

# Cover Story:

H. V. KALTENBORN

BY KATHY WARNES

Being a real Baron had little practical value for H. V. Kaltenborn, unless he happened to be in Germany on one of his radio commentating assignments. Then, his title came in handy. In Berlin, he was addressed as Baron Hans von Kaltenborn and given the respect the Germans reserved for titled nobility as well as access to the leaders of the German government.

But back in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where the Baron grew up, he was simply known as H. V. and wasn't even famous until he became a radio commentator for the Columbia Broadcasting System in New York City. In 1938, when he was 60 years old, H. V. got one of the most famous scoops of his career when a German annexation or Anschluss, brought the world to the brink of war.

Oddly enough, an earlier Anschluss brought H. V.'s parents to Milwaukee. The elder Kaltenborn was a member of the Hessian nobility until Germany annexed Hesse. H. V.'s father brought his family to Milwaukee and made a living for them by selling building materials.

In its 1938 Anschluss, Germany annexed 10,000 square miles of Czechoslovakian territory and H. V. covered the entire story for the Columbia network. He kept an almost 24 hour running commentary pouring into the microphone from the beginning of the crisis on September 10th to its end on September

29th. When he wasn't broadcasting, he read press reports and listened to every short-wave broadcast from Europe. He slept and ate in his office and his wife, a Baroness in her own right before she married H. V., brought him his dinners which included his favorite onion soup. Toward the end of the crisis, Adolph Hitler's speech from Berlin was broadcast. The applause at the end of the speech hadn't yet died away when H. V. went on the air. For fifteen minutes he ad-libbed a translation, an interpretation and a prediction, which turned out to be correct, of the consequences of Hitler's speech. This was an unprecedented event in radio history.

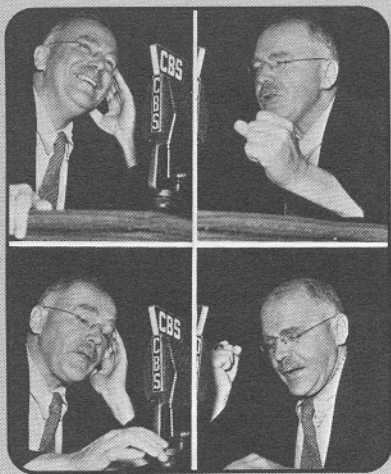
Rival radio networks and networks in other countries agreed that H. V.'s commentary on the European crisis was more thorough, illuminating and accurate than any other on the air.

H. V.'s expertise in broadcasting came from years of "voice-on" experience and mental preparation. He had been on the air since 1923 and perfected his craft with every broadcast. But he never prepared a script! He always came to the microphone with just a few penciled notes on a used envelope. Scribbles on odds and ends of note paper were the nearest this "ad libber" ever got to writing his material beforehand.

Even more exciting than H. V.'s ad-libbed Berlin broadcast was his August, 1936, description of a battle in Spain. Americans from Azusa to Andover who heard this from their armchairs more fully appreciated the reality of the Spanish Civil War.

"We happen to be straight in the line of fire," reported H. V. "Fortunately for us the bullets are flying high. I'm standing around the corner of a house with the microphone in the open, but with a good thick mortar wall between me and the bullets that are constantly whizzing past."

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H. V. KALTENBORN

No soundman had to create bullet noises for this broadcast, they were authentic. This was also the first live broadcast ever made of the Spanish Civil War.

A few months later, H. V. got another "scoop," this time with the help of Columbia Broadcasting's foreign representative Cesar Saerchinger. H. V. went to England to cover the coronation of King George VI, the first coronation ever to be broadcast. He didn't anticipate that it would be an unusual event because the British government had given blanket permission to all radio networks to broadcast. But H. V. and Cesar managed to out-scoop the competition anyway.

While waiting for the coronation festivities to begin, they decided to do a British "man on the street" broadcast. The British Broadcasting Corporation objected to this because they weren't sure what the British man on the street

would say into the microphone. H. V. and Cesar persisted and broadcast just off Piccadilly Circus. An inebriated Englishman insisted on introducing himself to the radio audience as Prime Minister Hitler of London! Columbia executives chuckled over H. V.'s "coronation scoop" and again reminded each other how lucky they were to have him.

More than any other news commentator of his time, H. V. Kaltenborn knew broadcasting and the news game inside out. From the time he was 21 years old in 1899 and the city editor of the *Merrill Advocate* in Merrill, Wisconsin, H. V. reported the news. In 1909, after he graduated from Harvard University, H. V. joined the staff of the *Brooklyn Eagle* and served in the capacities of reporter, drama critic, Washington correspondent, editorial writer and associate editor in charge of foreign news for over twenty years.

Fluency in German, French and Spanish and an intimate knowledge of Europe and its complicated history, especially German history, contributed largely to H. V.'s commentating expertise. He made his first trip to Europe in 1900 when he fed cattle on the boat to pay for his passage across. Since that first trip, he spent three months of every year of his life in Europe. There, he visited every country on the Continent, conferred with its leaders and lived with its people.

He usually managed to be on the scene when historical events took place. He interviewed Hitler in Bavaria shortly before the Nazi party swept him into power. Even in Asia, H. V. encountered adventures. He was captured by Chinese bandits and lived to return to the United States and broadcast his story to the radio audiences of America.

In 1941, when he was 63, H. V. broadcast the story of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, still ad-libbing.