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**Wynn, Neil A (2018) Letters from the Greatest Generation: Writing Home in WWII, edited by Howard H. Peckham and Shirley A. Snyder, forward by James H. Madison, Indiana University Press, 2016. History, 103 (354). pp. 187-189. doi:10.1111/1468-229x.12556**

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Peckham, Howard H., and Snyder, Shirley A. *Letters from the Greatest Generation: Writing Home in WWII*, (Bloomington & Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016). \$25. xi, 354. 976 0 253 02448 0.

Collected by the Indiana War History Commission and first published in 1948 as *Letters from Fighting Hoosiers*, this collection of 131 letters selected from 3,500 sent by men and women from Indiana who served overseas during World War II provides insights into the impact of war on ordinary people. Mail to, and from, home was important for the morale of both service personnel and those at home, even though it was censored by military and by the writers themselves. The letter writers often spoke of the importance of mail from home, but we just have their side of the correspondence and we can only imagine what they meant to their recipients.

The collection is organized by location covering various different theatres in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Military service enabled Americans to see the world and its sights almost as tourists: as one wrote, “it isn’t everyone who gets to visit Paris sometime during his lifetime.” (197) Paris was just one of many exciting places visited – the Pyramids, the Sphinx, the Nile, Rome, Naples, London, Stratford, all enabled the G.I.s to experience another world and to compare situations with those back home. For many this led to the realisation that it was “wonderful to be an American.” (54)

Sometimes almost light-hearted such as the opening descriptions of the attack on Pearl Harbor simply as an “air raid” (2) or a surprise visit from “our small yellow friends”(3),

almost all the letters are extremely well-written (one was a poem), and they were presumably selected partially for this reason. The letters vary in length from several detailed pages to single paragraph missives – in one short letter an airman tells his parents he is alive in a prison hospital, but has had a leg amputated. The more detailed correspondence describes the minutiae of daily life and routine in the military, through from training to combat itself. Accounts of battle, being under fire, or witnessing a French firing squad shoot a collaborationist, are often given in surprisingly matter-of-a-fact language, possibly reflecting “the callousness a man develops toward death” (63); a Marine presents a powerful description of the fear one feels under shelling, but follows it immediately with “I wish I could be with you this Christmas.” (217)

Rarely did the war seem glamorous as many letters refer to being cold, dirty, but comment positively on the food supply – a parachutist recalled the T-bone steaks, potatoes, green beans, coffee and pudding eaten before dropping into France and a female Red Cross worker in France outlined a monthly liquor ration of champagne, Scotch, gin, and cognac. Better still was the seven-day furlough in the United States Riviera Recreation Area where one soldier reported he and his colleagues enjoyed fine food and entertainment including Glenn Miller’s band. On the other hand, there are several accounts here of German prisoner of war camps in which hundreds of dead soldiers, Polish and Russian, were found starved to death or murdered, and details of the concentration camps that writers felt necessary to share with those back home so that, in one writer’s words, “if enough people understand what totalitarianism is, they will guard against it at home.” (180) Letters from the Pacific theatre tended to have a different tone from those from Europe – the terrain and the combat often seemed grimmer and there was an obvious sense of relief when it came to an end.

The process of selection and editing obviously means that these letters may not be representative of the ordinary serviceman and woman's views and experiences; they are almost too well-written. Nonetheless, they still provide the personal and emotional responses to the war often lost in standard historical accounts. The reality of war is here in the letters and the brief biographies of the writers also often make tragic reading as several of the authors did not survive the war. Included is a moving letter written to his family by an airman to be read in the event of his death – he was killed in action a year later. The only illustration in the book is a photograph of a twenty-three year old soldier who died in the Battle of the Bulge the day after his photograph was taken.

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