

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
VIOLET M. OWEN
Nurse, Army, World War II.

2001

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Owen, Violet M., (1909-2002). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 30 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Violet M. Owen, a Footville, Wisconsin native, discusses her World War II service as a nurse with the 81st Station Hospital in North Africa and Italy. She talks about her pre-war job at Lakeview Sanitarium, work with tuberculosis patients, and enlistment in 1942. She touches on her mother's response to Owen's enlistment. She speaks of being given bars and an officer title but not technically being part of the military until 1944. Owen discusses basic training at Fort Custer (Michigan) and the differences between field hospitals and station hospitals. Assigned to the 81st Station Hospital, she comments on the trip to North Africa, bringing the hospital supplies over mountains by train to Bizerte, living in the desert, and going to nearby Tunis (Tunisia) on leave. She details her duties in the operation room and central supply and reflects on running low on pre-cut gauze. She states she was nicknamed "Ma" because she was in her thirties during her service. Owen provides a sketch of military life in Tunisia including the role of the Red Cross, the officer's club, USO Shows, and air raids. She discusses duty in Naples (Italy), where they treated a thousand soldiers from the North African Army. She describes the different ethnicities in the North African Army and their love of soap and showers. She recalls that the Italians knew the hospital was moving to Leghorn (Italy) before the officers or nurses did. She describes a bombing raid during Christmas Eve Mass and getting orders to return to the States on New Year's Day. On her trip home, she relates often being taken off planes to make room for male soldiers. She mentions rehabilitation in Miami (Florida) with other servicewomen allowing them to "get our manners back," assignment to Vaughn Army General Hospital (Illinois), and transfer to Fort Wayne Army Hospital in Detroit. After her discharge, she talks about her nursing career.

Biographical Sketch:

Owen (1909-2002) worked as an Army nurse at the 81st Station Hospital. She served in both North Africa and Italy and was honorably discharged from service in 1947 after achieving the rank of captain. As a civilian, she worked in a variety of hospitals, including Associated Physicians in Madison (Wisconsin) and the Eleanor Nygaard Nursing Home in Stoughton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001

Transcribed by Marie Drumm, 2010

Corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2010

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

James: The date is the 16th of March 2001. I'm talking to Violet Owen. When and where were you born ma'am?

Owen: I was born in Footville, Wisconsin.

James: Where?

Owen: Footville, Wisconsin; it's down near Janesville.

James: Footville? Footville, I know where that is.

Owen: 1909.

James: In 1909. Footville. Say, I hadn't heard about that for a long time. What were you doing before World War II?

Owen: I was working at Lakeview Sanatorium. I was a nurse.

James: Nurse at Lakeview?

Owen: Yes. I graduated from St. Mary's Hospital in Madison.

James: St. Mary's? So you had a lot of experience with tuberculosis.

Owen: [Laugh] I sure did; I had seven years of it.

James: Well, I know, but you know that was a big disease--

Owen: Oh it was, at one time.

James: I'll bet that San was full all the time.

Owen: Oh it was; we had a waiting list.

James: You had a waiting list? I'll be darned.

Owen: I gave a report one time, not too long ago, on tuberculosis today, and the librarian got me a lot of material for it.

James: He did?

Owen: And it was very good. They're all street people practically that have it. This was from New York, all this material. And they have to go to the

infirmaries three times a day to get their medications. They don't do it. But they have so many of them that they can't take them out to the places.

James: I know. It's a terrible problem, as I read, in Russia. It's an epidemic situation there.

Owen: I suppose.

James: Between the alcoholism and the tuberculosis, it's a real major problem. And particularly because the drugs that we finally found that would cure the disease don't work in a lot of cases anymore.

Owen: That's what this article said, too, that I had.

James: I'll always remember I was in medical school when streptomycin came out or just beyond, I guess; it came out in '48 not in '47--a big breakthrough. And then they had the triple therapy after that and then pretty soon there wasn't any more but a--

Owen: We had sulfa when I left.

James: Yeah. See, that didn't help much.

Owen: That didn't help much, but they were giving it to 'em.

James: Protects against a secondary infection; that's about it. Yeah, those were the days, you know. They did the surgery to collapse the lung.

