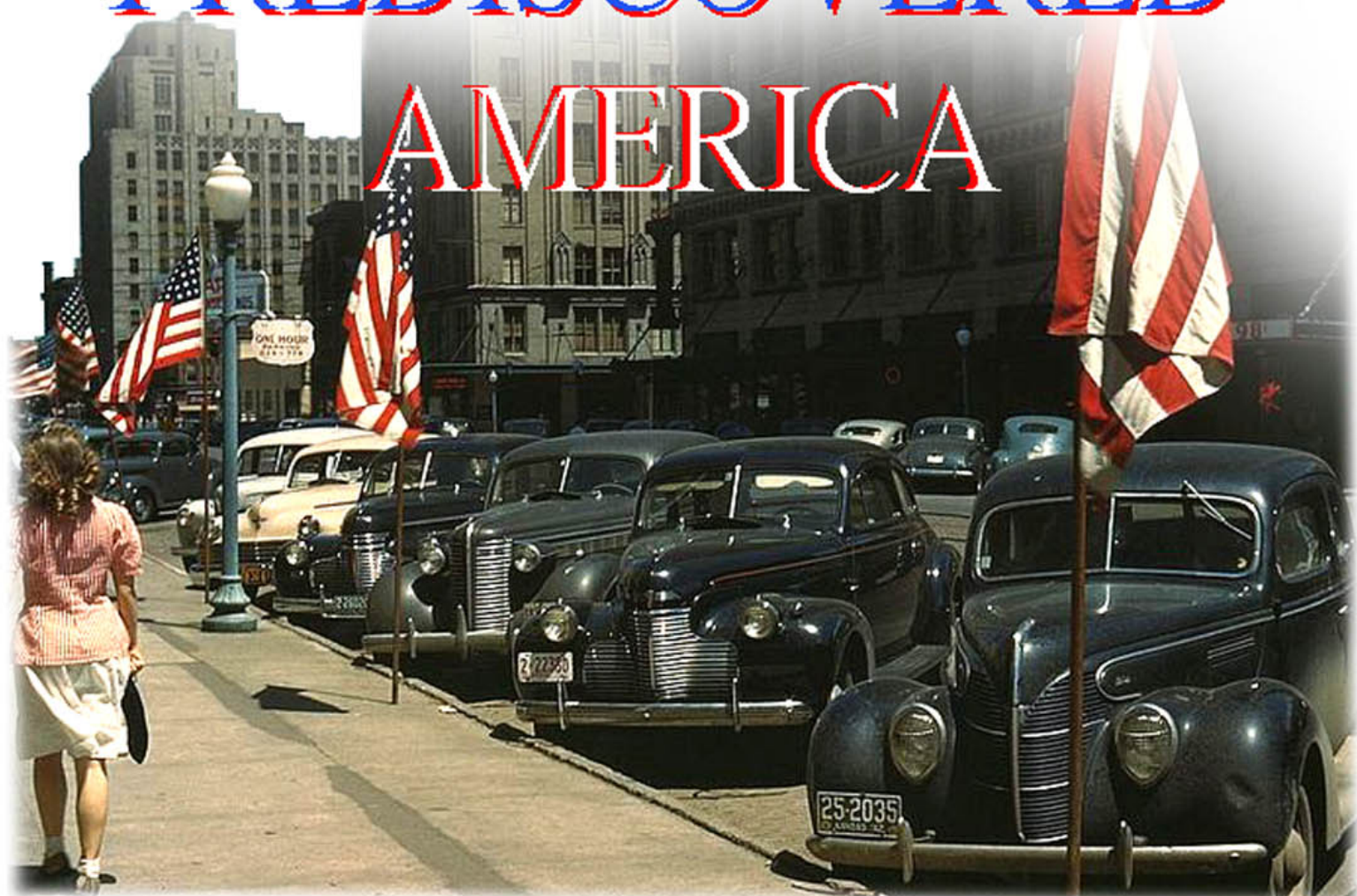


# I REDISCOVERED AMERICA



by WILLIAM T. MITCHELL,  
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*When the S. S. Capillo was sunk at Manila in December, 1941, Cadet-Midshipman Mitchell became a prisoner of the Japs. For three and a half years, until his recent rescue, he was cut off completely from the events of the world. In catching up with America, Mitchell also provides us on the home front with a review of some of the phenomena that have stolen upon us in these many crowded months. —THE EDITORS*

