

American Chetnik

THE SERBS CHOOSE WAR. By Ruth Mitchell. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc. 1943. 265 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by HENRY B. KRANZ

RUTH MITCHELL is the only American woman ever to become a member of the Serbian Chetnik guerrillas. She is General Billy Mitchell's sister. She has spent thirteen months in German prisons and concentration camps and at one time was condemned to death by the Nazis. It seems therefore more than brutal to criticize "The Serbs Choose War" by ordinary standards, for Mrs. Mitchell has undoubtedly tried to do the best that she could with her material. And this material is amazing, grim, tragic, perhaps too amazing.

Ruth Mitchell had been asked to go to Albania to photograph the wedding of its King Zog. She went—and stayed in the Balkans for three and a half years. She fell in love with the Serbian people. She learned to despise the Italians and to hate the Croats who betrayed the Serbs when the Nazis overran the country. She studied the Serbian language and translated Serbian literature. And although a British citizen with an American passport, she was invited to join the Chetniks. She was taught how to use a dagger: "not from above the shoulder, as one would expect but upward under the ribs to reach the heart." She sewed poison in the collar of her coat in the usual position, "where it can be chewed when the hands are bound." Then a line was drawn through her name in the books of the Chetniks — every member of the Chetniks must consider himself as good as dead.

But Ruth Mitchell had no occasion to fight. She was many times arrested

and after the German invasion she escaped from burning Belgrade on a troop train. Her description of the screaming Stukas, the falling bombs, the cordite fumes, the crying women and children, and the terrible destruction of Serbia's capital cannot easily be forgotten. Yugoslavia could have fought on, Mrs. Mitchell says, but every Serbian officer had to expect to be shot in the back by his Croat soldiers and hundreds were so shot. "A total of 1,679 officers representing ninety-five per cent of the Croat officers in the Yugoslav army proved traitors to their oath and went over to the enemy. Of the 224,000 Yugoslav prisoners of war taken into Germany, less than two per cent were Croats." When the Croats came into power, Mrs. Mitchell writes, the Serbs were

massacred. "Even the German massacres of the Jews, incredible as this sounds, pale by comparison. More than 600,000 defenseless Serbs died."

Miss Mitchell lived between enemy lines. She escaped to Dalmatia and was arrested by the Gestapo while preparing to join General Mihailovich. The Nazis who questioned her and sentenced her to death and were her guardians get their full share of hateful description too. "Sadist of the worst description—pervert of the kind so common among the Germans that one almost expects a creature who traded on his position to wreak every sort of mean cruelty—for four days (Hahn) drank steadily and could not eat, etc." Ruth Mitchell concludes: "Every German in Germany is guilty of every atrocity."

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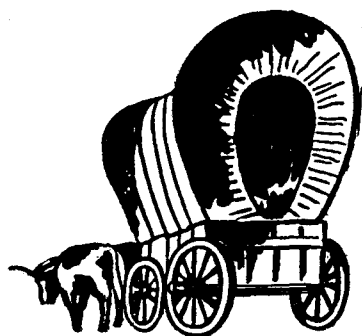
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Ruth Mitchell in Chetnik dress.

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A Yank in Australia

c/o POSTMASTER. By Thomas R. St. George. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co. 1943. 194 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by PERCIVAL R. KNAUTH

HERE is life in Australia through a Yankee soldier's eyes. Corporal Thomas R. St. George has written himself a delightful and very worthwhile little book that not only shows civilian stay-at-homes how the boys are living in the land "down under," but provides a good deal of quiet and sometimes noisy amusement in the showing.

This is not a book of combat, though its ending implies that combat for the men of St. George's unit was not far off. It is a diary, without dates, of what a bunch of U. S. soldiers felt and saw on board the ship that took them to Australia and in their period of training there. That may not sound like much of a story—but it is, as St. George tells it. His is a new and refreshing kind of humor, and a new and very up-to-date kind of travel book. Many thousands of Yanks have traveled over this same road, and we are likely to hear stories about their experiences for years to come. But I doubt if many of them will be better than this one.

Corporal St. George, his Top Kick tells us, was a student at the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and a writer and cartoonist for *The Minneapolis Star-Journal*. His book began as an irregular series of articles written with the fond hope that *The San Francisco Chronicle* would see fit to publish them. The first one to come in to *The Chronicle's* office was Number 14 of the series. The mails took care of the rest, by fits and starts. Number 1 piece never did show up, but *The Chronicle* did see fit to publish the rest of them. They were, says the editor in his foreword, written with "a kind of cockeyed seriousness," which is as

good a way of any as describing them, and *The Chronicle's* readers "loved them." So, I believe, will all those who read this book.

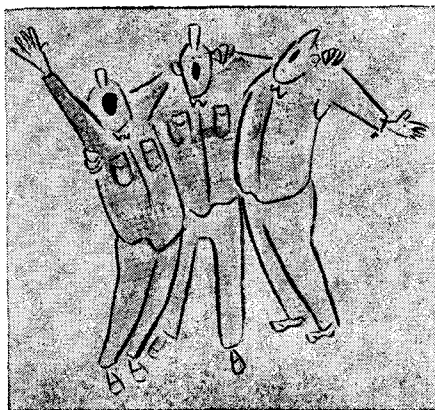
For Corporal St. George has achieved a kind of compromise between plain funniness and being serious which has resulted in a definitely compelling style of writing. He does it sometimes by understatement, sometimes by exaggeration, sometimes by just being funny in one place and serious in another. A good example is his description of his last moments in America.

During the voyage, St. George and five others played 981 hands of hearts for drinks; another group nearly 500 rubbers of bridge, any number of others any number of crap games. Sergeant Rubitkish, sleeping in the bunk below St. George, had a moment of excitement when the International Date Line was crossed: "Look," he said, "they're paying us for thirty-one days this month, ain't they? But we're only putting in time for THIRTY!" Nobody else got excited; nobody got excited at all, in fact, until they saw land.

Australia was a nation of many surprises. Everything was different, even the language. The weather, it seems, was terrible; particularly depressing to the troops was the fact that, having just about finished with winter at home, they were just beginning it again in Australia. And comforts? America had spoiled them. Their first beds were burlap bags filled with straw. The latrine was "the bloody lavatory... She's a little 'ut, wit pipes on. An' 'ere, Mite... you better tike me newspaper..."

But Australia made these men soldiers. It made them realize what a war was. It accustomed them gradually, almost unawares, to the fact that war was far more than the routine of the training camps they had known back home, far more than their individual lives.

There is no kidding in words like these. War is and remains a grim business, as every soldier who comes into intimate contact with it sooner or later finds out. But it has its lighter sides, too, as American soldiers seem peculiarly able to find out, even in its most difficult moments. American soldiers have a philosophy which no other troops seem to have—barring, perhaps, the Australians, men of a nation which grew up like ours. That philosophy, compounded of seriousness and humor but always with a wisecrack at hand, is expressed in this book better than in any comparable volume I know.



—From the book