Owen: Yeah.

James: Terrible surgery, you know, just--

Owen: Oh it was awful.

James: Disfigured those people so terribly, you know.

Owen: It was just terrible.

James: I just always thought that, cuz I used to--part of the medical school training was at Wales. They always used to send the medical student there for a couple of weeks and had some do all these chest procedures, the collapsed lungs--

Owen: They did them on the 7th floor at University Hospitals. They just had the TB patients up there. And we had to send ours over and then they'd send

them back to us. And, oh, they were in such condition when they came back. All out of shape and— [pause]

James: Thoracoplasty. That was worse than, you know--I just thought that was just a terrible, terrible way to treat anybody. So how did you get into the military service? Had the war started?

Owen: No, I went in, let's see, when did I go in? '42.

James: Oh, after the war started?

Owen: October.

James: How did that happen?

Owen: Because they were going to draft us if we didn't; they needed nurses so badly.

James: They threatened to draft you?

Owen: Uh-huh.

James: So you just joined the Army?

Owen: We didn't belong to anything. [laughs] We were called Army nurses. We were given bars to wear because otherwise we wouldn't have any--we weren't an officer; we wouldn't have any jurisdiction over the enlisted men. They didn't know we weren't officers. We were just out there by ourselves. And we didn't become a part of the military until I was in Naples.

James: Is that right? You said you were in Naples?

Owen: Naples, uh-huh. That was in '44.

James: You were just treated as a civilian?

Owen: No. See, they gave us the bars and they called us lieutenants and we got a staff sergeant's pay: \$65 a month.

James: Staff sergeant's pay?

Owen: \$65 a month.

James: Even though you had lieutenant--

Owen: But we weren't out--we weren't part of the Army. [laughs]

James: That's crazy.

Owen: Yes it was. But they just needed nurses so badly. Quite a few people went in at that time.

James: Staff sergeant's pay. That changed when you were in Naples after--

Owen: Then we got the regular second lieutenant's pay.

James: When did you get to Naples?

Owen: That was in May of '44, '45—

James: '45 or '44?

Owen: No, '44.

James: I believe that.

Owen: Un-huh. We were sent up for the Sicilian campaign. We went over to get there and then we went into--

James: So when you went into the service in '42, where did they send you?

Owen: Fort Custer in Michigan.

James: Custer. Was it sort of a basic education there, to military life?

Owen: Yeah. I was there six months. Then we went to Camp Shanks, New York.

James: Shanks, uh-huh. I'm not familiar with that one.

Owen: My Grandfather Owen came from the place where they were: Orangeburg, New Jersey. But then they made it New York because they were just holding it for protective purposes. Then we went over from there. One morning we went over to Ellis Isle and we got out on this side, walked through and the ship was on the other side waiting for us.

James: Were you in a unit by that time? Where you part of a hospital? What was the hospital?

Owen: Yes, I was. 81st Station.

James: 81st Field Hospital?

Owen: No, Station.

James: 81st Station Hospital, right? Is that the way you said it?

Owen: Uh-huh.

James: I have to try to decide the difference between a station hospital and a field hospital. Do you know? I hope you do; I don't.

Owen: Station hospital you were--now let me think, I got to get this straight--station hospital you could keep the people sixty to ninety days. The other one you could only keep them, oh, a week or so and then you had to get them back to the station hospitals. But then we were made, [pause] oh what did they call the ones that were up close to the lines? You just said it.

James: Field hospital?

Owen: Field hospital. We were made a field hospital because we were right up on the lines. And then they did away with a lot of the station hospitals; they didn't have them anymore.

James: I would think so. That sounds like an old term.

Owen: It didn't work out right at all.

James: But they kept the term 81st?

Owen: Yes.

James: So you went from a station to a field hospital, but you were still the 81st?

Owen: Uh-huh.

James: Okay. And tell me about the hospital. How many docs? How many nurses?

Owen: Oh, we had thirty-five nurses and I think we had twenty-five doctors.

James: Twenty-five docs and thirty-five nurses. OK.

Owen: And I don't know how many enlisted men; we had a lot of them.

James: You must have had a lot of them.

