

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Signe Cooper
U. S. Army Nurse Corps
World War II

2006

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Cooper, Signe Skott, (b.1921). Oral History Interview, 2006.

User copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Signe Cooper, a Clinton County, Iowa native, talks about her experience in the Army Nurse Corps in the China-Burma-India Theater during World War II. Cooper talks about moving to Middleton (Wisconsin), enrolling in the School of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and volunteering to enter the Army in 1943. She talks about being aware of living in a moment of history after Pearl Harbor and how everyone listened to the radio after the attack, even the nurses on duty. She discusses how little training and orientation she had at Fort Belvoir (Virginia), mentioning that later nurses received basic training at Camp McCoy. Cooper talks of starting work at Fort Belvoir with meningitis patients in an upper respiratory infection ward. She relates traveling to India via airplane hops, during which she saw glamorous movie star Ann Sheridan whom she thought looked worse in person than the nurses did. Cooper discusses being stationed at three CBI hospitals: a general hospital in Karachi (India), the 20th General Hospital in the province of Assam (India), and a hospital in Myitkyina (Burma). She mentions the 20th General Hospital was a University of Pennsylvania unit and gives details about working there in a ward for scrub typhus. She says that soldiers working in the jungle on the Ledo Road would get the disease from mites and she comments on patient death rates and treatment methods. She talks about working in the psychiatric wards, relating an incident of a tiger getting into the hospital kitchen and an incident of testing an electric shock therapy machine on a dog that seemed to like it. She describes her living conditions in tents and dealing with cold, mold, and monsoons. She speaks about food, supplies, cold showers, drinking from Lister bags, and going to rest camp, and she mentions taking Atabrine and using Scat to prevent malaria. Cooper discusses reactions to the atom bomb, as well as the complex political situation with Chiang Kai-shek's appropriating supplies for himself and Gandhi's trying to persuade Indians not to fight. She relates traveling home on the USS General Richardson and hearing a GI, on seeing the Statue of Liberty, say, "I am going to get a good look at her front, because I only want to see her from the back from now on." Cooper speaks of being discharged at Fort Dix (New Jersey) and of a group homecoming breakfast consisting of hot-fudge sundaes, malted milk, and BLTs. She talks about using the GI Bill to complete her nursing education and getting a job at the obstetrics unit of Wisconsin General Hospital.

Biographical Sketch:

Signe Cooper (1921-) served in the Army Nurse Corps in the China-Burma-India Theater during World War II. After her discharge in 1945 as a first lieutenant, she taught nursing at UW-Madison's School of Nursing, and received her masters degree at the University of Minnesota. She has received the Image of Nursing Award from the Wisconsin Nursing Association, the Wisconsin Governor's Special Award, and the Medallion of Service from the Wisconsin Health Association. She currently resides in Middleton, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.
Transcript edited by Susan L. Krueger, 2008.

Interview Transcript:

John: Okay. Today is August 23, 2006, and this is John Driscoll. And this is an oral history interview with Signe Cooper. Signe is a veteran of the United States Army Nurse Corps, okay, in World War II. And we are doing the interview at Signe's home in Middleton, Wisconsin. And, Signe, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview, and why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

Signe: I was born January 29th, 1921, in Clinton County, Iowa. And my parents were Hans and Clara Skott. And that's spelled S-k-o-t-t. Kind of unusual. Sort of unusual.

John: Yes.

Signe: I was the second of four children. I had an older sister, and a younger sister, and a younger brother. And we lived on a farm until 1933, when we moved to a little town called Epworth, Iowa. And then in 1937, we moved to Wisconsin.

John: Why?

Signe: My dad was employed by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

John: Okay.

Signe: And he got this job on the recommendation of a friend of his, but the Feds didn't want too many people in similar jobs in the same state. And since my father's friend already lived in Iowa, we had to move. But that was okay with my family because by this time we were thinking about what do we do about higher education. And so, we moved to Wisconsin in 1937.

John: To where in Wisconsin?

Signe: We first lived in McFarland. But then the next year, the next spring, we moved to Middleton.

John: Okay.

