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Berkeley, California

Alfred Soo

Rosie the Riveter
World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Robin Li
in 2011

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Alfred Soo

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Interview 1: November 9, 2011

Begin Audiofile 1

Li: This is Robin Li speaking with Alfred Soo in El Cerrito, California, November 9, 2011, part of the Rosie the Riveter National Home front Museum Oral History Project. Thank you so much for agreeing to be reinterviewed. I read the transcript from your 2002 interview with Dr. Bratton, so I'm a little familiar with some of your story, but I wanted to revisit some parts of it. But just for the record could you tell us your name and your date of birth?

1-00:00:36

Soo: Alfred Soo, I was born in May 21, 1922, in Berkeley, California.

Li: Do you remember what hospital you were born in, or born at home?

1-00:00:46

Soo: No, at that time I was born at home.

Li: Born at home, yeah, and were you given a Chinese name, or—?

1-00:00:55

Soo: Yes.

Li: Do you know what that is?

1-00:00:58

Soo: Yes. {inaudible Chinese name}

Li: Where was your family from, do you know?

1-00:01:07

Soo: My mother and father was born in—my father was born in San Francisco, my mother was born in Sebastopol.

Li: Okay. So did their parents come?

1-00:01:19

Soo: Yeah, my grandparents I guess were the first immigrants.

Li: Okay, and do you know what part of China they were from or—?

1-00:01:30

Soo: All I can think of is Nam Hoy. That's in Canton.

Li: Did they speak Chinese, your parents?

1-00:01:36

Soo: Yes.

Li: They did. Did you speak Chinese growing up or—?

1-00:01:38

Soo: Yes, but not very fluent.

Li: But it's Cantonese that they spoke?

1-00:01:45

Soo: Cantonese, right.

Li: Did you have any siblings?

1-00:01:53

Soo: Yes, seven siblings. There was eight in the family.

Li: Okay.

1-00:01:59

Soo: The oldest girl passed away when she was very young, so I never did get to know her.

Li: Where were you in the—?

1-00:02:06

Soo: I was the youngest.

Li: You were the youngest of—wow.

1-00:02:13

Soo: Right.

Li: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

1-00:02:20

Soo: Well, I grew up more or less spending time with myself since I'm the youngest. My older brothers and sisters were away in school or working, so I really was left to myself. Even my mother had to work as a seamstress. My father was always at the produce store, and, living in Berkeley, there weren't very many Asians in my area. The Asians living in that area were probably my cousins.

Li: Were they closer in age to you than your siblings?

1-00:03:18

Soo: Two or three were, was in my—

Li: What kind of playing would you do as a child? Do you remember what kind of games you would play or—?

1-00:03:32

Soo: I can't really recall.

Li: Was it safe for you to play in the street in your neighborhood?

1-00:03:39

Soo: Yes, there was no problem playing in the street. Across the street from the home on Tenth Street was the YMCA.

Li: Okay.

1-00:03:47

Soo: It wasn't—the building weren't there at that time, but they had a little house like, which we were playing in there, or we played in the yard in the field, playing maybe baseball, stickball.

Li: Right, so were most of the kids you'd play with—

1-00:04:07

Soo: Were old.

Li: Were older?

1-00:04:07

Soo: Right.

Li: Were these your cousins, or were there other kids from the neighborhood?

1-00:04:13

Soo: They were kids from the neighborhood.

Li: Yeah.

1-00:04:16

Soo: Mostly Caucasian.

Li: Okay.

1-00:04:19

Soo: Maybe Portuguese or Italian.

Li: Were they immigrants, or were they mostly Americans?

1-00:04:26

Soo: No, maybe the parents might have been immigrants.

Li: Okay.

1-00:04:36

Soo: Because I didn't speak much to them, but our immediate neighbor was Italian, and they spoke Italian, so I didn't communicate with them very often except maybe with the friend, their son, and he was a couple of years older.

Li: Okay. So was the Tenth Street house the house you were born in?

1-00:05:04

Soo: No, I was born on University Avenue, the home on University Avenue between Ninth and Tenth Street. It's where the brick garage is at this time.

Li: Okay, and how close was that to your family's store? The produce store belonged to my father and uncles.

1-00:05:26

Soo: Well, the—well, there was one store was on the south side of University Avenue between Tenth Street and Ninth Street. We also had produce store on University Avenue near Shattuck Avenue.

Li: Okay. How did your dad get into the produce business? Do you know the story?

1-00:05:45

Soo: I really don't know. I think that was just all they were permitted to do.

Li: Was the produce business; were there a lot of Chinese in that kind of work?

1-00:06:08

Soo: No. No, no. The only Chinese in that area were my cousins.

Li: Really?

1-00:06:18

Soo: Right.

Li: I found a photograph actually of—because you mentioned in your oral history— driving a delivery, doing a delivery truck for your family?

1-00:06:30

Soo: No, they didn't. Not as I recall.

Li: Okay, but I was thinking, especially Berkeley at that time period, I was thinking that there weren't many photographs of Chinese in produce.

1-00:06:45

Soo: I remember them mentioning they were having a horse cart or—

Li: Okay.

1-00:06:49

Soo: Not in this horse cart, well, you might call it truck, a horse-drawn—

Li: Okay.

1-00:06:56

Soo: —carrying all the produce.

Li: Where was the produce coming from?

1-00:07:04

Soo: I'm not sure, but I recall them going to South San Francisco.

Li: Okay.

1-00:07:13

Soo: It doesn't seem reasonable to go that distance in a horse-drawn vehicle.

Li: Yeah, well, maybe things were slower then, I don't know.

1-00:07:25

Soo: Right, it's much slower, and that's a long ways if it's by horse cart.

Li: So did your brothers and sisters work in the store?

1-00:08:09

Soo: No, they didn't. Only my father and uncles worked at the store.

Li: Okay. Did you ever work in the store or—?

1-00:07:40

Soo: No.

Li: No. Was the business pretty successful?

1-00:07:48

Soo: It was successful until the Depression, the Crash of 1929. I think most people suffered at that time.

Li: Do you remember that? You were only seven, but do you remember the—?

1-00:08:05

Soo: I don't recall that there was a depression at that time but I now know the situation of the financial problem because we—well, my father and uncles did own the UC Hotel, the brick hotel, the three-storey hotel on Tenth and University Avenue, and because of the Depression we lost that.

Li: Oh. Did people in your neighborhood suffer? Do you remember—?

1-00:08:47

Soo: I don't recall. I really don't have any recollection of the poverty situation, but now I know.

Li: Right, yeah.

1-00:09:00

Soo: So I can't state that in matter of fact.

Li: Where did you go to grammar school?

1-00:09:06

Soo: The Columbus School is still there. It's rebuilt twice, and I went to Burbank Junior High School. That was on University Avenue and a couple blocks east of San Pablo Avenue.

Li: Did you like school?

1-00:09:39

Soo: Hmm. I didn't dislike it. It was difficult because at home we all spoke Chinese, and so translating back and forth was difficult, and there was no—or I didn't seek any help from my brothers and sisters in the schoolwork. I went to Berkeley High School.

Li: Were the teachers understanding about being bilingual?

1-00:10:21

Soo: I felt comfortable with most of them. Also they understand the situation that after American school, I went to Chinese school in Oakland. So we'd take the streetcar to Oakland.

Li: Okay, was it in Chinatown?

1-00:10:51

Soo: In Chinatown. And we'd get there and start at 5:00 and start home at 8:00. That's a long day.

Li: So would you eat dinner at school, at Chinese school?

1-00:11:06

Soo: No, we ate dinner at home, or we had a snack before we left home.