Owen: Yeah, we did.

James: Alright. And so, you got on the ship and they took you over to England?

Owen: No, no--no. I went right to North Africa.

James: When did you go overseas?

Owen: May of '43.

James: Oh. Then you probably went to Italy.

Owen: No, we went to Africa. I was in North Africa first.

James: May '43 to Africa. Okay, got that. And whereabouts in Africa?

Owen: We went in at Oran. And then we stayed there for six weeks as a staging unit.

James: You set up a hospital then?

Owen: No, no-- we were just a staging unit waiting to get assigned over there. Then we went over to Bizerte by train, through the mountains, with all of our luggage [laughs]--all our junk for the hospital.

James: I'm sorry I missed that last one.

Owen: We had all our beds and everything. We took everything. We had to leave half of it in Algiers because the mountains were so high the trains wouldn't take it; we had so much stuff.

James: But at Bizerte, you set up a hospital then?

Owen: Yes. [pause] We were what they called hospital row. There was a whole group of hospitals. Our convoy was only a hospital convoy; that's all that was in it. Except one—oh, I can't think of anything. Oh, the thing that they put the airplanes on and take off—you know what I mean? That was the only thing that wasn't a hospital ship. We went on the Cristobal and it was a Panama luxury liner and it took us fourteen days to get over--no, twenty-one. And it should have only taken us fourteen, but they had to leapfrog about every other night. Maybe you'd get up in the morning and you'd say to the captain, "How far did we go last night?" "Oh, we didn't; we're back about ten miles further than we were yesterday morning." [laughs] And then we were very disappointed. We didn't know where we were going until we got away.

- James: They didn't tell you until you got to Oran where you were?
- Owen: Well, they told us. They gave us a letter when we were gone a week and a half; they told us.
- James: Now at Bizerte, how busy were you there?
- Owen: We were very busy. They opened us up. We were a 500 bed hospital when we left--that was what a station hospital was--and they opened us up, so when we set up we were an 800 bed hospital with no more help.
- James: Um-hmm. So then you were there for several months?
- Owen: Yeah. We were there over a year, about a year and a half.
- James: Year and a half. [pause] How did you like living in the desert?
- Owen: Didn't. [laughs] We weren't too far from Tunis and we were quite a ways from Algiers, but we could get there. We were about two and half hours from Tunis. If we had a day off we could get down there if we could get a--.
- James: Get a jeep ride down there?
- Owen: Or they'd take a truckload.
- James: What was there to entertain you?
- Owen: In Tunis? Oh, that was a big city.
- James: Yes. But what a bad set-up for the Americans, I guess.
- Owen: The Red Cross had a place and they always had doughnuts or cookies and they always had coffee. They could go there. Then there were a lot of stores. Now they had been in Bizerte before we got there and bombed 'em out. Bizerte was practically completely bombed out. We weren't allowed to go in there for about six months after we got over there because the buildings were still falling. But it must have been a beautiful place. It was right on the sea.
- James: So that was about your only entertainment, was to go into Tunis then? That was it?
- Owen: [Laughs] Well, we had an officer's club in Africa and we used to--and we had the 5th Army band in that area and some of 'em made little orchestras.

James: Oh, then you had some dances?

Owen: Yeah. We had a club. But we didn't let everybody come in. Whoever we invited could come, but they used to like to crash it.

James: Did the USO bring their troupe over?

Owen: Oh, yes. We had lots of USO shows. Oh yeah, we had good ones. We had Bob Hope in our area; he was very good. Yeah, we had some very good USO shows.

James: Tell me about the sand. Did the sand get in all your clothing?

Owen: Oh yeah. [laughs] Then we had a rainy season from September until May in Africa and that was really bad.

James: Because?

Owen: So much rain, it just POURED day after day.

James: You were living in tents, I assume.

Owen: Oh yeah, we lived in tents, but we had them pretty well secured; that wasn't the problem. But you'd get out, and it was, see it was clay, and when it got wet it was slippery. And when you'd walk you'd-- [laugh] Every third and fourth week I was assistant night supervisor, and I used to have to make rounds a lot. [laughs] They'd say, "Well how far did you slip tonight, Ma?" They always called me "Ma" because I was older, and they were just little young kids, twenty-one years old.