Signe: And that fall I enrolled in the university. I knew I wanted to be a nurse, and one of the interesting things, at that point, I was only seventeen when I graduated from high school. You had to be eighteen to enter the School of Nursing. And it was my plan to take one year at the university and then I would enroll in the Methodist Hospital School of Nursing. Well, it didn't turn out that way because, partly because I was having too good a time at the university. But partly because I made

quite a few friends by that time. And so I didn't want to leave campus.

John: Okay.

Signe: So I enrolled in the School of Nursing, and at that time the School of Nursing had kind of a strange curriculum, but we could complete about four and a half years, and get a certificate in nursing. And then we could come back later and finish our degree. Which is what we did. In fact, I didn't finish mine until after I was in the service. Well, in 1941, of course, we got involved in the war.

John: Yea. Yea.

Signe: And, as student nurses, we really felt this because the staff nurses were leaving the hospital. We worked a lot harder. We were having shortages of equipment. And I worked a few months, until I passed my state board exams, and then I went into the Army.

John: Okay.

Signe: And I think, you know, it was sort of the patriotic thing to do.

John: Let me ask a question of you. Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Signe: Oh, yes.

John: Would you talk about that for a minute?

Signe: Well, it was interesting, because that morning I was assigned to work in the hospital that afternoon. That morning I went to church. I didn't know anything that had happened. When I went on duty in the afternoon, everybody had their radios on. Everybody. And you could hardly get anything done because everybody wanted to listen to the radio. We wanted to know what was going on. And the next day, on December 8, all our eleven o'clock passes were canceled. And we went over to the nurses dormitory and there all of us that could get away, which was most of us, listened to the radio. And we heard President Roosevelt talk about "a day of infamy." And, interesting, because I don't suppose there was any of us in that room but what was touched by the war. Before the war was over. A lot of us lost their boy friends. They lost, later on, they lost their husbands. A lot of us enrolled in the military services. So this was, and it was, you knew it was a moment in history that you were living in.

John: Okay. Sure. I remember we listened. We had gone for a ride in someone's car. Not ours. We didn't have a car. And the car had a radio, which was very unusual. And I remember my dad hearing and saying, "Where the heck is Pearl Harbor?"

Nobody knew. Okay, so you heard about that, and then is that when you enrolled in the military?

Signe: Yes. It was right after I got out of the school. About three months after I got out of the school. And it was interesting, when I got my orders, this is hard to believe, but my orders were to go by train. And I was going to Fort Belvoir, Virginia. And my mom and dad said goodbye to me at the train station in Middleton. And, of course, when I got to Madison, my orders were all by train, here and there. And when I got to Madison, I had to change trains. So I went off. Fort Belvoir is quite close to Washington, DC. And I wended my way by train to Fort Belvoir. At that time they didn't have any kind of orientation for, this changed later. Later on, you know, nurses who enrolled in the Army Nurse Corps would go to Camp McCoy for some basic training. But that never happened to us. And we had very little orientation. I started out on a ward that had patients with meningitis. And they had just gotten over an epidemic of meningitis on the post, and so these patients were mostly recovering. But that is where I started out. And the hospital was an amazement to me because it wasn't in a shape of hospitals, as you think of it. The wards were all separate. You had to walk from one ward to another. And much of my time at Fort Belvoir, I worked on the upper respiratory infection ward. And so I would have several wards. If I was on night duty, I would have to, you know, go from one ward to another.

John: Now, this was when, Signe? This was still early?

Signe: This was 1943. 1943. And, you know, it was interesting. The patients weren't too sick. But in the Army, you were either well, or sick. I mean, there was nothing in between. So, therefore, I would have several wards, because the patients really weren't all that sick. Well, it was kind of interesting to be stationed at Fort Belvoir because we could take the bus, and we could go in, we got one day off a month. And we could go on our day off do some sightseeing in Washington. And that was kind of fun.

John: What was your rank?

Signe: Second lieutenant.

John: Okay.

Signe: And then, in 1944, I was sent to India. And one of the funny experiences that I had before we left this country was, we were billeted in a fancy hotel in New York. But the nurse in charge of us made us go walking. You know, we had to march around Central Park. And one of my friends and I, we were the tallest. And so we were the first in the line. And my friend could never get in step. So everybody else would have to change, to get in step with Jenny.