Li: So were you learning writing and—?

1-00:11:20

Soo: Reading, writing, speaking.

Li: Did you like Chinese school or—?

1-00:11:21

Soo: It was all right.

Li: It was all right.

1-00:11:26

Soo: I'm indifferent to it.

Li: Were most of your friends from Chinese school or from grammar school or—?

1-00:11:33

Soo: It was neither. I was generally by myself most of the time, or with my sisters. But later on I was going to Chinese school in Berkeley. They had a church on Addison Street in Berkeley downtown, and there I became acquainted with several friends that I still associate with, so that's a long time. So that's back in the thirties.

Li: So how long did you go to Chinese school, from—?

1-00:12:31

Soo: I think I stopped going probably 1930s, mid-30s, '37, '38. I don't recall going when I was in high school. So it might have been '35, or '36, '37.

Li: So is Chinese school sort of your earliest memories of Chinese culture and—?

1-00:13:01

Soo: Yes.

Li: Did your parents—did they seem very culturally Chinese to you at home?

1-00:13:12

Soo: Now, yes. Yes, at this time I would say yes. They were all the Buddhist tradition.

Li: Did you attend their Chinese church, your family?

1-00:13:35

Soo: I went to church on Sunday, but I wasn't baptized. I have more leaning toward the church rather than the traditional Chinese religion.

Li: You said most of the Chinese kids you know growing up were your cousins.

1-00:14:05

Soo: Right.

Li: Do you remember there being teasing from other kids about being Chinese or—?

1-00:14:14

Soo: No, fortunately I didn't experience any of that that I can recall.

Li: The teachers, you said, were pretty understanding about the fact that you went to two schools every day.

1-00:14:30

Soo: Yes, yes.

Li: How would they show that? Were they just—?

1-00:14:39

Soo: Well, they—I recall one instance where the teacher was pointing me out and commenting that I was going to Chinese school after leaving the regular school, and they still kind of impress me at this time that somebody realizes it other than my family.

Li: Right, but he actually knew a little bit about what your life was—

1-00:15:08

Soo: Right, right.

Li: Were there any Chinese teachers at your school?

1-00:15:12

Soo: No, there weren't.

Li: I have a question; I know in lots of parts of California the produce industry was primarily Japanese? Is that how you remember it or—?

1-00:15:31

Soo: No, if anything I remember them as gardeners. No produce in the area that I was aware of, and if there was any produce it was probably in the South Alameda County area.

Li: Okay. Was your family very political?

1-00:16:01

Soo: No.

Li: Did they keep in touch at all with any family in China that you knew about or—?

1-00:16:16

Soo: They did, but we've lost track.

Li: Would there be sending letters back and forth or—?

1-00:16:20

Soo: They were. I tried contacting, but we didn't get any response to our letters.

Li: Oh. Do you remember, did your parents talk about the Japanese invasion of China in the thirties, do you remember that?

1-00:16:40

Soo: No, but I know they were participating in some of the strikes and fundraising and such.

Li: Do you know what any of those were?

1-00:16:50

Soo: What was that?

Li: Do you remember what some of those strikes or fundraisers were?

1-00:16:56

Soo: No, I know they did.

Li: I remember reading about some of the boycotts of silk stockings because they came from Japan.

1-00:17:10

Soo: Yeah, I wasn't aware of that.

Li: I want to ask you, in the earlier interview you had mentioned switching your high school program when you were in the tenth grade, that you were in the general high school program, to pre-college?

1-00:17:29

Soo: Right.

Li: What prompted you to make that change?

1-00:17:43

Soo: I guess it'd go back to my going to the Congregational Church in Berkeley on Addison Street, 1917 Addison Street. It's not there anymore. It's moved to Acton Street in West Berkeley. Most of the fellows, boys and girls going to church, were college-oriented, and I think that caused me to think the same. And as a result of it, I did make the move over there to college education.

Li: Did your brothers or sisters go to college?

1-00:18:37

Soo: No, I was the first one.

Li: Were your parents supportive of—?

1-00:18:48

Soo: I guess they were, they didn't object.

Li: What did it mean to be in the pre-college track; what kinds of classes were you taking?

1-00:19:08

Soo: Well, I was taking the math, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, physics, chemistry and all the other English, history classes, so those are the primary science classes and the math classes.

Li: Was it difficult to change tracks and—?

1-00:19:34

Soo: Yes, it was, in the sense that I would be out of step with my previous fellow students. I would be entering into actually a lower, a beginners class and start entering freshman and sophomore subjects when I was a junior and senior, so I would be missing all the previous associates and friends. So that was the difficulty in getting to know all the new students that I would be having in class.

Li: Was Berkeley High School more diverse than your junior high had been?

1-00:20:37

Soo: No, I don't think so. Well, they may have seen more black students, but there were some in Berkeley High School, too. I didn't notice them. I don't recall them in the elementary school, but I recall them in junior high and certainly high school.

Li: I know that Berkeley High in the forties and fifties was pretty segregated in terms of groups hanging out together. Was it that way when you were there?

1-00:21:12

Soo: Yes, I think so. Even in high school I spent little time at school because after school I had a paper route, so that took me away from some extracurricular activities.

Li: Did you have time to go out and do fun things in high school, or—?

1-00:21:33

Soo: Not with high school students. I don't think I went to any football games.

Li: No. Did you date in high school, or—?

1-00:21:48

Soo: I don't recall.

Li: Did you spend much time with your family in your free time?

1-00:22:00

Soo: I think so.

Li: You said your mother was working as a seamstress?

1-00:22:07

Soo: Yes, she was working outside the home and also at home. At different times.

Li: Did she work for herself, or did she work for a company?

1-00:22:15

Soo: She worked for a company.

Li: In Berkeley?

1-00:22:24

Soo: In Oakland, and I'm not sure in San Francisco or not. I know certainly in Oakland.

Li: What kinds of sewing was she doing?

1-00:22:35

Soo: Clothing, women's clothing.

Li: Women's clothing. What year did you graduate from high school?

1-00:22:45

Soo: 1940.

Li: What were your plans when you graduated?

1-00:22:53

Soo: At that time I had no plans. And the instance came up, I guess my counselor—it kind of struck me, he asked me what I planned to do going back to China. I don't recall my response, but I know I was a little surprised with that question.

Li: Were you offended?

1-00:23:27

Soo: Yeah, I think I was offended in the sense, why do you think I'm going back to China when I'm born here?

Li: So he wasn't helpful in terms of guidance?

1-00:23:42

Soo: Right, right, right. Of course, it didn't do any harm.

Li: You had finished the pre-college track in high school.

1-00:23:59

Soo: I didn't really complete all the subjects, so I continued on with San Francisco Junior College.

Li: Is that San Francisco State now, is that—?

1-00:24:13

Soo: No, it's San Francisco—.

Li: Or City College is it?

1-00:24:17

Soo: City College, yeah.

Li: Were you living at home then while you went to City College?

1-00:24:22

Soo: Yeah, that was a long commute.

Li: Was it? Did you take the train across the bridge?

1-00:24:28

Soo: Train and streetcar.

Li: How long did it take you to get to school?

1-00:24:34

Soo: I don't recall, hour and a half, two hours maybe?

Li: Did you like going to—was it fun going to San Francisco?

1-00:24:40

Soo: Yeah, it was fun going to school there. Fortunately, I was able to become the manager of the basketball team, and so I had some outlet there.

Li: Have you played sports growing up?

1-00:25:06

Soo: No, but I played basketball at the University of California at Berkeley. I was a member of the California "130" basketball team.

