

UNITED STATES: Social history



Gal with a gun . . . Holding her original riveting gun and a photo of herself at age 22, Elinor Otto (98), known as the "Last Rosie the Riveter", poses with members of Pin-ups for Vets, female veterans and active-duty service members wearing 1940s period clothing during her visit to a veterans' home in Chula Vista. PHOTOS: TNS

Working on the plane gang

DAVID HERNANDEZ
of the San Diego Union-Tribune

ELINOR Otto was in her 20s when she picked up a riveting gun for the first time at Rohr Aircraft Corp in Chula Vista, California, during World War 2.

One of the original Rosie the Riveters, Otto, now 98, returned for the first time on August 12 to the place where she began her nearly 70-year career on the aircraft production line.

"Walking in there, 73 years [later], it brought back a lot of nostalgia," said Otto, who lives in Long Beach.

The company now operates as a subsidiary of UTC Aerospace Systems. Even though the plant was much changed, Otto's visit evoked memories of car pooling to work from her home in San Diego, working on the assembly line alongside her sister, and the tunes that were broadcast over a loudspeaker, like Vera Lynn's *You'll Never Know* or Frank Loesser's *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition*.

Otto would go on to work for Ryan Aeronautical Co in San Diego, and then Douglas Aircraft Company, which merged with



Elinor Otto

McDonnell Aircraft before it became Boeing. She worked until she was 95, when she was laid off in 2014, and she makes it clear she did not voluntarily retire.

Otto's trip to Chula Vista coincided with Spirit of '45 Day, which honours the legacy of men and women of the World War 2 generation.

The trip also served as an effort to plant the idea of a Rosie the Riveter memorial rose garden in Chula Vista to honour the women who took on the jobs left behind by men who served in the war.

The idea was well-received by Chula Vista Mayor Mary Salas.

"I think that's something that we should do to honour and respect these wonderful women, because that generation is

passing and yet we shouldn't forget the foundation that they built for us," said Salas, whose mother worked as a spot welder at Rohr in the 1940s.

During a gathering at a retirement community, Otto joined residents for lunch in the cafeteria. Many residents thanked her for her important work during the war.

In a brief Q&A, Otto spoke about life at Rohr, where she started working in 1942 for 65c an hour.

"I wanted to see if the men kept as busy as they said they did," she said.

Asked if she knew how many military aircraft she helped manufacture in her career, she said she had no idea.

"If you were too busy counting, you wouldn't have gotten the job done," she replied.

Otto also touched on the struggles women overcame on the job, of union-led negotiations and strikes for better wages. She said she was proud of the road she and other "Rosies" paved for women and how far women had come since then.

"We made history — now it's your turn," she said. — TNS