- John: They were all out of step but her.
- Signe: Right. And then, I think we were in New York about a week before we were sent overseas.
- John: Now, did you volunteer to go over, or were you just sent over.
- Signe: I volunteered.
- John: Okay.
- Signe: Although that didn't make too much difference because a lot of people who went over were assigned. And so we flew to India. Now, this was my first experience on a plane. And it was kind of an interesting flight because we would hop from here to there. We went to Gander, Newfoundland. And then we went to the Azores. Well, while we were in the Azores, we met, first of all we couldn't leave the airport, because they had an epidemic of bubonic plague.
- John: Oh, God. Oh, wow.
- Signe: While we were there. And we just had to wait. While we were waiting, the movie star Ann Sheridan and her troupe were coming back. And she had just gone over. And she took one look at India and came back. That didn't set too well with us. The other funny thing is, we had all seen her movies, and she was very glamorous, you know. Well, in the person, she looked worse than we did. So we all got a big kick out of that.
- John: Okay.
- Signe: And from the Azores we went to Casablanca. We had all seen the movie *Casablanca*. Well, reality was quite a bit different.
- John: Yes. I was there.
- Signe: And then we went to Cairo, and then we went to an island called Abadan. And then we went to Karachi. Now, at this point, Karachi was still part of India. This was before India was divided. And we were stationed at a general hospital in Karachi. I'm not real sure if anybody knew where we were going, eventually, but at any rate, while we were there, I volunteered one night to take care of a patient with polio. And the next day the patient died. And I was devastated.
- John: Sure.

Signe: I thought, oh, this is so awful. To go off to the war, and die of polio, of all things. And, of course, this was before the polio Salk vaccine.

John: Yes.

Signe: Well, eventually then, we went to eastern India, in the province of Assam. We were assigned to the 20th General Hospital, which was a University of Pennsylvania unit. I don't think they do that anymore, but in World War II, like Wisconsin General had a unit. And this was a University of Pennsylvania unit. And we were replacements for the nurses. Now, this hospital was the largest Army hospital overseas. It was two thousand beds, and half of the patients were Chinese. I never worked on the Chinese wards, but eventually I worked on the psychiatric ward. And occasionally we would get a Chinese patient. And I know a lot of my friends worked on the Chinese wards. But I never did. One of my first experiences at the 20th General Hospital was on the scrub typhus ward. Now, scrub typhus is different from the type that we commonly, the louse form of typhus that we commonly think of. It had the wonderful name of toocheecamoochee disease.

John: Okay.

Signe: I love to say that word. I think it was probably named after whoever probably discovered the organism that caused the disease. But, anyway, it was a mite-borne disease. And we were in Assam because we were building the Ledo Road. And the Ledo Road was designed so we could send supplies over to China. And that is another story. But, anyway, a lot of our patients who had scrub typhus were hacking down the jungle. And so they would end up with this mite-borne disease.

John: Oh, okay.

Signe: And these patients were very sick. Very sick. Our casualty rate was very high. And, but from a nursing point of view, it was a nice ward to work on because you really could give the kinds of care, and we were well staffed. And you could give the kind of nursing care you wanted to give because we were well staffed. But the problem was, the casualties were so high, this was before antibiotics. And there wasn't really any good treatment.

John: Yes, I was going to ask, what would you treat them with?

Signe: There really wasn't anything. Mostly, you know, you made them comfortable, if you could. And that was a very good experience. Well, after a month or so of that, they discovered that, as a student nurse, I'd had psychiatric nursing. Which a lot of nurses at that time didn't have. And so they sent me to the psychiatric ward. Which would never have been my choice, but you don't get a choice.

John: Yes. Yes.

Signe: So, I went to the psychiatric ward. There were five wards. I did a lot of night duty. And at night you would have to go from ward to ward to see that the patients were okay. Well, one of the things that happened shortly after I was assigned to the psychiatric ward, a tiger went into the kitchen. Amid the pots and pans. The kitchen, you know, was a separate building. But, they had a rule that we couldn't go alone from ward to ward. One of the corpsmen was supposed to go with us. Well, that lasted about a month. But, anyway, and nobody ever saw the tiger again. But that was a really funny experience..

John: Oh, wow. Oh, man..