Li: No? I imagine you played stickball with your friends.

1-00:25:11

Soo: Yeah, no organized school baseball, basketball or football.

Li: Well, what did you do as manager of the basketball team? What were your responsibilities?

1-00:25:23

Soo: Just to keep track of the score book, be sure the equipment is enough, take care of the needs of the players.

Li: How did you get into that?

1-00:25:55

Soo: I really don't know. I think I applied for some student office work assignment, and for some reason I was assigned to the basketball coach as a typist or something like that I think. From that he asked if I would be willing to be or want to be the manager, and I said, "Certainly."

Li: So would you travel with the team for games?

1-00:26:30

Soo: Yes, yes.

Li: Was that fun to—?

1-00:26:32

Soo: Yeah, it was fun.

Li: What kind of places would you go?

1-00:26:36

Soo: Well, Modesto, mostly Northern California.

Li: That's where you were in 1941, then, when war broke out?

1-00:26:57

Soo: '41, '42.

Li: Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

1-00:27:05

Soo: Yes, at church, it was Sunday. It was Sunday here anyway.

Li: Yeah. Did they make an announcement in church?

1-00:27:14

Soo: Pardon?

Li: Did they make an announcement in church about what had happened?

1-00:27:19

Soo: No, we were outside, and one of the fellows came and mentioned it, said, "Did you hear on the radio?" We hadn't heard here. We didn't have radio at the time. But we didn't have the car, so we wouldn't know. He made an announcement to us.

Li: What was your reaction?

1-00:27:49

Soo: At that time I guess I didn't have a care in the world, so I had no interest because I didn't have any Japanese friends. Oh, I didn't have much contact

with Japanese people anyway, so I had no really pro or con or any feelings about the situation.

Li: Were you aware of the Japanese invasion of China and the war going on there?

1-00:28:18

Soo: Yes, because I know my parents were doing a lot of war effort—they solicited for contributions, donations, and demonstrations.

Li: Did you do any of that work with your church, I mean—?

1-00:28:42

Soo: No, we didn't. I guess I may not have gone to church at the time because this was before '40, we were early '30s, mid-thirties, so I was probably not at the church.

Li: When you heard about Pearl Harbor you didn't immediately think, "Oh, this is going to change my life."

1-00:29:17

Soo: Right, right.

Li: So you went to back to school normally and—?

1-00:29:27

Soo: Right.

Li: What motivated you to leave school and start working in the shipyards?

1-00:29:32

Soo: Well, they were hiring, and they were paying pretty well. Yes, I realized that sooner or later I'd be drafted. So at that time I thought, "Well, maybe I'll get the money," and another friend of mine that I got pretty well acquainted with from church, he and I went and applied, so I would be riding with him to the shipyard from Berkeley.

Li: So it sort of seemed inevitable that you were going to end up being forced to leave school anyway?

1-00:30:08

Soo: Right, right. Since I was going into engineering, it was suitable to do that and continue some training in the engineering field.

Li: What was the application process like for working in the shipyards?

1-00:30:35

Soo: I don't think there was any problem. You just—they were looking for anybody. They were looking at people that didn't understand plans and such, they were hiring them. So I felt comfortable in that.

Li: Did you have a choice about what kind of work you were going to do?

1-00:31:01

Soo: I don't recall. I don't know, maybe they looked at my application and saw what I was doing, what kind of program I was in at school. So they had me doing shipfitting.

Li: Shipfitting, what's that?

1-00:31:22

Soo: Shipfitter. My particular duty, then, was to duplicate the wood template pattern onto thick metal plates. The plates are then cut, rolled and assembled to form the bulkhead and sides of the Liberty ships. They had these templates for the Liberty Ships, and we'd lay them out on metal plates, thick plates, and transfer the plan of each section onto the plates.

Li: What kind of tools did you use to transfer the—?

1-00:32:41

Soo: We used what you might call keel [soapstone], chalk, and once we transferred the pattern in soapstone or chalk, then we would use a center punch and punch into the plate the pattern. Because generally once the plates are marked, they usually end up outside in weather so that the chalk marking may be gone. So the indentations will retain the patterned hammered in the metal plates. We also used clamps, two-pound hammer, and center punch and chalk line.

Li: Would you work in a team to do this work?

1-00:33:45

Soo: Yes, yes.

Li: The same people every shift?

1-00:33:52

Soo: Right, we had the same team.

Li: Did they become friends of yours?

1-00:33:58

Soo: Yes. In fact, one of them had married one of the girls that I had classes with at Berkeley High.

Li: How many people in your—?

1-00:34:13

Soo: There was five.

Li: What was an average day like at the shipyards? How would you get there, and when would you start work?

1-00:34:26

Soo: We were the swing shift. That was, I think, 3:00 to 11:00. I believe. We'd get up and play around, do things. Not useful, just spending time. And then when the time was 2:00 my friend would pick me up, and we'd drive to the Shipyard No. 3. Then we'd spend our eight hours and after that we'd go home, go to sleep. We would also attend some training classes on shipfitting.

Li: Would you bring your dinner, or—?

1-00:35:10

Soo: We'd bring a lunch.

Li: And you were living with your parents?

1-00:35:20

Soo: Yes. I think I made my own lunch.

Li: How much were you making when you first started working there? Do you remember?

1-00:35:32

Soo: I think seventy-five cents an hour.

Li: Do you remember the Rosies? Do you remember women at the factory?

1-00:35:40

Soo: At that time they didn't have that. That synonym.

Li: Were there women working at the factory?

1-00:35:50

Soo: Yes, there were women working there already.

Li: Was that surprising to see women doing that work?

1-00:35:57

Soo: No, because it was obvious they needed workers and were hiring anybody, any body they could get, and I felt that some of them, not women, but some of the employees weren't properly trained or didn't have the knowledge.

Li: But they just were hired anyway?

1-00:36:23

Soo: They were hired anyway. But there were some Asians there already, and there were some Asians that were pretty high level positions.

Li: Like what kind of positions were they?

1-00:36:34

Soo: Superintendent.

Li: Chinese?

1-00:36:41

Soo: Chinese.

Li: Because they had been there long enough that they—?

1-00:36:47

Soo: Apparently so, because they would be probably in charge of a whole shipyard for that shift.

Li: Was that unusual at that time?

1-00:37:03

Soo: I think so.

Li: Because they would be giving orders to Caucasian workers and—

1-00:37:09

Soo: Right.

Li: Do you remember any of the names of—?

1-00:37:15

Soo: No, I don't.

Li: You mentioned that you know Maggie Gee growing up. Her mother worked at the same shipyard, is that right?

1-00:37:27

Soo: Right, right, I didn't know that at the time. She probably worked there after I left.

Li: Was there much socializing at the shipyards?

1-00:37:37

Soo: Didn't have time.

Li: So at lunch break you would just—

1-00:37:41

Soo: Eat. Half hour and that's it.

Li: Get back to work. Did you have a uniform that you had to wear?

1-00:37:43

Soo: No.

Li: Was the labor segregated? Were certain groups kept at certain kinds of jobs, or was it pretty—?

1-00:38:03

Soo: I wasn't aware of that if there was. Because I didn't have time, and I didn't wander around to see what was going on elsewhere.

Li: And your group of five was mixed?

1-00:38:20

Soo: Yeah.

Li: There wasn't any tension between—?

1-00:38:29

Soo: No, no.

Li: Do you remember the Japanese being moved to the camps?

1-00:38:42

Soo: I guess subconsciously I was aware of that. I knew things were changing, but I didn't pay much attention, or it didn't have any impact on me.

Li: Had many of your friends enlisted after the war broke out?

