

The Story of *WORLD NEWS TODAY*

BY JIM WARRAS

Who said "you can't go home again?" Certainly not Adolf Hitler.

In March, 1938, he returned home to his native Austria, accompanied by a sizable amount of Nazi terror and a sizable portion of the German army. The question of where Adolf and his army might travel next was a major concern to much of the rest of the world; so major that it triggered something totally alien to the Nazi philosophy: the expansion of a politically-independent, international news reporting service.

Catalysts of this expansion were three Americans, only one of whom had any experience as a foreign correspondent. They were William S. Paley, founder and president of the Columbia Broadcasting System and two of his employees: Edward R. Murrow, whose official title at that time was "European Director" of CBS and William L. Shirer, dubbed "Continental Representative of CBS" End product of their efforts was CBS' legendary "World News Today"...but a lot of things had to happen first.

Paley started the process by redefining radio news and rethinking who should deliver it. Though it was news that gave birth to modern American commercial broadcasting (What else could one call those election returns from KDKA, Pittsburgh, on Nov. 2, 1920?), local stations and, later, networks were soon dominated by shows featuring big-time, *entertainment* stars. Certainly, some current events deserved coverage (political conventions and cam-

paigns, Lindbergh's return from Paris, the occasional Presidential speech) but, for the most part, radio news in 1938 still consisted of an announcer in a studio, reading what was rewritten from the station's teletype machines. No question, some of these announcers were major journalists in their own right (H.V. Kaltenborn once edited "The Brooklyn Eagle" while Walter Winchell's syndicated column was as distinctive as his radio delivery). Nevertheless, what went on the air was usually no more and no less than what was available for their particular newscast's script.

Then Murrow and Shirer came along. Ed Murrow's majors in college were speech and drama. In 1935, CBS hired him as "Director of Talks and Education." In 1937, Bill Paley sent him to Europe...not to broadcast himself but to line up other people to short-wave programs back to New York. When it came to *news* reports, Murrow was supposed to use journalists already serving as correspondents for newspapers and wire services.

Paley did not want CBS employees doing news programs themselves because he felt they might commit the network "editorially." Murrow argued against that policy from the beginning and, in September, 1937, persuaded Paley to hire, as his number-two man in Europe, William Shirer, a veteran journalist in his own right. Paley could have been wavering in his "no employee newscast" rule by then because, before agreeing to take on Shirer, he required him to send an audition broadcast from London. Though Shirer didn't have the "golden throat" that seemed so essential to broadcast executives in 1938,

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BEFORE THE BLITZ-- Edward R. Murrow, Columbia Network's European Staff Chief, is the center of this quiet, contented-looking group in a Paris sidewalk cafe sometime before the arrival of the Nazi blitzkriegers. At Murrow's left is William L. Shirer, CBS's famed Berlin correspondent. The man on his right is not identified. (CBS Photo)

Murrow convinced Paley it didn't matter. What mattered was that Shirer knew what he was talking about, and that some day CBS might be glad to have him use it. "Some day" was coming soon...but not just yet.

In early 1938, as German soldiers prepared for possible war (no one knew for sure how Britain and France or Austria would react to the Fuehrer's "homecoming") Murrow and Shirer were also hard at work. Their big assignment from CBS was to line up children's choirs for a program called "Columbia's American School of the Air." Shirer was based in Vienna, but used quick train trips to set up choir broadcasts from Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. Each time he returned to the Austrian capital the increase in tension was obvious. But CBS

still refused Shirer's request for air time.

Murrow, meantime, was recruiting choirs in Warsaw, Poland, so Shirer could not reach him by phone. With domestic Nazis preparing to take over the Austrian government, and still no word from New York, Shirer, on his own, tried to set up a broadcast through the Austrian Broadcasting Company. No luck: the Nazis were already in control. Finally, late on Friday, March 11th, Murrow got through to Shirer from Warsaw. He told Shirer to fly to London while he, Murrow, would head for Vienna. Neither knew yet if CBS would let either of them broadcast.

Shirer's flight was far from easy (he had to change planes in Berlin, of all places) but he finally reached London late Saturday, March 12th. His English secretary was

waiting with good news. CBS wanted him to broadcast for 15 minutes at 11:30 that night (6:30 P.M. in New York.) Using a script he wrote on the plane, Shirer gave the world its first uncensored account of the Nazi take-over of Vienna. As Shirer noted in his memoir "The Nightmare Years," it was also the first time CBS had ever allowed one of its own staff to go on the air and report news first-hand. Broadcast journalism would never be the same.

Now that the journalistic ice was broken, so to speak, CBS couldn't get enough of Shirer...or Murrow, for that matter. Shirer got orders to set up another broadcast for Sunday night, March 13th: a half-hour this time, which would include *live* reports not only from London but from as many other European capitals as could be contacted. New York announcer Robert Trout called it a "special broadcast" and, for the people putting it together, it certainly was. Shirer admitted later, "I didn't have the faintest idea how to do it."

The first thing he did was telephone Murrow who, by then, was in Vienna. Shirer also contacted American correspondents in Paris, Rome and Berlin. At first, it didn't look good for Vienna (where the new Nazi broadcasting bosses, who turned down Shirer, were still in no mood to do favors for Americans.) But Murrow thought he could get a phone line to Berlin, where other Nazis at the "Reichsrundfunk" could send his report to New York. Then more bad news from Rome. The Italian government transmitter there was not available, requiring another phone line to another transmitter in Geneva, Switzerland. Much the same story for Paris, which meant a third phone link, this time to London.