Signe: Another funny thing that happened, the psychiatrists decided we ought to be doing some electric shock therapy which, at that point, was used on psych patients. So, they got the machine. Well, to test the machine out, they tried it on a dog. And every day, we knew the dog because his head was shaved. Every day he would come back. It was as if was asking for more.

John: Got to where he liked it.

Signe: We decided he must have liked it.

John: Going back to the typhus and that, you just, you didn't have anything to treat it with, then?

Signe: Well, what they were using, which was kind of useless, was a substance called para amino benzoic acid. PADA, which later on they used it in sunblocker. And that was absolutely the only medication that we had to use. A lot of the patients got oxygen. But mostly you tried to force fluids and make them comfortable, and there wasn't very much that we could do.

John: Was there a mortality?

Signe: At least one a day.

John: Oh, wow.

Signe: It was very high.

John: Oh, that's tragic. Yea. So, how long were you there? The 20th General, you said?

Signe: Yea.

John: How long were you there?

Signe: About fifteen months. I was, toward the end, I was sent, for about a month, before the war ended, to Burma, to Myitkyina. Which I don't know how to spell. That was the only time while I was there, the only time that I lived in a tent. But we actually lived in tents there. I want to say, a leaky tent, when it was raining. That was the other thing about India. We had really terrible monsoons. And, you know, your clothes would get mold, your shoes would mold. It was really up. And then, there was not only the summer monsoons, there was the small monsoon in the winter. Well, it was cold. And we weren't really prepared for the cold. There we were, in a hot climate, and we would go to work with just about everything that we could find to put on.

John: Yea, you don't think of India as cold. What about, speaking of that, what about living conditions. You said you lived in a tent in Burma. In India?

Signe: In India we lived in what they called a basha. And this had a concrete floor and then the sides were like woven reeds. And we did have electricity. You know, one light bulb hanging down. The latrine was a block or so away. The shower was in another direction. And we never had a warm shower unless you could get there first thing in the afternoon when the sun had warmed the water. But most of the time, it was a cold shower. But, at least, you got a shower. Our drinking water we had to get from what they called a Lister bag. Yep. Where they had chlorinated the water. And we'd use jugs and go get out water for the day. Including our tooth-brushing water.

John: How about food?

Signe: The food wasn't bad. We'd go to the mess hall to eat. We ate, my mother would write me letters about, she used all her points for getting pineapple, and I'd think, ah, we're eating pineapple till it comes out of our ears. So we had a lot of canned pineapple, a lot of canned fruit. A lot of things like canned beans and canned peas and stuff like that. But it could have been worse. At least it was edible.

John: How about, like, supplies, replacement clothing, any logistical thing to help your living?

Signe: We, there were some things that we could get at the PX, but we never could get, there was never anything like replacement clothing. Although at one point, I think that things were quite disorganized in the CBI. And finally, after we were there, a nurse was appointed who was sort of an overseer of all the nurses in the CBI. And she saw to it that many of the nurses really, their uniforms were shabby, and they didn't have enough clothes. And somehow or other, she saw to it that we got better uniforms.

John: That would be at the far end of the supply chain.

Signe: Oh, yea. We always, after six o'clock, because the mosquitoes were a problem, after six o'clock we always had to wear slacks. And long sleeves. And they didn't allow us to go, there was what they called the bazaar. Which was a bunch of little shops. We could down there and we could have slacks made. They would let us do that because they hadn't gotten enough, you know, of the brown and white stripes that we usually wore. They didn't have enough of those on hand. And some of us did that. And then, because of the mud, we wore what we called Little Abner shoes. They were ankle height of shoes. And because of the danger of malaria, we all had to take Atabrine. And in spite of it, or maybe they weren't taking their Atabrine, a couple of the nurses did get malaria.

John: Yes, were there casualties among the nurses?

Signe: Not too much, but there were a couple who did get malaria.

John: Well, that is fortunate. How large a nursing contingent was there? How big a group of nurses?

Signe: I think there must have been at least fifty of us. It was a big hospital.

John: Oh, okay. How about Army life? Discipline, and that kind of stuff? Or were you pretty much there as nurses?

Signe: As I think about it, I don't think, well, we had to obey whatever rules and regulations there were.

John: Yea. Sure.