1-00:39:03

Soo: Yes, several did.

Li: Were you tempted at all to join?

1-00:39:14

Soo: No, I wasn't. I wasn't interested.

Li: Do you know what their reasons were for enlisting?

1-00:39:23

Soo: I think they probably enlisted because they had a choice of assignment.

Li: What was considered a good assignment?

1-00:39:38

Soo: Well, I guess my assignment was. It wasn't by choice, though. But it worked out that way. I would guess officer training. In the Air Force. I wanted to go into meteorology because they had a program at Cal Berkeley, and I figure if I could get into that, I'd stay home for a while. And get some education as well.

Li: Do you remember when you got your draft notice?

1-00:40:16

Soo: No I don't.

Li: I think you mentioned 1943? Does that sound about right?

1-00:40:23

Soo: '43, right. Well, I was inducted into the Army on February 26, 1943.

Li: How did you feel about being drafted?

1-00:40:34

Soo: I don't think I had any problem, any feeling one way or the other. Being drafted was something that everybody had to do at the time, and I guess I wasn't looking too far ahead as to options in the service.

Li: Do you remember feeling patriotic?

1-00:41:03

Soo: No. Probably not until I got in.

Li: What was life like in the service? What was that like?

1-00:41:16

Soo: It was okay. I did what I had to do, did the best I could. Fortunately, my scores were well enough to be accepted in the programs that I had applied for. So I feel comfortable with that, and I feel comfortable with what happened after that.

Li: You said you were interested in meteorology.

1-00:41:55

Soo: Right.

Li: So you were accepted into the meteorology program—

1-00:41:57

Soo: No, no. They—at the time they weren't accepting any more applicants, and so they said they would send me to Chanute Field outside of Urbana—Chicago, Illinois—to train to be a weather observer. And it's at that time—when I got there, that's when I applied for the navigation position.

Li: Because you were in the Army, is that right?

1-00:42:47

Soo: Right.

Li: Why did you apply for navigation; what was it about that that interested you?

1-00:42:58

Soo: Well, it was that or pilot or bombardier, and I felt navigation had more college training or would provide me with additional training and education that I could use later on.

Li: So you knew you were going to be involved in the Army Air Corps.

1-00:43:20

Soo: No, no I didn't. I was inducted in the Army, and I was sent to the Monterey Presidio, then to Fresno Fairgrounds, and there I took the battery of tests and scored high enough that I would go into the Army Air Corps.

Li: That's how they decided based on your scores on those tests.

1-00:43:53

Soo: Right, and that's how I got into weather observer training—

Li: What were the, I'm sorry—

1-00:43:58

Soo: And then subsequently my application for navigators was approved for the cadet program. And into navigation specifically.

Li: Do you remember what the tests were like, what kinds of things they measured?

1-00:44:21

Soo: General knowledge, technical knowledge, math, and just general aptitude.

Li: What did you think of the navigation training? Was it interesting?

1-00:44:36

Soo: Yes.

Li: That was in Urbana, or was that—?

1-00:44:50

Soo: No, no, that was at San Marcos, Texas. Then during the time I was going to the observer school they finally approved my application and sent me down to Miami Beach for pre-cadet training.

Li: Did you have time to sort of enjoy the places that you were in? Did you get to explore Miami Beach or—?

1-00:45:43

Soo: No, no time off. By the time we were finished training, we were sent to the next assignment. From there I went to this college training detachment for supposedly either ten or twelve weeks, must have been ten weeks of college training.

Li: And where was that?

1-00:46:11

Soo: Cedar Rapids. Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Li: Were you at college with regular students?

1-00:46:19

Soo: No, just fellow cadets. The regular students were kept separate from the cadets.

Li: What were the other cadets like? Were they like you?

1-00:46:32

Soo: Same.

Li: Same?

1-00:46:31

Soo: Yes. I don't know whether they were volunteers, or draftees. I suspect most of them were volunteers. I kind of think that I was fortunate to be able to get into the program since I was a draftee.

Li: Oh. Did you make any significant friendships at this time in your training?

1-00:46:54

Soo: No.

Li: No? Were people pretty friendly?

1-00:47:04

Soo: I wouldn't say friendly, but not hostile. They had no adverse effect on me. Come to think, I probably was the only Chinese in any of the groups I was in. Yeah.

Li: But people weren't making comments or—?

1-00:47:35

Soo: No.

Li: Was it competitive, the training?

1-00:47:42

Soo: Sure.

Li: They would rank people and—

1-00:47:54

Soo: Right, mentally, physically and scholastically. Yeah, because they would be washing people out that didn't perform.

Li: So not a friendly experience.

1-00:48:03

Soo: No, right, right.

Li: Did you enjoy it, the training?

1-00:48:07

Soo: Yeah, I had no problem with it. I competed with them as well I think. Yeah, then after Coe College, they sent me to Santa Ana Army Air Base for further—screening, From there they sent me to San Marcos Army Air Base for the navigation training. San Marcos, Texas.

Li: Do you know what year that was?

1-00:48:46

Soo: When I was sent there?

Li: Yeah.

1-00:48:52

Soo: Yeah, 1944.

Li: So the training was long. It was over a year?

1-00:48:58

Soo: Well, yeah, because I went to weather observer school in Chanute Field, Illinois, Miami Beach, Florida, and Coe College, Cedar Rapids; and to Santa Ana. Well, you're talking about two or three months at each location.

Li: Did you adjust pretty well to military life, the structure, and the—?

1-00:49:23

Soo: I think so. Yeah, military bearing, they recognized that I was okay and did well enough in it.

Li: You were getting paid at this time, right?

1-00:49:43

Soo: Yes.

Li: Was the pay pretty good for—?

1-00:49:51

Soo: Yes. Well, we were paid as cadets, so we were getting more than a private or corporal. Then when you're on flying status, you got flying status pay on top of that.

Li: Was that money going back to your family or just putting it in a bank account for later?

1-00:50:10

Soo: Both. Yeah, I sent some home because I don't smoke, I don't drink. So my needs were minimal.

Li: Were any of your brothers or sisters—did they join the service?

- 1-00:50:31
Soo: My older brother was drafted, but he was killed overseas in Saipan.
- Li: Was he a Marine, or what was he?
- 1-00:50:41
Soo: Army.
- Li: Army. Was that while you were in training or—?
- 1-00:50:50
Soo: Yes. That was when I was at—no, I'd finished training, I was assigned to a crew. In Gulfport.
- Li: Louisiana?
- 1-00:51:06
Soo: Is it Mississippi?
- Li: Mississippi, Okay. Were you close to your brother?
- 1-00:51:15
Soo: Somewhat, somewhat.
- Li: Did it make you nervous about your own service?
- 1-00:51:25
Soo: No, I didn't give much thought to that. I guess I figured, "What's going to happen will happen."
- Li: After you finished your training in Texas, is that when you were then assigned to a crew?
- 1-00:51:44
Soo: Right. I was sent home for leave. Following my leave I was assigned to Tampa, Florida and then to Gulfport, Mississippi.
- Li: Then you were given the crew that you were going to work with.
- 1-00:51:53
Soo: Right.
- Li: How many people were in a crew?
- 1-00:51:56
Soo: Initially there was ten; then when we were sent to overseas, they reduced it to nine.
- Li: Can you tell me a little bit about the other crew members?

1-00:52:17

Soo: Yeah, the pilot ,W.W. Daniels, and co-pilot B.G. Rieth were pretty good. The pilot was pretty young. I think he was nineteen or twenty, and he was in charge of the whole crew, in charge of the plane.

Li: Wow.