James: That's right. They were teenagers, old teenagers, and you were well in your twenties then, weren't you?

Owen: I was up in my thirties.

James: Thirties. No wonder they called you--

Owen: I was thirty-one. They said one day, "Can we call you Ma, with all due respect?" [James laughs] I said, "Yes," so they did. We still have a round robin going with the people that are left.

James: What were your specific duties there?

Owen: I was in the operating room or central supply most of the time.

- James: You were an OR supervisor?
- Owen: No. We had two real good OR supervisors who had taken a special course in op [unintelligible]. No, I worked more in central supply than I did in surgery. If they needed help I'd go, because they were right together.
- James: Did your supply always come in time?
- Owen: Oh, we had lots of supplies. Although we used to make 4 x 4s because we didn't know they had them. The Red Cross at home was working their fingers to the bone making them. I got a letter from one of my girlfriends one day and she said, "Well, I just came home from folding a lot of 4 x 4s for you people."
- James: Through the Red Cross? The Army didn't supply 4 x 4s?
- Owen: Well, they did eventually, but they didn't--
- James: I can't imagine going into the operating room without 4 x 4s; it's sort of a standard thing.
- Owen: Well, you got a bolt of gauze and then you had to cut it. You didn't have a saw--you know, those electric things.
- James: It was a lot of work.
- Owen: It was terrible. And then you'd have an air raid. You'd have all your supplies ready for the next day, you'd have an air raid and phff, they were gone.
- James: Gone?
- Owen: Why sure, because you had so many injuries.
- James: Oh, I see. After the air raid there are so many wounded. Did they come close to where you were living?
- Owen: Well, the first night we were set up in our tents they wanted to let us know that they knew we were there. But they weren't supposed to bomb right in the area, so they dropped one on each of the four sides, far enough away so it didn't do anything but scare us.
- James: Enough to scare you, though. I'm sure you got no sleep that night.

- Owen: [Laughs] Oh, we didn't anyway. We always called them Jerry. Jerry came on moonlight nights, and he would come at ten and he'd come at twelve and he'd come at two and at four.
- James: Keep everybody awake?
- Owen: Uh-huh. You'd just get back--
- James: Just one airplane?
- Owen: Oh no; oh no.
- James: I didn't know whether you were speaking in singular or plural.
- Owen: And we had one of those metal huts for our operating room.
- James: Quonset.
- Owen: Yeah, a Quonset. He'd go out over the sea and go around this way and way down and then come over right on the middle of our area--it must have been a point, our operating room--and zoom down and go out like that and that's when they did their bombings.
- James: And so he bombed the hospital?
- Owen: No, he didn't bomb the hospital. He didn't bomb until he got down to Bizerte. See, we were--
- James: Oh, I see. He just sort of buzzed you.
- Owen: [Laughs] And he'd always just come down that way; I suppose it was their landmark.
- James: How many planes, generally, were in this attack that came every four hours?
- Owen: Maybe ten. But on Saturday mornings our planes went over to bomb them. There used to be four and five hundred of them. They went right over our hospital when they went. But they were friendly people; we liked them. This one lady at Bizerte told us that they were always so glad when we came because the Americans bombed about ten minutes and they did more damage than the Germans did in two hours.
- James: With that many planes, I'm not surprised. So when did you move to Italy?
- Owen: Let's see, that was '43 when we got over there, '44--

James: You said it was May of '43 you went to Africa, and you were there a year?

Owen: Well, no--a little more than a year.

James: So it would be sometime maybe in the fall?

Owen: Yeah. It was in the fall of '44.

James: That would be about right time-wise. So you moved to Italy. Whereabouts in Italy?

Owen: We went to Naples.

James: Naples? That had been just recently secured by the time you got there, right?

Owen: Yeah. Uh-huh.

James: Okay. And how did you find Naples? An improvement?

Owen: Oh, no. The true Italian tells you that Italy ends at Rome. From Rome down is Sicilian.

James: Oh, yeah. I noticed that when I went to Italy that the northern Italians had very little kindness towards the southern Italians.

Owen: Oh no. They don't have any at all.