Signe: For the nurses, you had to be in at a certain time. I think that was just for the nurses, though. But I'm not real sure. We had to do things like, if you went to the movies, which were outdoors and after dark. We didn't have a matinee because they did this outdoors. You had to take your own seat, and there was something called Scat, that was an anti-malaria, or anti-mosquito thing. Mosquito repellent. And they would stand at the door with a bottle and they wouldn't let you in the movie unless you put that stuff all over your hands and face. And it smelled to high heavens.

John: Well, that's why the mosquitoes stayed away.

Signe: But if you wanted to go to the movies, that was what you had to do. Those were the rules. So, I would say, as far as rules and regulations, there weren't too many.

Whatever they laid down, we had to obey.

John: Okay. And then, towards the end, what was it like toward the end? Did you have an idea that things were wrapping up, or winding down?

Signe: Well, yes, because we had so many false alarms. That when they finally said the war is over, we didn't believe it. Because we had heard this so many times. But then, they sent me from the 18th General in Burma, they sent me back to India, and then we had to wait until they could send us, well, what they did eventually was they sent us direct to Karachi, where we waited, again. And this time we flew over, but went home by ship.

John: Okay. What was the reaction among the nurses and the patients when you heard, for real, that the war was over?

Signe: I think it was relief. I think, you know, being in the China Burma India theater, was a lot different from the experiences that my friends had in Europe, for instance.

John: Okay.

Signe: You were never quite sure what was going on. And that whole situation was so complex that most of the time we really didn't, like I say, we didn't know what was going on. We didn't know until afterwards, for instance, that a lot of the Army supplies and material that we were sending to China, Chiang Kai-shek was saving for his own. What was going on in India was, Gandhi was trying to, we were training Indian troops, Gandhi was trying to persuade the Indians not to fight. Which was kind of subversive, so to speak. But, so there were all these things going on. Now, by the time I got to India, the Japanese were being pushed out of Burma. But they had gotten as far as Burma, and India was really threatened by the Japanese before they were finally pushed back. But we were aware that we were fighting the Japanese but it was almost that everybody else was fighting each other. And some of that you didn't really know until afterwards. But, it was very complicated.

John: Did you have any contact with the locals? With the Indians, or the Burmese?

Signe: Well, we had Indian servants. I can remember a discussion I had, I can't even remember his name. He was our, what they called our bearer. He kind of ran errands. I can remember a discussion with him. He was explaining to me why the Moslems were like the Christians. You know, he was explaining what the similar characteristics were. And I have often thought of that in this recent business with Iraq. Isn't that funny? He was comparing the Moslems with the Christians, and saying everybody was alike. Which I no longer believe, anyway. But it was an interesting discussion.

John: Yes. Did you ever have contact with any Japanese?

Signe: No, I never did. But there were Japanese prisoners of war.

John: Okay.

Signe: On a special unit. But I did not have contact with them.

John: What was it like, socially, among you ladies? When you weren't working, how did you get along?

Signe: I think we got along quite well.

John: Were you from all over? Were there any...

Signe: A lot of us were from the Midwest.

John: Okay.

Signe: You know, there were several from Wisconsin. There were several from other surrounding states. There were some from, a few from the South. My room-mate was from North Dakota. But I would say, you know, most of us were from the Midwest.

John: Okay.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: Okay, we were talking, and I had asked you before we ran out of tape on the other side, what was the reaction when you heard about the atom bomb?

Signe: I think it was, the reaction was one of relief, because we understood that the war would now be over. I think, who knew about the atom bomb? I don't think any of us understood the implications. Or that we were really seeing the world changing. But I think, for the most part, we were glad the war was going to be over.

John: Okay. And then you headed back?

Signe: Right.

John: You said you went from the hospital to someplace in India?

Signe: We went back to Karachi. And we waited about two weeks, until we could get the

ship. And we came home on a ship called the *General Richardson*. And pretty much that was an uneventful trip, except that when we were almost home, we hit a storm, a bad storm. And I can remember going down to eat, and on the tables they had these little shelves up. And the dishes were flying around. Oh, my. People were making jokes about collecting submarine and flight pay, and all that. It was really a bad storm. When we got into New York, I can remember one of the GIs saying, when we saw the Statue of Liberty, of course, we were seeing her from the front. And he said, "I am going to get a good look at her front, because I only want to see her from the back from now on."

John: When you came back, India to New York, did you come through the Suez?

