Book Reviews

*Letters from Fighting Hoosiers.* Selected and Edited by Howard H. Peckham and Shirley A. Snyder. *Indiana in World War II,* Volume II. (Indiana War History Commission, Bloomington, 1948, pp. xvi, 406. Portrait of Sgt. John H. Parks frontispiece and index. $5.00.)

The real nature of war is soon forgotten—if, indeed, it is ever apprehended—by those not directly involved in it. Historians, however able and conscientious, cannot put its personal essence on paper. The hundreds of thousands of pages already published on the history of the Second World War and the hundreds of thousands which may yet be devoted to it cannot easily record what it meant to the individual caught in its midst. We have brilliant studies of military and naval strategy, of diplomatic counterpoint, of political upheavals and debacles, of economic and social changes, achievements, and catastrophes. These, however, are by their nature generalizations. Even if they describe individual episodes, they usually involve masses of persons whose separate identities are lost. Such is the inevitable limitation of the historian. In events which may have had no generalized significance at the time to most of the participants, he must seek a pattern and a meaning. Separated in time and space from these events, the reader cannot learn from most histories, however excellent, how it felt to stand watch on deck in the freezing spray of an Arctic night on the Murmansk run; or to carry a forty-five pound pack up a rough mountain trail in the New Guinea jungle, over roots and fallen logs and across waist-deep streams, amidst swarming flies and spiders “big enough to saddle and ride”; or to soak in an Italian foxhole for weeks under grey skies, without dry clothes, living on cold K-rations, suffering from diarrhea, and seeing one’s buddies blown to bits in hours-long artillery barrages; or even to accustom oneself to the dreary barracks life, the deadening physical exhaustion, the subordination to loud-mouthed tryants, and the utter loss of individual dignity which was called basic training.

What the historian has not been able to do, the novelist has attempted. A Norman Mailer or a John Horne Burns can recreate the feelings and experiences of individuals with
compelling power. Nevertheless—however we may be moved by the artistry of such a re-creation—we know in the back of our minds that we are reading fiction. This, we tell ourselves, is like what happened to a lot of people, but it isn’t exactly what did happen to any real person.

Now at last the gap between personal experiences and historical record has been bridged. It is a great service by the Indiana War History Commission that the first volume actually published (though the second numerically) in its history of Indiana during the Second World War is a volume of *Letters from Fighting Hoosiers* which tells us, in their own words, in a highly personal way, how more than a hundred representative men and women of Indiana fared and felt during the course of the war. The editors have selected 131 letters from more than thirty-five hundred made available to them. Except for two articles by Ernie Pyle and a couple of other accounts written some time after the events, the contributions are genuine letters to family or friends, not intended for publication. Some, indeed, from men killed in battle, are so very personal that one realizes what a sacrifice of privacy in grief has been made by the survivors in surrendering them to print.

Literary merit, the editors say, was not the sole criterion in selection: sincerity and representative distribution were important. Every branch of service is represented, including WACS, WAVES, and the Red Cross; nearly every rank from private to general; every theater of war; and the entire period of the struggle from Pearl Harbor to the months following V-J Day.

These letters are the authentic voice of the American civilian in uniform. Some of the writers are masters of the telling phrase, and some are addicted to the cliché. Some voice prejudices which the war did not wear away, and some reveal great insight. Here you can find some Americans in foreign lands indulging in a complacent feeling of national superiority, some making bitter and unfair generalizations about other peoples on the basis of limited personal experience, some expressing warm admiration for the qualities of our allies, and some showing keen interest in and shrewd appraisal of the strange societies into which they have fought their way.

Despite these differences of personality, temperament, outlook, and education, a certain community of experience
emerges. War is the ultimate in horror, and the military way of life is a bad way of life. These letters build up a picture of war, piece by piece, until the total effect is almost unbearable. Here you have the boredom, the drab cheerlessness of barracks, the resentment of the new soldier—and of the seasoned one, too, often enough—against arbitrary, unreasonable, and sometimes incompetent non-coms and officers; the depressing grind of sixteen-hour KP; the idiocy of "inspection," and the tragedy of a stray grain of dust discovered by an officer's white glove; the blistered feet, the dusty roads, the hot uniforms under a blazing sun; the everlasting "shots" for tetanus, typhoid, and other possible ailments; the "slop" served as food on overcrowded British transports; the seasickness aboard a tossing landing craft as you approach an enemy beach; the blisters that form on the hands on the first day of digging foxholes and break on the second day and bleed on the third day; the long artillery barrages during which you hug the stony ground or lie in a water-filled hole while your friends are blasted into unrecognizable messes; the endless rain that soaks your clothes, which dry out a little from your body-warmth at night if you can find a sheltered place to sleep, but get soaked again the next morning; the helplessness under the strafing of enemy planes; the numbing hours of guard duty at a frigid post; the fatalism that makes a flier starting off on a mission wonder whether his "number" is up this time; the tension with which infantrymen watch one of their fliers, his parachute caught on the tail of a burning plane, struggle to get it loose until the flame sweeps across the cords and he plummets through space; the all-pervasiveness of mud; the K-rations, the D-rations, the dehydrated eggs, the grey dehydrated potatoes with their curious taste of corruption, the Spam, the Spam, the Spam!

Here, of course, you also have perseverance, amazing courage, gaiety, the ability to find wry humor in the grimmest situation, the tenderness which finds an object in the company pup, more spoiled than a colonel's mistress at the Hotel Aletti. Yet all the qualities which held our men together and brought them—or the survivors—victory cannot make us forget the unspeakable grimness of war. One of the most painfully realistic battle accounts I have ever read is in this book: the simple story of a man caught with a few comrades in a small town during the Battle of the
Bulge. His straightforward narrative is replete with horrible details:

"Two of the boys were still there, blown to Kingdom Come by an 88. I looked at them, but didn't recognize either one. Tupper told me who they were. I still couldn't recognize them. . . . I remember one rifle which had part of a man's forearm blown into the stock. . . . The pig went a little farther and started munching on a German body. . . . We went to sleep [in a basement] immediately and were awakened by Tupper who told us before we were fully awake that we were going out and dig in in front of the town. I choked back some tears and told him this was suicide, but the officers were back in the town now and they wanted a place to sleep. The basement we were in looked pretty good to them and they started gloating over it before we were out."

There is nothing specifically Hoosier about this book. It is a book about Americans, who might have come from any state in the Union. They faced death, and some of them met death, with a courage which knows no boundary. Every American should read them at least once a year, and should spend some time contemplating the frontispiece, a superb photograph of a G. I. who combines the utter weariness of a Bill Mauldin figure with the tragic dignity of a Rembrandt portrait. The book should be read, and the portrait studied, with special intensity and prayerfulness by those persons who prate with callous ease or even satisfaction about "the next war."

Indiana University

C. Leonard Lundin

Old Cahokia, A Narrative and Documents Illustrating the First Century of its History. Edited by John Francis McDermott. (St. Louis, Missouri, The St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1949, pp. 355. Illustrations, end maps, and index. Cloth $4.50, paper $3.00.)

This volume is, as its title suggests, a collection of documents which purport to illustrate the first century of the history of Cahokia. The reason for its appearance is the desire "to focus attention on Cahokia in commemoration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its founding." To attain this end, five different writers edited vari-