that. But when we moved to South Dakota, we rented houses. The first house we had in South Dakota was a Quonset hut, the one they had for the returning veterans. And we went there from Missouri with Eunice being pregnant with a second child. Now he's with us, and he's a wildlife biologist because he followed my footprint, sort of. And he's working for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, out of Portland. So then after we were in South Dakota long enough, we decided that we wanted to build our own house. So I designed a whole Cape Cod house, and I did the general contracting, and I had plumbers and whatever else we hired on, and got it done. And that was through the Veterans Administration programs, where they had low-cost loans. And that was a very nice house.

Arbona: I have so many questions, and I don't know if you—

02-00:15:50

Progulske: The GI Bill is so entwined with everything that we did. It's important. It's very important. And to me, that changed the whole society around, as we look around now. The general attitude, I would say, is go to college. Kids are going to college now. And my wife and I are living in the past, pretty much, when it comes to electronics, and we don't know much about computers, but they're right up there with it. I think they'll all be successful in what they do.

Arbona: What you're saying, if I can almost project it back to you, is that coming from a family of your father being a carpenter and from manual trades and technical

scales, you've seen the American culture change, in a sense, and the world change—

02-00:17:00

Progulske: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Arbona: —and your family being of a college-educated culture.

02-00:17:06

Progulske: Yeah. And to travel, where people are traveling more to foreign countries and so on like that. So that's all, again, education. If you look at each one of those young people that are traveling, I think you'll see before them, a family that somehow got prosperous enough that they could go to college.

Arbona: And you also had the opportunity to go to research in Asia. So you went to—was it Taiwan you mentioned before?

02-00:17:40

Progulske: Taiwan, Taiwan. Yes.

Arbona: So anything you want to mention about that, what that experience was like seeing that culture or seeing—

02-00:17:48

Progulske: Well, we left the kids home; they stayed in our house. And Eunice and I went over to Taiwan, at the invitation of the Taiwan government. They had a problem of squirrels eating the bark around the trees in managed forests. And you'd look at a hillside; it'd be all brown, where the squirrels had eaten around the cambium layer and sort of cut off the system of the nutrients getting from the roots up to the top of the trees. So they wanted some studies done on the giant flying squirrels. But that was kind of fun. So it was nine months I was over there. It was fun living with that culture. We had Chinese neighbors and very much like here, except they're Chinese and we were Americans. It was fun.

Arbona: Were there dinner parties or any way in which you were able to integrate into your neighborhood or your community somehow?

02-00:19:08

Progulske: Oh, yeah. They invited us to do things. We lived in a compound that was built by the Japanese when they held the island. So we had a big house that they assigned to us, a lot more space than we ever needed. So we were invited to their celebrations. I was teaching courses, as well as—I was teaching a course in ornithology and wildlife management to graduate students. One thing I saw differently is that when you're lecturing to a bunch of people with black hair and very much interested in what you're saying, you can't get conversation going with them like you can here, get arguments going or sidetrack a lecture or something like that, because they're always listening and listening and

listening. Everything was closed, that they had to do this and they had to do their very best. So I was pleased with what we did, and seeing that culture.

Arbona:

I had two general questions, if I may. One is, coming from the wildlife sciences in your career, is there anything that you have reflected upon, in terms of how the environment has changed or has been effected in the, let's call it late twentieth century? Does it worry you in any way? Or do you have other reflections, in terms of what you've seen change in these couple of years?

02-00:21:15

Progulske:

I think the great change was an attitude of a lot of people about the environment, what's happening to the environment, and the need for special types of habitat for special animals, whether it be birds or snakes or whatever. It's the setting aside of a lot of information about the nature of things and so on like that. It's also about protecting lands now. Most every state and a lot of the countries around the world now are setting aside wildlife reservations and lands, where they're protected from development. So that attitude has changed a lot, yes. Yes, it has. Yeah.

Arbona:

What do you think has made people's attitudes more aware?

02-00:22:15

Progulske:

I think TV, with the nature series and things like that. But I think it's down at the—our grandson here is seven years old, and he's getting a lot of information in school about animals and habitat. Of course, his father's a wildlife biologist and his mother's a veterinarian. But my point is that in the school systems, that's been part of the new curriculum now, is to get more about biology and natural resources.

One thing that I did in South Dakota was to follow the Custer expedition of 1874, when he was sent out from Fort Abraham Lincoln, which was near Bismarck, North Dakota, and sent down into the Black Hills to establish a fort site and establish whether there was gold in the Black Hills or not. And fortunately, there was a photographer along, William Ellingsworth by name, who had been out to a trip out to the Yellowstone previously. But he was a master with the new wet plate, the glass plates with—stereoscopic, with side-by-side images, so you'd look at it and get the three dimensions. Well, over fourteen years, I was interested in this particular thing, and spending time out in the Black Hills looking for all these photo sites previously.