Signe: Yes, we did. And one of the interesting things that I didn't know, the ship stopped right smack in the middle of the Suez Canal. And I said to somebody, "What is going on?" And they said, "Well, we have to pay for going through the Suez Canal." Apparently the British charged them. And I said, "Pay?" And they said, "Yea, they have to pay this in gold."

John: Okay.

Signe: Yes, we did go through the Suez Canal.

John: Did you make any other stops on the way back?

Signe: No, we didn't. We went by the Rock of Gibraltar. And then came home to New York.

John: When was it when you got to New York? What year?

Signe: That was November of 1945.

John: Oh, okay. That was soon.

Signe: Yea. You know, they had this point system.

John: I was going to ask about that.

Signe: And I don't know how they did this any more, but you got so many points for length of service, you got so many points for overseas service, and if you had so many points, they you were sent home. So I was in the group that was sent home.

John: Okay. Then, when did you get out? Right when you got to New York?

Signe: We were sent to Fort Dix. And that is where I was discharged. Oh, the other funny

thing was breakfast at Fort Dix. We got in late at night, so the next morning we all go off to breakfast. I wish you could have seen what people were eating. Hot fudge sundaes. Malted milk. BLTs. All this stuff they hadn't had, they were available. They were just really having...

John: I'll bet no pineapple.

Signe: And no pineapple. Right.

John: That's great. That's great. What was your rank at the end?

Signe: First lieutenant. After so long, they sort of automatically appointed you, raised your rank.

John: Afterwards, did you stay in touch with anyone? Any reunions, or that? Or just one on one?

Signe: I never went to any, the CBI had reunions, but I never went to any of them. And the University of Pennsylvania had their own reunions, and I never went to any of them. But I did keep in touch with two of my good friends, both of whom have since died. But I kept in touch with them, for years.

John: Oh, good, Okay. I just got in touch, these past two years, with two of my friends of fifty years ago. And we've been getting together occasionally. It's great, but it's funny, because you say, "Do you remember the time?" and the other fellow will say "no." When you came out, of course, you had your education behind you. You still had the GI Bill. Did you ever use it?

Signe: I did.

John: How?

Signe: See, I hadn't completed my requirements for my degree. I came home. I didn't realize that there was a huge shortage of nurses. Yea, because a lot of the nurses were in the military, and did not return. Other things were going on. So I came back to Wisconsin General, hoping I would get a job. Well, they were so glad to see me that it was really funny. But I did use the GI Bill, and I completed the requirements for my degree. Eventually, I started out as the head nurse in the obstetrics unit, and then I, after I completed my requirements for my degree, I went, I taught at the School of Nursing. And I went to several summer sessions. And eventually got my masters at the University of Minnesota. And spend a lot of time, most of the rest of my career teaching. Including, in 1955, I was appointed to a joint position with University Extension, which involved doing continuing education all over the state. And I really enjoyed that.

John: My niece is a lovely lady, and she is a nurse. She is from central Ohio. And she has her Ph. D. in nursing, and we kid her about being Dr. Nurse Roth. She doesn't use the doctor. She is also, God love her, coming up next week to do the Iron Man again.

Signe: Isn't that great?

John: Twelve miles of swimming, and twenty-six running, and a hundred and some on a bike. Wow. Well, this is a remarkable story. Let me ask you a question I ask everyone. You were a young person, just starting out in life. Everything was pretty good. And then this thing happened, and bong, you got jerked out of life, taken out of life, and you were sent in harm's way. What, thinking back, what is your reaction to that, and those time?

Signe: Well, because of our nursing skills, we knew that we could contribute to the war effort.

John: Okay.

Signe: It was the patriotic thing to do. But I think all of us had a little bit of a sense of adventure.

John: Well, okay.

Signe: You know, this is something kind of exciting. And we'll take advantage of the opportunity.

John: You never would have got to Burma or India.

Signe: No, right. Exactly.

John: I don't know if that is where you wanted to go. That's great.

Signe: Somebody said to me, this was some time ago, they said, "Would you ever want to go back to India?" I said, "No, I really wouldn't." I don't know what India is like but, you know, I don't know what it is like now, but at the time you were so much aware of all the poverty.

John: Yes.