James: Yeah. They treat them like dirt. They think of them as Sicilians, which is what we have around this country.

Owen: Yeah, that's what we have.

James: We don't have that many Italians, really.

Owen: No. All those in Madison are supposed to be Sicilians.

James: Well, that's the ones who immigrated around the turn of the century. Practically all of those came from Sicily rather than Italy. Quite different.

Owen: Oh, yeah. They even look different; they are much darker. It was so funny when we got up in the northern part of Italy to see these white-headed kids flying around.

James: I've known some people in training from northern Italy. They were blond; they didn't look Italian at all.

Owen: See, the Germans were in there for quite a while and they intermarried.

James: Sure. So what did you set up? Your same hospital went over, the 81st at Naples?

Owen: Uh-huh.

James: And you set it up similarly? Same personnel roughly?

Owen: Yep. But then we had--well, we were going to have one place that was just for rehabilitation and so they put up a big tent. They put three or four ward tents together and they got 100 patients, I think it was, in there. They had three up here and two down here on a terrace and that was to be for all this business. One Sunday afternoon about five o'clock we got a call, the colonel got a call, and he said you are going to get a thousand patients. You've got to evacuate immediately and you're going to get a thousand patients from the North African Army. They had been up at southern France. They brought them down to Naples and then we took care of them there, down there. They brought them by hospital ship to Naples. We were one of the hospitals that was designated to take care of them, and then we sent them back to--they were trying to get them back to Africa. Cuz they couldn't get 'em--they didn't have any means of getting them back there. And that was really--oh, it was terrible. We didn't even have cots for--they took the enlisted man's cots. They didn't have the tentage and they had to get that the next day, and they just put them on the terraces.

James: Just put them on the ground?

Owen: No, they took the enlisted men's cots. Oh, it was so many people and we didn't have the means of taking care of them. You know, they were injured; they were bad. But it was a good experience. [laughs]

James: How long did it take you to clean all of that group up?

Owen: Oh it took us about-- they started coming in on Sunday night and Monday morning they started taking them to the operating room. It took about three days to get them all taken.

James: To get them all sorted out. My goodness. Well, that was a lot of work.

Owen: Sure was. [laughs]

- James: Did you stay in Naples 'til the end of the war?
- Owen: No. Then we had the civilian employees. We had one corpsman that was—they brought in a boy to help that was a wealthy boy who had never done anything but go to school. He just didn't know what to do, but he tried to learn and I felt sorry for him. So his cousin was being married up in northern Italy, and he asked if he could have Saturday off cuz he had never asked for a day off; he worked every day. He was as good as could be, he just didn't know how to do anything. So I said, "Yes, you can." He said, "I'll be back Sunday morning" and I said, "Alright." So he came back on Sunday morning and he said, "When do you people leave?" I said, "Leave? I didn't know we were leaving. Where are we going?" He said, "You're moving way up to Leghorn, Italy."
- James: Leghorn?
- Owen: Uh-huh. I went to talk to the colonel and I said, "Are we leaving here?" and he said, "Not that I know of!" Now, this is your secrecy. [laughs] They all knew we were coming, but we didn't know we were going. Then we moved on up to Leghorn.
- James: When was that, do you recall?
- Owen: That was in the fall of '44.
- James: That was when you got to Naples, in the fall of '44--
- Owen: Then it was--must have been that summer. [pause] I'm trying to think--
- James: Is there something I can get for you? Don't move.
- Owen: My book is over there on that chair, and I think I have the dates written in there. It's a big book. [pause] And you know these Arabs all looked alike. You couldn't tell, and they were all Mohammed, Ben Mohammed, or--.
- James: There you go.
- Owen: Let's see. Now I can give you the exact dates: Fort Custer October 27th, 1942; left there on April 20th, 1943 and went to Camp Shanks, New York. April 27th, 1943 went overseas.
- James: April?
- Owen: Uh-huh. North Africa at Oran in 1943; Bizerte June, May of '43. No-- Bizerte in June of '43 to May of '44. Italy, Naples, May of '44 to October

'44. Leghorn, October '44 to January '45, and then I came home. They were giving us, letting us come home. Rotation, they called it.