1-00:52:40

Soo: The co-pilot was an older fellow. I think he may have been the oldest in the group, twenty-six or something like that. But there was another fellow, P.J. McCaffrey, he was a gunner, waist gunner, he may have been twenty-some odd years. The rest were fairly young, or younger, nineteen and twenty. There was one fellow, M.R. McInnis—I think it was McInnis—he had lied about his age. He was seventeen. And the radio man, W.A. James, was a pretty good guy. But I entered into the crew half way through the training because, as I mentioned, I was at Gulfport when I was notified that my brother was killed at Saipan. So I got leave to go home. When I came back they assigned me to another crew, and at that time—so I missed half of the training as a crew member.

Li: Was that hard to come in half way through?

1-00:54:28

Soo: It wasn't hard to fit in, but it was difficult to get to know them. Because I'm coming in unknown, and Asian at that.

Li: There weren't any other Asians on the crew.

1-00:54:45

Soo: No, there were no other Asians around. I guess the only Asian I saw was probably at the mess hall. So I really didn't get to know the crew, except maybe the pilot and the radio man. The radio man wanted—was short on algebra education, so I was helping him at the base, when we had time, to teach him some algebra.

Li: What kind of planes were you flying?

1-00:55:38

Soo: B-17s.

Li: B-17s? Where were you on the plane? Did you have a—?

1-00:55:51

Soo: Yes, I was in the front in the nose, just behind the nose on the left side.

Li: Who is closest to you?

1-00:55:59

Soo: I'm sitting facing out the left wing, say, and to my right would be the nose, and the bombardier would be sitting right in the nose.

Li: Would you chat and talk on the plane and—?

1-00:56:19

Soo: No, not really.

Li: Can you tell me about your first mission, your first assignment?

1-00:56:32

Soo: I don't recall the first, second mission. The only one I recall is the third mission.

Li: When you were shipped overseas, what base were you sent to?

1-00:56:44

Soo: We flew over. We flew over, went to Greenland, Iceland, and into Scotland, and then we were taken by truck to the base. To the 388th Bombardment Group at Knettishall.

Li: You mentioned before that you didn't see many Chinese around.

1-00:57:12

Soo: Didn't see any.

Li: Any. So were people surprised that you could speak English, were they surprised to see you there or—?

1-00:57:23

Soo: No, no, because they knew I was in the crew already, so obviously I could speak English, and I was an officer. And the fact that I wasn't there very long anyway—so base-wise I hadn't had a chance to get familiar with the base or with any others, and even with my crew I didn't get to know them very well. But subsequently I found out there was another Chinese. He was a very, very, very good pilot, was very highly thought of.

Li: Stationed at the same base?

1-00:58:23

Soo: Stationed at the base before my time.

Li: You said you don't remember your first or second mission, you just remember the third? Can you tell me about that?

1-00:58:37

Soo: Well, our target was railroad yard at Hamm, Germany, and we were approaching the target—

Li: Sorry, actually, you know, I just realized—

Begin Audiofile 2:

Li: This is Robin Li, speaking with Alfred Soo in El Cerrito, California, November 9, 2011, Interview 1, Tape 2, part of the Rosie the Riveter National Home Front Oral History Project. You were just about to tell me about your third mission, the one that you remember.

2-00:00:47

Soo: Right, the third mission. That was November 26, 1944. Our target that day was the marshaling yards, the railroad yards in Hamm, Germany. At that time Hamm was a large railroad depot for Germany. We were approaching our target, just beginning our bomb run on the target. Up ahead I see black smoke, black clouds exploding ahead of us. And I was going to comment that we were approaching flak area, although it was light. But it was there, and before I could say anything, apparently our plane was hit, and I was blown out of the plane. But I wasn't aware of that situation until I became conscious. And how the chute got open I don't know, but it did get open, and I was floating down, and it was getting kind of cold, and my hands were real cold, and I was missing my gloves and some of my warm leather clothing. At that time—

Well, before I continue—before taking off on our mission I picked up a tether from the supply clerk, and the tether had a hook and a ring on the end so that I could put it onto my harness and put the chute onto the hook so that if something happened, the parachute would come along with me. And that day was the first time I knew of it because the soldier ahead of me, as we were getting supplies, had asked for it. And I asked the clerk, who was disbursing the equipment, what it was for, and he said, "He's the ball turret gunner, and he's in the ball turret, and he wanted to be able to hang onto his parachute if something happens." And my situation was similar, so I wanted to do the same thing because I'm usually writing on a desk and the chest pack would be in my way. So with this tether arrangement, the parachute would follow wherever I went with my harness. And that was what happened that day, on November 26.

Li: You first regained consciousness while you were falling through the air.

2-00:04:32

Soo: Yes, as I was getting lower elevation where the air was—where the oxygen was heavier. Regaining consciousness, and I really didn't think to see what was missing or what happened; all I could see was red flames coming out of the anti-aircraft guns, or the—flames coming out of the barrels of the guns down below.

Li: Were they aimed at you, or aimed at—?

2-00:05:26

Soo: It apparently—it seemed like it was aimed at me, but it wasn't.

Li: Could you see other chutes around you?

2-00:05:35

Soo: I didn't take a good look to look around to see if there were any other chutes, but I did find out that there were four other chutes that did come down, that were sightable because we lost four of the others. So there's a chance that they may not have been able to get their chutes open or even have the chutes on. And so, as I was going down, I finally landed in a farmer's field. And I tried to ditch the parachute, but there were farmers nearby on the ground before I was able to do that. And later on there were a couple of soldiers, Wehrmachts, or civilian soldiers similar to myself except they were Germans. And so they took me over and headed towards a youth camp which was nearby, and on the way walking there I could hear a squishing noise as I was walking to the youth camp, and I looked down and noticed my sheepskin lined boots were gone, but my shoes were still on, and red blood was oozing out the seams. Fortunately, I did not lose consciousness or have any ill effects. When we got to the youth camp I stayed there, I guess—now, this was getting into late afternoon, so by the time we got to the youth camp it was kind of dark, and so they just left me in one of their offices, and I just stayed there for a while with no treatment, no first aid. But fortunately, I guess the wounds I had were such that they had coagulated or the bleeding stopped.

Li: Had you been wounded in the fall? Is that—?

2-00:08:23

Soo: I think the wounds were from shrapnel that penetrated the plane and into my legs and possibly injury from my flak suit that was penetrated by flak, so I noticed there were some cut areas in my back shoulder, right side and shoulder.

Li: Were you in pain?

2-00:08:53

Soo: No, I had no pain and no nausea, not unconscious except when I was out of the plane in the air. And I don't recall whether it was immediate or a short time later that I was brought up to what seemed to be a first aid station, but they didn't do anything for me, and so they took me back out to the car or to the wagon, horse-drawn wagon which I was in, and they brought me to the hospital.

Li: Were there any other prisoners of war with you?

2-00:09:53

Soo: No, I was the only one in the area. There were two others at the hospital at the same time, but they were together, and I was separated. They did not know who had survived and what happened to any of us.

Li: What were you thinking or feeling as you land in the field and the Germans approached and—?

2-00:10:27

Soo: I wasn't really cognizant of the danger I was in and the precarious situation. All I was thinking of, where I am and what happened to the other eight people, because it was a long time before I ever found out. I didn't find out until I was liberated.

Li: Oh, wow. Did you speak any German?

2-00:11:01

Soo: No, no. The doctor spoke some English because he had done some training at London. That was interesting.

Li: This was the doctor at the hospital they took you to.

2-00:11:23

Soo: Right.

Li: This was a military hospital, or a—?