I came up with a lot of them, and then came up with a book called *Yellow Ore, Yellow Hair, Yellow Pine*. The significance is that yellow ore was the gold that they're supposed to be looking at; Yellow Hair was Custer himself; and yellow pine is one group of yellow pines, versus the white pines. So it's a ponderosa pine that is prevalent in the Black Hills. So it's a book I put out for the bicentennial. It happened for the bicentennial. The Forest Service adopted

that for their project, and so I published that and another (*Following Custer*) through the South Dakota State Experiment Station. So that's looking at the change. So I was looking at the change from what the original plates said versus what I saw, and whether cutting timber is good or bad or whatever; whether the advent of forest fires should be encouraged or not. So that's what the whole thing is about.

Arbona: So it's looking at environmental dynamics and change very specifically.

02-00:25:33

Progulske: Yes.

Arbona: Are there any specific conclusions that you want to mention, in terms of what was the contribution of that study?

02-00:25:49

Progulske: Well, I think the item to get across is that the Forest Service was wrong in having Smoky the Bear and pushing it as hard as they did. We know that forest fires are natural, and it's up to the human population to try to prevent catastrophic fires. We don't want that, but fire is a tool for maintaining habitat. It could be chaparral, it could be montane trees, it could be deciduous or evergreen or whatever. So I could see a change in the attitude of the Forest Service now accepting that Smoky the Bear, as they used to push it, was not entirely correct. It was kind of a fun project.

Arbona: Yeah, I know that fire suppression and the integration of fire into environmental—and human-environment relations is very important, and it's a field that has changed a lot, I think.

02-00:27:10

Progulske: Yeah. Well, we look around the hillside where we're sitting here now, out the window, and there's four or five deer that—not right at this moment, but they're there because this is the habitat. And the animals adapt to certain degrees of changes and so on like that. So there're problems of coyotes in downtown Los Angeles and whatever, and you've got the condor program being rebuilt, and with the whooping cranes in the West and Texas and so on. So there's a lot of attitude about changes and doing right. Yeah. Obviously, we're still doing things incorrectly, or don't know enough about which way it should go. But these younger people are coming along and they're making study. They're the ones that are going to decide.

Arbona: Well, I had one other very general question, because obviously, the issue of the integration of the armed forces and the changes in race relations in society seemed to be an important theme that came up. So I was curious if you were surprised that the US elected a black president this last election cycle.

02-00:28:37

Progulske:

No, I'm not surprised. I think it's a good thing. I think that the country is—our constitution says for everybody, and not just a certain group of people. So therefore, we can see the minority people, whether men or women, going into certain professions. It might be dentistry or it might be engineering and so on. The whole thing has changed so blacks and whites are working together, blacks and Latinos and whatever else you want to name, they're working together. And I think that as bad as these wars are, the United States is trying—they were drawn into it—is trying to establish the same attitudes in some of these other countries we're trying to help. [laughs]

Arbona:

All right. Well, I don't know if you want to take any more time. We're at about half an hour on this tape and I know that they've finished outside with Eunice's interview, so I hope I'm not taking too much of the family vacation.

02-00:29:58

Progulske:

Oh, no. No, no, no.

Arbona:

Okay. I was just going to say if there's something that you think we've skipped or if you want to go over anything else if there are some details missing, or a topic or anything else, go ahead and throw it in there so that we can make sure to cover it.

02-00:30:22

Progulske:

Well, I think again, just what I saw is the changes and the attitude of the public—and desegregation programs going on. That's all for the better. The GI Bill is all for the better. The veterans loans for housing was for the better. And I think we covered those some, pretty much. So I don't really have any other particular ones to mention.

Arbona:

Great.

02-00:31:04

Progulske:

I do know the importance of talking to people, like you and I are doing, so we can sort of understand what some of the values are of the cultures that we're living in. Yeah.

Arbona:

So hopefully, people in the future all will get a glimpse into your life. Yeah. Well, I was thinking I also wanted to sort of get images of these photographs, so I was going to just take the camera and—this doesn't mean that we have to stop here, but at this point we can take these images.

02-00:32:03

Progulske:

Oh, here. I had another photograph somewhere.

Arbona:

I'm just going to kind of pause. [audiofile may stop & restart]

02-00:32:11

Progulske:

That must be downstairs.

Arbona: So why don't you tell us just for the recording, what we're looking at right here.

02-00:32:23

Progulske: This is the part of the base, when it was in operation and loading ships with the important things, part of the Coast Guard were the watchdog around the whole Suisun Bay. And this is just some of the ships of the Coast Guard and so on like that.

Arbona: Did you take this photo?

02-00:32:49

Progulske: Yes, I did.

Arbona: Wow.

02-00:32:54

Progulske: I had a four-by-five camera. I had my own personal camera, too; it was a Kodak folding camera. So this is just a group of the—so on the other side here would be where the ship would be lined up for loading.

Arbona: For munitions?

02-00:33:13

Progulske: Yeah. And this is an example of one of the Victory ships that was loaded and heading out towards San Francisco. And this is the end of the pier, with the railroad track going right to it. Once this ship moved out of the way, then another one would come right into it, so they could take two ships at a time. And as you probably understand, that one was loaded up with about 4500 tons of ammunition when it blew.

Arbona: Yes.

02-00:33:49

Progulske: And so that's an example of one of the ships.