James: Oh, you rotated home before the war was over?

Owen: Uh-huh, and I came home on-- I got into Miami Beach at February 1945.

James: [Pause] Alright, I got it. Here, I'll take that off your lap. That's pretty heavy.

Owen: [Laughs] It is.

James: You saved a lot of things.

Owen: Well, my sister saved a lot of my letters and a lot of things, all the clippings from the papers on everything, and then I had a lot of things that I brought home with me that I put in there, too. It's really quite complete.

James: Okay, now we are back at it here. So in October '44 you moved to Leghorn. Was there a different situation there?

Owen: We didn't have hardly anything to do compared to what we had before.

James: You mean that the war wasn't so busy there?

Owen: No, uh-uh, and it was--well they were trying to get this business that they were all going to make all of them--were going to come together and push, the big push, and they had a lot of troops up there. We had troops, but he didn't. And he missed the boat. On Christmas Eve when we were there, during midnight mass, he came over and bombed with his planes. They only had about, oh, seven or eight planes and that was all, and if he had had more planes then he could have pushed us all the way right back down again, because our troops were all up above there.

James: Oh, my goodness.

Owen: We were really worried that night. [laughs] Our priest had gotten a bishop from Florence to come and, oh, it was just a beautiful service and everybody came, the Protestants and the Catholics and everybody. It was right in the middle of it. We were all so upset and embarrassed. [nervous laugh] But then that was the end of it. We were--then I came--

James: That was the last you saw of the war?

Owen: Well, I came home. I got my orders on New Year's Day.

- James: Where did they send you? Did you get back on a ship and come back by ship?
- Owen: I flew.
- James: You flew home?
- Owen: Uh-huh. And then I came to Naples and I stayed there for a week cuz I lost my rating. When I left up there I had a first class rating, but then when I got down there--this is what happens, you lose your rating because they put the boys that have to come home, you know. And then I got over to Casablanca and I lost it again, and I had to stay there for a week. So it took me awhile to get out of there, but it didn't take me long to get home [laughs] when I got started.
- James: When they flew you back did they discharge you right away?
- Owen: No.
- James: Because the war wasn't over.
- Owen: No. I didn't get out until-- I should have kept my book [laughs]; it's right there. When did I get discharged? '47.
- James: Oh my goodness.
- Owen: When I came home I went to—oh, then we went to Miami for a month's rehabilitation and getting acquainted and being able to “get our manners back.” Mrs. Roosevelt didn't think we had any manners, that we lost them all while we were over there! [laugh] I don't know where we lost them, but we had dishes and we ate off of dishes and she said we ate off our kits, you know, and that was all. We had nice dining rooms. I mean tents, for the dining rooms.
- James: So from Miami, where?
- Owen: Miami, I went to Vaughn outside of Chicago and I thought--
- James: Was that a regular hospital or was that a VA hospital?
- Owen: No, that was a regular hospital. It was an Army general hospital.
- James: Army general, that's spelled V-a-u-g-h-n? Near Chicago?
- Owen: Yeah. It was out of Oak Park.

- James: And you got there probably about June of '44?
- Owen: Oh no, I was there before that.
- James: You left Italy in February and you spent a week in--
- Owen: Oh yeah, that's right I forgot; it probably was about that time. [laughs]
- James: Spring?
- Owen: Yeah, it was the spring.
- James: Okay. Then what, you were there for awhile?
- Owen: No; I thought I was gonna be. I came home one night—oh, it was so nice I could go downtown, get on the train and come home and go back. I got back on a Sunday night and there was a note on my bed and it said, "Lieutenant Owen, please come and see me in the morning at 8 o'clock." It was signed by the chief nurse and I thought, "Oh no, what did I do?" because she never does anything like that. I had been there just a month. When I went she said, "I have a call that I must transfer you to Fort Wayne in Detroit. And you have to go down and talk to the Colonel downtown today," the colonel that was over all of the nurses. So when I got down there she said, "Well, it's a mess out there and I want you to go out there and clean it up, and if it isn't cleaned up in a month, I'll be there." And I was there three years and I never saw her, [laughs] so I must have cleaned it up.
- James: At Fort Wayne?
- Owen: In Detroit; it was right on the river bank.
- James: What was there? What was the facility?
- Owen: Oh, what did they make? They made something for the airplanes out there, parts for the airplane. It was a unit itself.
- James: What was the hospital?
- Owen: Fort Wayne.
- James: Fort Wayne Hospital. Army hospital?
- Owen: Yeah. And it was mostly for the--it was so close to Percy Jones, and they had a lot of patients from Percy Jones and they had to get rid of some of them so they'd send them home for three months of leave. Then they'd