2-00:11:32

Soo: I guess it might have been a military hospital because there were quite a few soldiers that I noticed at different times. In fact, there was one who looked like Asian, but I didn't get a chance to talk to him at all to find out whether he was or was not.

Li: These were American soldiers?

2-00:11:49

Soo: No. In Germany.

Li: In Germany, okay.

2-00:11:53

Soo: Germans.

Li: At this point in the war how much did you—how familiar were you with the Nazis and the things they were doing?

2-00:12:09

Soo: I wasn't familiar with anything other than they were on the other side.

Li: Did they treat your wounds at the hospital?

2-00:12:21

Soo: Yeah, they treated me. They took care of it, and I felt they gave me the comparable treatment that they were giving their own. So I guess there was

probably two or three months, maybe December, maybe close to three months, before they felt I was able to go on my own.

Li: You spent three months at that hospital?

2-00:13:01

Soo: About three months.

Li: Did you learn any German—?

2-00:13:07

Soo: No. But there were nurses. The nurses were the nuns. The nuns were the nurses, so they were taking care of some of the wounds and dressing. But none of them spoke English either.

Li: You mentioned that there were two other American soldiers?

2-00:13:48

Soo: Yes, those were my co-pilot and my radio man.

Li: Did you have communication with them, or did you just see them.

2-00:13:54

Soo: No, I never did see them.

Li: You just learned afterwards that they had been there.

2-00:13:58

Soo: Afterwards, right. Never did see them until we got back home. I never did see my co-pilot.

Li: So you're in the hospital and your wounds are healing. Do you have a sense of what's going to happen to you next? Did they tell you?

2-00:14:22

Soo: No, no.

Li: So after three months what happened?

2-00:14:27

Soo: After three months the guard and myself were walking from train station to train station to try to get a train to Frankfurt, which was my destination. So, this is on foot from where I was to Frankfurt, and in between several stops for interrogation purposes.

Li: Were you scared at this time? Were people polite?

2-00:15:19

Soo: They didn't seem concerned, but—maybe because the hospital had taken all my clothing so they had no clothing that would fit me except a German

uniform. That was not a good thing because they could have disposed of me and say I was posing as a spy, an American spy in German uniform. But we were—it was near lunch time at this particular situation when the guard and I were going into a restaurant to get something to eat, but while I was there apparently there was an officer, who noticed that I wasn't in proper uniform and wasn't using good military German manners. And he was asking the guard what was going on, and the guard was apparently explaining to him what I was doing and why we were there. Apparently, the officer wasn't happy with the situation, so he told the guard to take me out of the restaurant and go elsewhere. So we did, and ultimately, finally we got to—I guess Wetzlar; there's an interrogation facility. So I was there for I think a couple days, and we continued on to Frankfurt, and then there was another—I don't know what kind of unit it was. I was sent there, I guess, for processing to see where I should go. After I think eight days, or a week, I was sent to Nuremburg. There was a big temporary prisoner of war camp.

Li: When they were interrogating you, were they, did they want information about—?

2-00:18:09

Soo: Who I was, and what I was doing, and who was the others, and that was it, because they didn't know whether I was flying or not. Supposedly, I just gave my name, rank and serial number, but you can find out from that [shows document to Robin Li] because my mother had moved.

Li: So a fellow POW gave you—this was your prisoner of war document—

2-00:18:43

Soo: Right.

Li: —that you said your friend found after liberation—?

2-00:18:48

Soo: Yeah, I have the whole—I have the large one.

Li: So they had information about where your mother lived, but you didn't give them that information?

2-00:18:54

Soo: I didn't know she had moved.

Li: So they knew she had moved, and you didn't.

2-00:18:58

Soo: Right.

Li: Wow. How do you think they got that information?

2-00:19:02

Soo: I don't know.

Li: Like in the—

2-00:19:06

Soo: I don't know.

Li: So you're wearing your German military uniform.

2-00:19:10

Soo: Yeah, right.

Li: But did anyone act surprised that you didn't look like a typical American in terms of your features, that you—?

2-00:19:19

Soo: No.

Li: No, no one commented or asked about it?

2-00:19:22

Soo: Maybe the officer did. He might have been the only one. I guess he was an officer, so he felt it was his responsibility to notice the differences, and my neat uniform.

Li: But no one else about you being Chinese?

2-00:19:42

Soo: No. Well, the doctor did.

Li: What did the doctor say?

2-00:19:46

Soo: He know I was Chinese. He was commenting, "How come he's so young? Sending kids over there." I just laughed at him.

Li: Did you have the opportunity to write a letter home or communication?

2-00:20:04

Soo: No, no. I did, I do have postcard and paper that they did provide, but I never did write. By the time I was able to write, I was headed home anyway.

Li: So you were put in a prisoner of war camp in Nuremburg?

2-00:20:30

Soo: Nuremburg, then later transferred into Moosburg VIIA, roman numeral VIIA. Finally wound up there, and that's where I was liberated.

Li: How long were you a prisoner of war altogether?

2-00:20:48

Soo: A total of five months.

Li: From November 26—

2-00:20:58

Soo: To May, yeah.

Li: Did you have a sense of what your fate would be? Did you know you would make it home at some point? Did you—?

2-00:21:03

Soo: I just assumed that. I didn't think that I would not get home because at night and day you can hear our bombers coming during the day, plane after plane after plane. So in my mind it was just a matter of time. Although the German doctor did come in and says they're winning because they had some success at the Battle of the Bulge.

Li: Oh, so you heard about that.

2-00:21:49

Soo: No, not then.

Li: After you left the hospital you were well and able, and you got to Nuremburg and then Moosburg. Were you able to talk to other prisoners of war and—?

2-00:22:10

Soo: Yes, but for some reason we never did talk about our situation.

Li: What would you talk about?

2-00:22:19

Soo: Where they're from, who won the World Series, [laughs] and that's about it. Yeah, I don't ever recall thinking about what's going to happen. I don't think any—well, I don't know if the other people did or not.

Li: What was an average day like when you were in camp? Would they feed you? Would they—?

2-00:23:03

Soo: Yeah, at my compound we had a communities kitchen. In other words, okay, at the Nuremburg camp, when we were leaving other soldiers were saying that, "Go down here, down the road, there's a shack there and in the shack there's a lot of Red Cross parcels," and they said, "You can go down there and carry what you can," because—we were going on a troop train consisting of box cars. So I went there, and for some reason I don't know how I managed but each Red Cross parcel was ten pounds each, so I was able to carry four, so that's forty pounds. And that's after being in the hospital for the length of time without any exercise or muscle toning or maintenance.

So when I got to the Moosburg, I turned those over to the community kitchen, and they combined that with whatever food the Germans had provided for our breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Li: So other prisoners or war ran into the same thing.

2-00:24:41

Soo: Ran into the same thing, yeah.

Li: So what would you do all day during that time—?

2-00:24:52

Soo: I don't really remember.

Li: So you didn't work.

2-00:24:54

Soo: No, officers were not required to work. Enlisted men, sergeants and above were not required to work, only privates and corporals. That's why all our—I think almost all our enlisted men were staff sergeants or above. They got promotions the minute they were overseas.

Li: Is that in case they were taken as prisoners of war?

2-00:25:20

Soo: Right, the Air Force people, they wouldn't have to do that, and officers weren't required. So unless they wanted to volunteer.

Li: So what was your rank at this time?

2-00:25:30

Soo: Second Lieutenant. It was a short time, so I had no chance of promotion. Gee, what I did all day? I don't know.

Li: Because you didn't smoke.