Signe: And it was just, I don't know. It was, now we call this culture shock, but, you know, it was almost too much to take. Oh, I never did talk about, when I was in India, I was sent to rest camp for three weeks. They took pretty good care of us,

because the climate was awful hot. So we were sent off. We went by train. And every province had a different railroad gauge, so you would hop off the railroad and look for your car. Our car was always labeled "Three Army Nurses." We didn't have any problem with that. And I don't know how many times we changed trains. Well, we were sent to Darjeeling. And our last train, they made us all get out of the train, because they had a land slide, and the train was going to ease itself over this area, but they didn't want any of us in the train. Well, we had to walk half a mile, or so, and get back in the train. Rest came for us was in a hotel. In the Mount Everest Hotel, which is pretty fancy. And three times while we were there we saw Mount Everest. It was really spectacular.

John: Yea, I'll bet. Wow. That's great. Just an aside question, what were you paid? What did you make in the Army?

Signe: You know, I don't remember exactly, but I think it was something like \$121 a month.

John: Bib money.

Signe: Yea, right. I might be wrong, but that's how I remember it.

John: Okay. Well, that is remarkable. What a great story. And then you stayed in nursing all the way through. When did you get married?

Signe: Before I went overseas.

John: Oh, did you?

Signe: Well, that turned out to be kind of a disaster. That is what I don't want to talk about.

John: Okay. Well, that's great. What a remarkable story. You know, I have a good friend. I write, when I'm not doing this. I'm a writer. And I had a very good friend, he just passed away a couple of years ago, from around here, Stephen Ambrose. The writer. And he has done mostly World War II and that.

Signe: I've read some of his stuff. Great.

John: He was giving a talk to a bunch of World War II vets, at the Veterans Museum a couple of years ago. And he was praising these people, men and women. And most of them were saying, "Look, I did my job, I drove my truck, I carried a rifle, I was a nurse, but I really didn't do an awful lot." And he, and of course he was a big B.S.er, and he said, "Wait a minute. You were giants!" And people looked at him. And he said, "You went out and saved the world." And that is true. That is what

each and every person that went, did. It would have been a different world without all of you.

Signe: Well, I think we all felt we all were doing our part.

John: Yea, yea. Did you have much of a problem, because when you came back, you went right back into nursing. Much of an adjustment problem?

Signe: Listen, I was so busy, I didn't have time to think. I was in a maternity ward, and this was the baby boom years.

John: Oh, yea, oh, heavens, yea.

Signe: And I was going to school. I would take, like, six credits a semester. But I was thankful for the GI Bill. I read, I can't remember the name of the book, but I read recently a book about the GI Bill, and what a great idea it was. And I agree with that.

John: The other side of the GI Bill, most people think of education. The other thing was home buying.

Signe: Except that nurses weren't eligible for that.

John: Oh, they weren't?

Signe: No.

John: That is terrible. Because so many people came back and bought homes, and that put people to work building homes. I remember, I was born in 1935, so I was, what, ten years old at the end? But I remember, you could buy a home, and you had to get land, and you had to make the foundation, and then you could take time. And there were all these houses that were just a cellar and a floor and a doorway. And then they were going to do the rest of the house when they got around to it. Yea. Okay, well, this is remarkable. This is a fantastic story. Great. I talked to several women who were nurses. There was a woman from Stoughton who I talked to, who was in New Guinea during the war, with Wisconsin troops. She was in a hospital, treating men from Wisconsin National Guard units. Just terrible stories. Just bandages and aspirin was about all they had. Okay, this is really remarkable. Anything else, if you take a minute to think about it? Anything that sticks in your mind from back then?

Signe: No, I guess not.

John: Of course, if you are like me, this afternoon, you will probably think of seventy-

five things.

Signe: I wish I'd said that.

John: Okay. Well, what we'll do, I'll take this back and I'll give the original tape to the Archives. And they'll make a copy and send that to me, and I'll type it up, transcribe it, and then we'll send you a copy of the transcription. And they will have the copy down there. And they won't, if someone wanders in off the street because it's raining outside, they won't let them go through all these personal stories. But anyone doing research work, or studying, there is a lot of interest, I don't know why, in the China Burma India theater. I have no idea what. I just said I would pass the name on. All right.

[End of Interview.]