get sick when they got home and we didn't send them back down there; they brought them in to us and we took care of them cuz it was easier. Their folks were there and they could come and see them, and they weren't real sick. It would be maybe colds or something, or maybe some of the problems that they had turned up again.

James: You were there three years, until the end?

Owen: No, I was out then before the end. I got out before the end; they started letting the nurses out.

James: Oh you stayed there after? You said you stayed in the service until '47. So you were there three years at Fort Wayne?

Owen: No I was out at--they sent me to Fort Sheridan to be discharged and when I got to Fort Sheridan they gave me orders to go on duty in the hospital, so I was there for about three months before I was discharged.

James: What did you do after you got out of the service?

Owen: What did I do? I didn't do anything for--

James: Did you use your GI Bill?

Owen: No. No. My mother wasn't very fond of me going back to work. [laughs] She'd always say, "Oh, stay home now. It's spring, stay home until summer and then you can go." Then summer came and she'd say, "Oh, stay home now until fall." And it came to fall and she said, "Oh, stay home through the winter." And I said, "Oh, mother, I can't; I've got to go to work." So I went out to join the thing you get a job from and I went out to St. Johns in Michigan to be a--I was director of nurses in this small hospital. And my mother passed away in May and I came home. I wasn't there very long, because my dad was going to be alone otherwise. I worked here in the hospital for awhile, and then I worked at Associated Physicians in Madison for and Dr. Hummer. I worked there for thirteen years. And then I got to the point where I was just getting so tired and worn out from it that I went to the bloodmobile to work in the central supply. And then I--where did I retire from?--Oh, ohhh! Then I bought a gift shop here in Stoughton [laughs] and then I went to Eleanor Nygaard Nursing Home and I was the nurse in charge there until I retired.

James: [Pause] So, what did you think about your experience in Italy? Did you think that it was a lot of work, that it was worthwhile?

- Owen: Yeah it was, only we didn't go over there to take care of those dirty filthy people, [laughs] but we got them cleaned up. Oh, they loved our showers, just loved them. And soap went just like that because they'd use--
- James: In Italy, nobody had any soap and people would steal from the hospital?
- Owen: No, no; this was for the patients. You see, this was when we had all these people, the North African French, and they had never had showers, I suppose. Oh, they thought they were great; they'd take three or four a day! [laughs]
- James: They sent them up from North Africa to your hospital?
- Owen: They were the ones who came in from southern France.
- James: From southern France? That was while you were in Naples. A thousand patients came in over one weekend, right? I've got to get that down.
- Owen: We had to discharge all our patients that we had.
- James: You had to discharge the patients that you had. [pause] And then you said it took about three days before you had them squared away. They were North Africans?
- Owen: North African French they called them then. The French were ruling then.
- James: There were African soldiers, right? For the French, they were from Algiers?
- Owen: Well, they were from all over. We had South Africans, we had the Arabs, the Senegalese and the Goums and--all French. The Senegalese were the ones that were the short yellow and they had their hair parted, it would be all cut off wherever the braid was. They had a big thick braid on one side, maybe down the back here or maybe over here. And they allahed Allah every night. If they were able to be up, they'd be out there allahing Allah. [laugh]
- James: So they almost ran you out of soap, eh?
- Owen: [Laughs] Sure did. This boy came up and asked for a bar of soap, and one of the girls was sitting there--oh they were tall, those Senegalese were TALL, and I had to look way up like this at him and I said, "If my mother could see me now she'd just have a fit." [laughs] I often thought of her when I was over there. If she knew what we were taking care of, she'd think I should be scared to death. I was.