2-00:25:46

Soo: I didn't smoke. I guess I must have walked around the camp, talked nonsense with each other, I guess. Where they're from, who they are. Yet, you don't know who is loyal and who's not loyal, so even in camp—

Li: Oh, yeah?

2-00:26:23

Soo: So—oh, on the troop train that we were in—was taking us to Moosburg, just outside of Nuremburg the train stopped, and we all got out, jumped off the box car, and then we heard planes coming, so we dove into a ditch thinking they were Germans, German planes, but it wasn't. It was two of our P51 pilot, P51 plane, and they strafed the front of the railroad engine, and unfortunately one of the fellows that I had gotten acquainted with was killed by one of the

bullets by our own forces. Of course, the two pilots didn't know it because they were low, and the Red Cross was on top of the box cars. When they did approach close enough to recognize us, they kept on going, circled around, waved their wings to acknowledge that they made a mistake, and there was nothing else they could do. And so—

Li: Awful.

2-00:27:56

Soo: That was unfortunate because he went out there to get some water for tea because that's where all the hot water is from the engine, the steam.

Li: Were most of the other prisoners young like you, because you were only twenty, right?

2-00:28:21

Soo: Right, twenty. Yeah, they were young, from eighteen to twenty except for the two that were older, at that time older.

Li: So did you see your co-pilot and radio man at camp at this point?

2-00:28:42

Soo: No, no, I didn't see anybody. I saw the pilot and the flight engineer—oh, no, I saw the flight engineer at the hospital once. They brought him in, and we didn't call any names, we just said Hi, just acknowledged each other, but we didn't acknowledge knowing each other. But I saw him then and didn't see him until we got back home. But I saw the pilot after we were liberated at one of the Camp Lucky Strikes, they call it.

Li: What was the Camp Lucky Strike?

2-00:29:33

Soo: Camp Lucky Strikes were where we were reassembling—all the POWs that were liberated and getting acknowledged and getting reclothed and acknowledged and sent back to relocation camp, I guess. Of course, and also to be shipped home.

Li: So do you remember liberation? Do you remember that day?

2-00:30:44

Soo: Yes. In the morning, people were coming in telling us that the Germans have left; they had left the camp, and we were on our own.

Li: They were just gone that morning.

2-00:30:58

Soo: They were gone that morning, yeah.

Li: Is that how you knew the war was over because the Germans left?

2-00:31:07

Soo: Germans left, and yes, and I guess some of General Patton's Army's troops were there maintaining order, I guess. Really, I don't recall what else, who came in and got us organized in getting us to the relocation camp.

Li: Do you remember what the date was when you—? I guess you didn't have a calendar probably.

[temporary tape break]

Li: We were talking about liberation. You said it was April 29. That was 1945?

2-00:32:13

Soo: Yes, yes.

Li: And they moved you. It was Patton's army that was—

Soo: Patton's forces

Li: How soon were you able to communicate with your family back home?

2-00:32:27

Soo: Not until I got home.

Li: Not until, so when were you able to come home?

2-00:32:39

Soo: That's a date I should know. I don't think I have that date.

Li: Were you in Europe for several more months after—?

2-00:32:55

Soo: It wasn't immediate. Yeah, because there were so many of us coming home since the war was over, and I was in—we were in the main land in France. There was limited ship space, so Air Force personnel were canvassing which of us were in the Air Force and which of us would be interested in going back, flying over to England for two weeks, and then leave for home from Southampton.

Li: By ship?

2-00:33:56

Soo: Yes, by ship. But since they had the planes, they would be willing to fly us over in England and bring us into London and be on our own for two weeks and then report to Southampton to going home. That sounded like a pretty good deal for me. So four of us did that, Air Force personnel. So we did, we got together and got sleeping quarters in London, four of us.

Li: What was it like to be in London at the end of the war?

2-00:34:40

Soo: That's the first time I'd been there, even when I was at the base. It was good. We were on our own wandering around, seeing the sights. One day I went back to the base and, not being there very long, I didn't know anybody there, and they didn't know who I was either. So they had to find out who, my name, they had to check, and they found that I was there, and so—

Li: What were Londoners like at the end of the war?

2-00:35:28

Soo: They were very friendly, very appreciative. Even now they are. We went over early this year.

Li: With your family?

2-00:35:40

Soo: Two of my daughters.

Li: How was your health after being a prisoner of war?

2-00:35:57

Soo: Except for the wounds—they were healing—my health was okay.

Li: And we haven't talked about this, but when did you get married and have children. Was that before you left or—?

2-00:36:11

Soo: No, no, after. I didn't know her until I came back.

Li: So you spent two weeks in London and then—

2-00:36:25

Soo: Then we flew home—no, we got on a ship, hospital ship and got to New York, and then went to Camp—I forget now, there's a camp in New York for processing—and then took a train back to Marysville and got separated there for thirty days and then sent to report to Santa Monica.

Li: How did you feel about the war ending?

2-00:37:25

Soo: Gee, it's been so long. I still felt indifference. I just felt that what's going to happen has happened, and everything's working out well so far. The wounds are healing. Mentally I seemed fine. It seemed like everything at home is the same. My friends are still here. I guess I still felt comfortable with what was going on. Had no ill feelings of anybody. Oh, maybe I had ill feeling about Japanese, because they're the ones who killed my brother, but I can't—in the present day that's not people we know that are doing it. It's just a certain group.

Okay, I came back and got married in 1949.

Li: How did you meet your wife?

2-00:38:53

Soo: At the church.

Li: What was Berkeley like when you came back? Did it seem changed?

2-00:39:10

Soo: No, I didn't see any change, or I didn't notice any change.

Li: And your parents were well and—?

2-00:39:18

Soo: Were well, yeah, and they were still living in Oakland.

Li: Oh, they had moved to Oakland?

2-00:39:23

Soo: Yes, they had, but we still had the house in Berkeley.

Li: Did they know, after you had been shot down, that your plane had been shot down?

2-00:39:36

Soo: They knew I was missing, that's all.

Li: Just missing in action.

2-00:39:57

Soo: They knew I was missing. Of course, the government didn't know what happened, because even the people at the base, even the people we were flying with, they didn't know how many survivors there were.

Li: How many people survived from your crew?

2-00:40:12

Soo: Five.

Li: Five.

2-00:40:15

Soo: Only two now.

Li: When did you see each other again?

2-00:40:24

Soo: The first time, the four of us, except the co-pilot, never did see the co-pilot.

Li: You knew he survived, but you didn't know—

2-00:40:33

Soo: Right, we had a reunion, but he wasn't interested in attending the reunion. Back in 1977.

Li: So that was the next time you saw them.

2-00:40:44

Soo: Saw all four together.

Li: So since November 26, 1944 you didn't see them until 1977?

2-00:40:55

Soo: I may have seen the pilot and the radio man on occasion because they had some business, they flew out here, and I think I got to see them before 1977. That was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the 388th Bomb Group Reunion.

Li: When did your family find out that you were still alive?

2-00:41:33

Soo: Before I got home. My radio man's mother called my mom and told them that I was safe, and I was okay.

Li: I can't imagine getting that phone call. That was several months before you—

2-00:42:00

Soo: Oh, maybe it was a couple months. Let's see, it was May, June, yeah, a couple months, really, because April, that was the end, the 29th. So that's May, and I was still a week or so at the relocation camp and a couple of weeks over in London, and another week transporting over to New York, and another week or so processing. Yeah.

Li: What were your plans for after the war, like were you thinking about what would happen next?

2-00:42:55

Soo: Well, I would probably go back to school, continue when I left, other than working in the shipyard.

Li: Is that what you did when you came back to Berkeley?