Arbona: One question about this one. So this is really taken from the Port Chicago side of the strait, what we're looking at in that photo?

02-00:34:02

Progulske: With the ships?

Arbona: Yeah. So the one that you're pointing to right now, this is from the Port Chicago side?

02-00:34:10

Progulske: Yes. Yes.

Arbona: Okay. I don't know if we can tell from the photograph if these are sailors or stevedores in the foreground.

02-00:34:22

Progulske: Down here. Yes. Yes.

Arbona: We don't even know if maybe—I'm not sure if they're African American or—

02-00:34:30

Progulske: I wish I could tell, but again, no.

Arbona: You almost can't tell. Was there a combination of unionized stevedores with military people on the base at this point, after the explosion? Or was it all Navy people?

02-00:34:44

Progulske: That's a good question. There were civilians working on the base, too. And the civilians were responsible for moving the train cars around, and the diesel engines and so on like that.

Arbona: So they only did the moving of the trains, but they didn't do loading itself. Or did they?

02-00:35:05

Progulske: Yeah. No, they didn't. No, they didn't. One thing that surprised me is the amount of wood that goes into filling up a ship like this. Just the boards. It's like layering different types of ammunition. The heavier stuff goes in first, so it's down deep in the hull. And then each layer of bombs had to be stabilized, so we built cribs around there. So we had constantly a supply of lumber on the dock, in the form of railroad carriers.

Arbona: Okay. Maybe we can move on to the other one.

02-00:36:02

Progulske: This is the brig that was built there after the explosion. And it was the most substantial building [laughs] on the base, as you well know. Yeah. And it was used, it was used. You'd see some whites and some black sailors in there, doing their bit.

Arbona: I'm going to see if it gets any—

02-00:36:33

Progulske: I'm sorry?

Arbona: I'm just trying to see if it can zoom in a little bit, but it might just get a little fuzzy anyway. I think that's about as close as I can get. Okay.

02-00:36:44

Progulske: This is real small, of course, 35 millimeter. This is the inland area type of barracks that we lived in. We eventually moved out there and had much more freedom. They were like old chicken coops that were redone. And so then we

wouldn't have to travel back and forth from the inland area to the dockside there. So that's a couple of sailors here.

Arbona: Yeah. The travel between the two areas, you mentioned before there was a pickup truck; but did people ever take the train back and forth? Or was it—

02-00:37:31

Progulske: No, it was all by truck.

Arbona: All the by the truck?

02-00:37:33

Progulske: All by truck. I remember going out one day. In the morning, we're heading out, and the flag at the base was at half-mast. We did not know what had happened. And I just made a guess there. I said, "Well, the President must've died." And sure enough, it was when President Roosevelt died. That was the half-mast response.

Arbona: I was thinking about the zoom for a moment, but did you mention who these people are in the photo, if you knew? These two gentlemen.

02-00:38:22

Progulske: [laughs] I think one of them's me.

Arbona: Oh, that's you on the right, you think?

02-00:38:27

Progulske: Yes. Yes.

Arbona: Wow.

02-00:38:30

Progulske: And there's, like I say, another picture—it must be downstairs—that's got our unit shown together.

Arbona: Oh, wow. Maybe we can get—well, anyway, I don't know, we can stop tape right there, but I wanted to thank you, Mr. Progulske. And let me just try to see if I get—

02-00:38:58

Progulske: Well, I understand the reasons for oral history and the importance of it. I did one for the Wildlife Society one time.

Arbona: Sorry, I'm just putting the camera—I was just going to say we've covered so many areas and I was just thanking you. I just wanted to give you one last opportunity, in case there was anything else that you wanted to add before we wrap up. I know we're losing you to Florida, so we don't get many chances to maybe sit down with you.

02-00:39:35
Progulske: Well, I'm all for you, your program. And it's very, very important because these different generations are coming and going, and most of them are going now, one way or another.

Arbona: Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Progulske.

02-00:39:51
Progulske: Thank you very much.

Arbona: It's been a pleasure. So I will pause right there. [audiofile may stop & restart] So this is one last photograph of Mr. Donald Progulske. And it looks like it's sailors on the base in Port Chicago. And we're just going to look on the back, at the names that are written, just to get an image of this. And it says, "Left to right, back row: Brinker, Keller, Cox, Kahn, Riesman," it looks like "me," so that would be him. "Dubot," I think, or "Dubawn, Toodles." I can't understand the other word. I think it says—

02-00:40:48
Woman: Trundle?

Arbona: —Trundle, Carmen, Johnny—

02-00:40:55
Woman: Palmisano

Arbona: Palmisano and Nelman," I think, "taken behind our barracks." I'm not sure I can read that last name.

02-00:41:05
Woman: That was back row, left to right.

Arbona: Great. If there's anything else—

02-00:41:10
Progulske: That's me right there.

Arbona: That's you right there.

02-00:41:13
Progulske: [inaudible]

Arbona: Yeah, I'm going to turn it, just get it close, as much as possible, without it getting fuzzy. Yep. Okay. Anything else?

02-00:41:28
Progulske: No, I guess that's it.

Arbona: I guess that's it. Great.

[End of interview]