- James: Did they speak English at all?
- Owen: No, we had to get interpreters. A lot of our boys could speak French, and you give it to the Frenchman and they gave it to the guy who could speak it because some of them had their own lingo, and by the time it got to them, you wondered what it was, what they had told them. [laughs] Especially if they were going to surgery; they couldn't have any breakfast in the morning.
- James: Right, that was tough. That's another thing; did you have trouble with the food, because they ate differently?
- Owen: They got our food.
- James: They just had to eat whatever--
- Owen: What they got and they loved it.
- James: They got along okay with that?
- Owen: Oh yes, they just loved it. But that was a job serving trays. Practically everybody was getting trays. I always served the noon tray because I was out there on that ward. They sent me out there to be in charge.
- James: I'm surprised they sent so many up to Naples. Why didn't they take care of those folks in Africa where they were? Oh, they were in France.
- Owen: No, they weren't in France, they were in northern Italy. They were getting ready--see the war was still on up in northern Italy at that time.
- James: I was wondering how those French soldiers had to be in northern Italy.
- Owen: The French? They brought them over. They went from Bizerte--The French soldiers came into Bizerte and then they took them over to Naples, and then they went up, the way they went up through, you know, in Italy, and got up there at the top, over here, and here we were right here when we got up in Leghorn. When we were here we got these North African French that were injured when they were fighting up here. Still--
- James: You were given such a bunch, and you didn't have any before. I wondered where they got their care before they sent them all down to Naples?
- Owen: They were fighting. And then they put them on hospital ships; they brought them down there by hospital ship.

- James: They brought them by hospital ship?
- Owen: Uh-huh. Got them all by hospital ship.
- James: I know about hospital ships.
- Owen: Ohhhh. [laughs] They are not supposed to bomb them, you know.
- James: Yes, I know. We had a big Red Cross that lit up at night.
- Owen: We had these people on detached service to us; they used to have surgical units that they sent out. There were two doctors and three nurses. And they sent them out and then they could take over as an extra unit when you were so busy. And [laughs] they sat at our hospital and they stayed and they stayed. They were only supposed to stay two months. [laughs] Nobody reported that they were there because they should have at headquarters.
- James: They were supposed to go back to the hospital ship?
- Owen: Yeah. They were supposed to go back, but they never got called. Well, then they got called to go to Naples, and so they went. They took them over on the hospital ship and they bombed it just before they got into the harbor and the girls lost all their clothes and everything. They weren't supposed to bomb hospital ships and they weren't supposed to bomb ambulances. But they found the British were hauling guns in their ambulances, so they bombed them. Not ours they didn't, but they did theirs. [pause] [laugh] One time, they brought gas over to North Africa, and so the Americans brought a whole trainload of gas up and left it on the tracks down in Tunis. Well that was fine, but about three or four years after the war was over with the cars were completely empty, there was nothing in them. It came out in one of the Army magazines; that was one of their prides and joys. [laughs] They could have bombed us or I mean used the gas and we couldn't have done a thing, but it frightened them.
- James: So it was quite an experience you had?
- Owen: Yes it was.
- James: Your mother was happy to see you come home.
- Owen: [Laughs] Yes. I said I--
- James: Had she given up on you, decided you'd never make it?

Owen: No, [laughs] she knew I would. My brother--she had both of us in. My brother was in, too. He was in the milk business. He worked for Armor Evaporated. We had a plant here then. My dad worked there, too. They got him out so he wouldn't be drafted, but he volunteered. He said he was a young man, he wasn't married, he had a car, he had a good job, and he said he couldn't face these people. He said, "I could hardly drive up and down the main street." So he told mother he was going. I came home and I thought, "Well, how am I ever going to tell her that I'm going to go?" I came home on a week's vacation and I put it off and I put it off and I put it off. The last day I said, "Mother, I want to tell you when I go back, I'm going to volunteer to go in the Army." And you know what she said? "I wondered why you hadn't done that before." [laughs] Because she saw it all over; they were lauding them and everything. So I don't know whether she said it to make me feel good or what, but it did; it made me feel real good that she wasn't so upset about it. But I guess she was pretty upset.
[Tape Ends Abruptly]

[End of Interview]