title makes clear, he unifies the whole of Nicholson’s career into “a writing life.” The result is a coherent, compelling study with only minor shortcomings: a few instances of unwieldy prose that is otherwise clear and elegant, and, in discussion of events spanning 1938 to 1943, a few confusing shifts in chronology. Such lapses are negligible, however, in light of the book’s sizable contributions to Indiana’s literary and historical scholarship.

As Gray recalls in his final chapter, the New York Times called Nicholson “the last leaf on a famous literary tree that grew in Indiana” (p. 243). Thanks to Ralph Gray’s insistence that the life and work of Meredith Nicholson are still worth considering, despite the shifting literary winds of the last century, Nicholson’s place on that tree will remain secure.

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Steel Shavings, Volume 39
Brothers in Arms
Edited by James B. Lane

In this latest volume of the Steel Shavings series—a social history journal focusing on the Calumet region of northwest Indiana—historian James B. Lane has again woven together a thought-provoking, often entertaining, and at times tragic collection of oral histories and recollections from Vietnam veterans. The series first featured the stirring voices of local Vietnam veterans in 1988, when history students at Indiana University Northwest compiled oral interviews in conjunction with Professor Lane’s course on the war. At a time when Reagan-era revisionists were attempting to recast the Vietnam conflict as a noble and winnable endeavor, Lane and his students intended to reinforce the real “lessons of Vietnam”—from the hazards of misunderstanding vital national interest to the absence of a clearly defined exit strategy—by using the reminiscences of the working-class men and women who paid for those mistakes in southeast Asia. Now, twenty years later, with the United States again groping for answers in another unconventional war, Lane’s students have gathered together another album of visceral testimony in the hopes of revisiting many of those apparently still unheeded lessons of Vietnam.

As one soldier explains, every veteran has his own story; no two are the same. Indeed the real value of this Steel Shavings volume rests in the
richness and multiplicity of perspectives from these soldiers, many of whom are drawing on lives well-lived, and not-so-well-lived, to make sense of their distinctive place in the Vietnam experience. More than fifty IUN students conducted the loosely structured oral histories around such themes as how veterans found themselves in Vietnam, how they experienced life “in country” and upon return to “the world,” and how they assess the impact of Vietnam on their lives.

A certain stoicism, often fatalism, emerges from these pages, as many veterans from this steel mill region of Indiana that sent a disproportionate number of its sons to Vietnam recall their decision to enlist, instead of waiting to be drafted, and their curious baptism into the surreal logic of war. For some, Vietnam was a land of fantastic flora and fauna: elephants and elephant grass, tigers, leeches, mosquitoes, and lizards whose cries sounded remarkably like obscenities. Others evoke the unforgettable smells of the war—sweat, gunpowder, diesel fuel, rain, and the sickeningly sweet stench of death. Nearly all work to articulate in some haunting way the raw emotions of human suffering and the senseless waste of young lives both interrupted and too often cut short. Not surprisingly, strong feelings of mistrust and cynicism—toward the government in general and military adventurism more specifically—permeate these pages, as does a pronounced aversion to the idea of sending their own sons to be exploited in undeclared wars.

In addition to the powerful oral histories, Lane wisely includes other primary source materials, including selections from contemporary newspaper columns and sundry letters, diaries, poems, memoirs, and photographs, to further establish the authentic look and feel of the Vietnam era. In fact, the volume’s most provocative passages are those excerpts from L.T. Wolf’s Soldier’s Vietnam (1996) and Joe Klein’s fine book Payback: Five Marines After Vietnam (1984) about the heartrending odyssey of a veteran named Gary Cooper.

Ultimately, as the bloodshed and horror of Vietnam increasingly fade from our collective consciousness, the memories included in this volume of Steel Shavings realize Lane’s aim of reiterating the harsh lessons of what George Kennan judged the most disastrous of all American undertakings. In doing so, he and his students capture the simple dignity of these unheralded Vietnam veterans who, in serving their country, often “walked the line between heroism and cowardice, proud but with few illusions” (p. 112).

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