2-00:43:07

Soo: Yes.

Li: Did you start back again at City College?

2-00:43:09

Soo: No, I started back at the University, Cal.

Li: Were you part of the GI Bill?

2-00:43:13

Soo: Right, and Berkeley was pretty good, then. They were accepting—any soldier who was able, they were accepting. Not like now, tough now. And expensive.

Li: So you started Cal. And did you go back to studying engineering?

2-00:43:35

Soo: Engineering, right.

Li: What year did you graduate from Cal?

2-00:43:41

Soo: '51.

Li: What kind of engineering were you—?

2-00:43:44

Soo: Civil. Civil and traffic.

Li: So you married in 1949?

2-00:43:54

Soo: Right.

Li: Is your wife—was she from Berkeley?

2-00:43:59

Soo: No she was from Armona, Fresno area. Hanford. I don't know if you know—

Li: And she's also Chinese American?

2-00:44:09

Soo: Yeah.

Li: Did you have any children?

2-00:44:12

Soo: Five, four girls, one boy.

Li: What are their names?

2-00:44:20

Soo: Linda, Charmaine, Cynthia, Rodney, Nancy.

Li: Did you settle in Berkeley?

2-00:44:39

Soo: We settled here. We settled in Berkeley until February 1956.

Li: Was it easy to find a job after you finished Cal?

- 2-00:45:03
Soo: No problem.
- Li: Where were you working?
- 2-00:45:05
Soo: With the State, Cal Trans.
- Li: That was were big time for Cal Trans; there was a lot of building.
- 2-00:45:21
Soo: Right, big program. Lot of Asians, too.
- Li: Really? Were they people who had come through on the GI Bill or—?
- 2-00:45:29
Soo: I think so.
- Li: What was some of the projects that you were working on in the fifties, do you remember?
- 2-00:45:35
Soo: MacArthur Freeway, there was a section in the MacArthur freeway. Nimitz Freeway, Warren Freeway, and other smaller projects and then individual projects.
- Li: Did any of the training that you had had either at the shipyards or in the military help you with your work later on?
- 2-00:46:16
Soo: Maybe some of the math because you don't use the math you learn at school, but I'm sure some of the background carried over.
- Li: What year did you move to El Cerrito?
- 2-00:46:36
Soo: '56, February in '56.
- Li: Why El Cerrito? What did you like about it?
- 2-00:46:43
Soo: A friend of mine designed these homes, and so he made them available to us, and we took him up on that.
- Li: Were there many Chinese in this area?
- 2-00:46:56
Soo: No, there was a couple of Japanese below.
- Li: Okay, because I know in the fifties it was difficult for a lot of Chinese.

2-00:47:09

Soo: Right.

Li: Had you looked elsewhere?

2-00:47:12

Soo: We looked out in Moraga because I was doing some work out in Livermore area, that area. We found out this is probably more suitable. School was good, new school, good program at that time.

Li: Overall, do you feel like your war time experiences helped you with your career later in life, your education?

2-00:48:03

Soo: Well, it helped the GI Bill for one, and the benefits of being a serviceman.

Li: Did you feel more American having been in the military? More patriotic or—?

2-00:48:30

Soo: I think so. I think so. No less anyway. At least I can say I did my part, willingly or otherwise.

Li: Did you ever feel like a war hero, being shot down over Germany and being held a prisoner of war—

2-00:49:10

Soo: I feel I'm an exception to the group. There's a lot of them, but that's still a small percentage, but of course that doesn't compare now with what's going on over in Iran and such. There's a lot more wounded and permanent injured. Affected mentally as well as physically. So I feel bad about that part.

Li: You feel like World War II was—

2-00:49:43

Soo: More humane.

Li: More humane?

2-00:49:58

Soo: Well, maybe not. Maybe the torture was there but not with Americans, because you hear about the Serbs, and Germany and the Jewish, and then Japan and China.

Li: Did you find out about all of that afterwards? The Holocaust and the camps and the—?

2-00:50:31

Soo: Yes, yeah.

Li: Did you feel proud to be a part of ending that? Did that feel—?

2-00:50:41

Soo: Oh, I don't know if I ended it or not. I just feel that, willing or unwilling, did what I did. But yet I had no part in doing any damage, and that I was safe to come back home.

Li: Well, thank you so much for talking with me. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you—?

2-00:51:21

Soo: Oh, a little—

Li: What's that?

2-00:51:25

Soo: Like on the ship is a good thing. On the ship coming back from Southampton the first day I was wandering around the ship, and I came across an Asian, and he was part of the crew, and they were part of the cooking staff, so he said, "Are you Chinese?" I said, "Yes." And I said, "Are you?" And he said, "Yeah," and so he said, "Where are you eating?" I said, "Down below where my bunk is." He said, "No, don't do that. When you're hungry, you come, you follow me right now; I'll show you where to go." So he took me up to where the chefs and the cooking staff—and he said, "You come here if you're hungry, whatever you want, we have choi, all that kind of stuff." He said, "After the movie, or do you go to the movie?" I said, "Yeah." "After the movie, you come upstairs and have some ice cream and stuff." So I never did go to the mess for food. Always ate upstairs.

Li: Had you had Chinese food since you enlisted?

2-00:52:58

Soo: No, no. Didn't have any good food, so that was great.

Li: Was he the first Chinese serviceman you talked to?

2-00:53:06

Soo: No, another one I talked to was in Gulfport. And he was working at the officer's mess.

Li: Could you sort of see that Asians were getting directed into that kind of work in the military?

2-00:53:26

Soo: No, because I had—at Tampa there was a, I think, 555 service group that had all Asians. They went overseas in Asia, Burma and such, and I saw some friends there. That was before I left for Gulfport.

Li: What was the 555 service group, what kind of—?

- 2-00:54:00
Soo: I think it was the Air Force.
- Li: Air Force? And there were people that you—?
- 2-00:54:04
Soo: They were Chinese.
- Li: Were they Chinese you knew from California?
- 2-00:54:07
Soo: Yeah, from here, from Berkeley.
- Li: Yeah?
- 2-00:54:09
Soo: Yeah, they were—most of the fellows I knew were officers.
- Li: I read some statistic that said something really high like 40 or 45 percent of the Chinese who served during World War II were part of the Army Air Force. Do you think that's because of the kind of testing that was done for those programs?
- 2-00:54:39
Soo: Yeah. In fact since you brought it up, I have a book that was written by one of the fellows who had gone to Santa Ana Air Force Base, and in there he wrote—this is a cadet booklet so it's on the life of a cadet—he said, “Those who were accepted in navigation for the highest-level knowledge—it doesn't mean that the pilots weren't good, but in order to be assigned to train for navigation you had to had a high level of competency.
- Li: I mean, it's both math and engineering and—
- 2-00:55:47
Soo: Math and engineering and general knowledge aptitude, and I think that's where he left it.
- Li: That there are a high number of Chinese who were in—
- 2-00:56:02
Soo: I think. That's the reason there's a high number of Chinese in the Air Force, because quite a few people I knew were navigators.
- Li: Really? Interesting. And perhaps like the emphasis on education that Chinese families place—
- Soo: Right.
- Li: And so do you keep in touch still with some of your friends from the war years?

2-00:56:33

Soo: They're gone. Only one.

Li: Was there anything else, any other stories or anecdotes that you would want to share?

2-00:56:56

Soo: I can't offhand. I'm sure there's a lot of it.

Li: Well, thank you so much for—

2-00:57:03

Soo: No, I think that's it.

Li: Thank you so much for talking to me today. I really appreciate it.

[End of Interview]