**I** **HARDLY** know myself in the mirror. My hair is gray, some of my teeth are gone. My old clothes are pretty loose because of those forty pounds I lost. My dog growls at me and slinks away. My girl has disappeared and most of my friends have moved away. Strangers kid me, and call me "Rip Van Winkle." Tomorrow I'll be 23 years old.

My story doesn't seem very important. Yes, I was a Nip prisoner for more than three years. I was at Santo Tomás and Los Baños and those other places you've read about. But so were thousands of others, men and women who suffered more than I did, and whose experiences have sickened the world. I don't want to tell their



story again. But I've been doing some thinking.

Today I was riding on a train south of San Francisco and there was a Marine sitting in front of me, just back from overseas. "I wonder where we are?" he said, peering out at the fresh, green countryside. "What do you care?" his buddy replied, "as long as it's the good old U.S.A."

That goes for me, too.

But it's not the good *old* U.S.A. It's a new country I never really saw before. I'm a stranger in my own land, and it gives me a queer feeling. I was nineteen when the Nips grabbed me at Manila, just a fuzzy kid. Now it's almost four years later and I'm home again. I feel as if I slept through those four years, until the morning somebody tapped me in my bunk on the ship, just outside the Golden Gate, and said: "Wake up, Bill. This is it!"

So this is it—the place I left 41 months ago. This is where I came in. Or is it?

Do you know how it sounds to hear people saying things in English you can't understand? Do you know how it feels to have people stare at you blankly when you ask: "What's Wilkie been doing?" or "What are pin-up girls?" Do you know how it feels to have other servicemen be impatient because you've never heard of radar, or flame throwers, or bazookas or Wacs? I do—and it has been an eye-opener.

But there is one compensation. I have rediscovered my own coun-



try, and my own people.

Just the other night, walking downtown with a friend, we passed a movie theatre advertising Deanna Durbin in one of her pictures, and I was suddenly depressed.

“That was certainly tough about Deanna Durbin dying and her husband committing suicide, wasn’t it?” I said.

“What kind of a gag is that?” my friend said suspiciously.

“It isn’t funny,” I said, a little annoyed. “The Nips told us all about it. And Judy Garland, she died, too.”

“Why, you dope,” my friend started laughing. “Neither of them is dead. In fact, they’re very much alive.”

You may think this is a trivial incident. I don’t even know Deanna Durbin or Judy Garland and they’ve never heard of me. But that good news gave me a tremendous lift, an unaccountable happiness. The Nips had lied to us, and I fell for it. You believe anything—almost—when you’re cut off from your home.

WHEN I WAS a kid in high school I once spent an afternoon on the Midway at the San Francisco World’s Fair. It was a dizzy, exciting experience for a boy—color and mystery and noise in every side-show and tent. Now it is happening to me all over again with a new adventure every ten minutes.

Who’s this Sinatra, for instance?

I asked one of our neighborhood girls about him one night and she gave me a chill like a quick-freeze



box. I thought perhaps he was in the Air Force and had a lot of Jap planes to his credit. Or maybe he was a ball player. "Why, Frankie's sensational," the girl said. "He sings." Okay—so he sings. And perhaps he's good, but most of us from Los Baños remember Bing too well—Bing on old cracked records we heard the Nips play once in awhile.

And what's all this talk about plastics and ultra-violet window panes and chemical clothes and baked beans with built-in sodium bicarbonate and post-war lavender plumbing fixtures? I'll sign on the dotted line right now. There's been a lot of kidding about American plumbing, but I'll never kick again. I wore the same clothes for three years, the tropical sun peeled the skin off my back, and we took our rare baths in muddy water in a Nipa hut. Americans have more luxuries than any people in the world—or am I telling you?

Americans also have whims and fads, and you can take it from me, who is just beginning to catch up, that they would baffle a doctor of philosophy.

There's jive jargon and the bobby-sox set. We accentuate the positive and we put gin in our rummy. We've got something mysterious called penicillin, and our taxi drivers are women. Moron jokes came and went and cuffs were left off the pants. We talk about postal zones and dehydrated food. We sell our goods with singing commercials (the first one I heard scared the wits



out of me) and everything is copasetic. We worship Lauren Bacall (I've just discovered her!) and write plays about invisible rabbits. Many a night at Los Baños when no one cared if the sun ever rose again, we longed for some of this wonderful American nonsense.

YES, I'M learning about time, too. You feel its urgency and its impact in night clubs, restaurants, street cars, theatres and stores. Four years ago people went out to be entertained; today they're fighting destiny and the clock. Even women smoke furiously on the street, men and women hurry their pleasures, squeezing every hour as though it were their last. People shove, people snarl, people grin and take it. The black-and-blue mark is the home front battle star. But I'll never worry about time again. There was a seven o'clock curfew at Los Baños, and time was only the beginning of night, and the start of a new day.

I HAVE SEEN a new spirit in our people. To explain what I mean, let me tell you about something that happened the day I came home.

There was a drizzle of gray rain as our ship neared the California coast, and mist hung over the San Francisco hills like a shroud. But as we stood on the deck I saw something white and shining, and presently I knew it was the towering Easter Cross on Mt. Davidson. I pointed it out proudly to one of my



shipmates, but he shook his head glumly.

“I never want to see another cross,” he said. “I’ve seen too many of them on the ground, little white ones with names on them.”

A week later, standing outside one of San Francisco’s large churches, we saw men and women going in to worship. Some had mourning ribbons on their sleeves. Some had honorable discharge buttons. Some wore service-star pins, both blue and gold. We went in with them, and we’ve gone many another time since.

“I take back what I said about the Cross,” my friend confided at last. “I guess it means life, too.”

You can call it faith. You can call it hope, or whatever you wish. But I have seen this new inward light in the eyes and faces of Americans, and to me it means we’re no longer locked up, selfishly, in our own small backyard. I know I’ll never be an isolationist. I saw Filipinos risk death to help men and women they would never see again. You can’t isolate a man’s courage nor his soul.

I’m really not a Rip Van Winkle, of course. Because Rip came back to a friendless town and a suspicious people. I’ve come home to a warm-hearted place, and a family I never really knew. I was telling my father about my experiences one night, with all the trimmings.

“It was pretty tough, Dad,” I said.

He nodded gravely and patted my shoulder. “Yes, Bill. I know how it was. I was a prisoner myself



with astonishment. "You never told me that before."

"No, I didn't." he said with a slow grin "It just didn't seem like much"

TOMORROW is another day.

I've got a date for a driving license test, and I'll have to learn the wartime traffic laws. I have to call on my ration board, and I'm going to find out about this new miracle, plasma, down at the blood bank. I've got a list of twenty movies to see (they're old to you), and I want to take another sightseeing trip to the grocery store (but deliver me, please, from rice). I want to buy a copy of the new World Almanac (I read the 1941 edition five times at Los Baños and got sort of attached to it). I want to walk into a restaurant, for the fourth time this week, and say casually: "Fry two, over easy." I want to finish my course in the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps, and go to sea again.

But mostly I just want to stand on the busiest street corner in town, or sit in a crowded room—and watch and listen.

I've got to catch up with today.

**Coronet**

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