Part of the problem of course, was that Shirer and Murrow had to set all this up on

a Sunday (then, as now, a day-off for most people, even journalists and broadcasters.) But CBS' persistent duo had lots of friends among American journalists in Europe and, that March 13th, called in lots of I.O.U.'s. The final lineup for this "special broadcast" included, besides Trout in New York interviewing Senate Foreign Relations committee member Lewis Schwollenbach; Edgar Mowrer of the Chicago Daily News in Paris; Pierre Huss of the International News Service in Berlin; Frank Gervasi of INS in Rome; Murrow in Vienna; and, of course, Shirer in London.

Naturally, there were last-minute complications. The telephone line from Rome never materialized, so Gervasi dictated his report by phone to the London secretary and it was aired by Shirer. Murrow, however, came through loud and clear (via the Berlin transmitter). So did the Paris-to-London phone connection. But Shirer had other worries. Ellen Wilkinson, a member of Parliament who had reluctantly agreed to a late-Sunday-night interview, arrived at BBC's Broadcasting House just 15 minutes before airtime. But Shirer's final jolt that weekend came *after* the broadcast, on a feedback line from New York. CBS news director Paul White said everyone there, from Paley on down, was elated. So much so, White said, "they want another broadcast tomorrow night." So, as Bob Trout put it, "that next night Monday we did it all over again and the "Round-Up" (titles would change over the years) was launched."

That second broadcast featured the same cities (London, Paris, Rome, Berlin and Vienna) and the same correspondents. Gervasi, in Rome, remembered his payoff as warm thanks from Shirer...and \$50 from Paley. A full "Round-Up" did not continue *every* night (that would come later) but Murrow, at least, was back on the air Tuesday, describing Hitler's entry into Vienna.



ROBERT TROUT

Thanks to this German (and now Austrian) Fuehrer, that would be no shortage of material for this new American broadcasting format. Next stop for Hitler (and the Murrow-Shirer team) was Czechoslovakia, leading to the Munich "Peace In Our Time" pact of September, 1938. Less than a year later, "Time" was up. Germany invaded Poland.

CBS managed to keep pace with all this, helped by new correspondents like Eric Sevareid in Paris. However, battles over how and what to broadcast also continued on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, the problem was growing censorship (particularly German). Stories the Nazis liked, like the absorption of Austria and German military victories, were no problem. But other stories, beginning with Czechoslovakia's reluctance to knuckle under to Hitler, had a tougher time hitting the air. Even if a reporter was in Prague (before occupation) and his transmitter was in neutral Switzerland, the telephone line connecting these two points crossed German territory. One could almost guaran-

tee "technical difficulties."

Broadcasts from Berlin, of course, meant as many as three censors checking your script before a word was uttered. But CBS felt it was worth the effort...particularly when, just a week after World War II started, NBC and Mutual *suspended* direct news reports from Europe (apparently thinking such reports were "unneutral"). That left American radio listeners with Murrow in London, Shirer in Berlin and Sevareid in Paris ('til just before the French capital fell in June, 1940.)

Along with news roundups, there were also more "special" broadcasts, as events (and Germans) picked up their pace. Shirer, for example, scooped the world with his live broadcast of the German-French armistice signing at Compiegne. His words were supposed to go by telephone to a recording machine in Berlin. Instead a German engineer (either accidentally or on purpose, Shirer never learned for sure) switched the line to a transmitter that fed a joint CBS-NBC hookup throughout the U.S.

Sometimes, CBS correspondents in Europe would have *liked* to use recording, but Paley kept nixing the idea. He felt news reports should always be live so listeners would always feel they were hearing events "as they happened." But Murrow and Shirer argued that wasn't always possible. For one thing, "events," particularly in wartime, didn't always conform to American broadcast schedules, or to the best time of the day for a short-wave transmission. BBC reporters regularly used portable disc recorders, and the Germans even offered one to Shirer whenever he visited a battlefield. The recorder issue was still unresolved when Shirer left Nazi Germany for good in December, 1940, as it turned out, just one step ahead of the Gestapo, who were convinced his broadcasts included coded messages to the Allies.

Shirer's replacement in Berlin, Howard K. Smith, had his own narrow escape a year later, just after Pearl Harbor and just before Germany interned American civilians.

This growth of the war, of course, insured continued growth into the "round-up" style of worldwide news reporting. If Berlin and Paris were no longer available, there was always London (where NBC got back into the battlefield news business in the summer 1940) and, later, Cairo, Manila (at least until the Japanese took over, Algiers (while the Allies were driving the Axis out of North Africa), and our own nation's capital.

Reporting staffs grew as well. Later-blooming CBS "stars" included Charles Collingwood, Bill Downs, Winston Burdette and David Schoenbrun. As the war moved along, even news recordings gained grudging respect on American networks. Certainly, that George Hicks report, describing D-Day landings from a ship off Omaha Beach, was among the most dramatic.

After the war, news round-ups continued, if a bit less "worldwide" than before. For one thing, the format (live reports from distant world capitals) was no longer a novelty. For another, most of the important news now originated in our own capital or in New York City at the United Nations. By the early 1950's, many of the best radio reporters had switched to television (though radio would keep its monopoly on "immediate" news until video satellite feeds became practical.) Today, of course, CBS still dominates radio news in the U.S.; with the help of its network-owned stations in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. But credit for preserving the early "glory days" of CBS news has to go to a non-network-owned radio affiliate in Seattle, Washington.



HOWARD K. SMITH

Back in the war years, station KIRO thought CBS covered world news just fine. What it didn't like was when "The World Today" went on the air. 6 p.m. in New York was 3 p.m. on the Pacific Coast; fine for soap operas but a lousy time for news. So KIRO transcribed each day's "World Today" (presumably while Bill Paley still refused recordings from his correspondents) and aired the entire broadcast at 6 p.m., Seattle time. More importantly, KIRO saved those transcriptions until University of Washington Professor Milo Ryan found out about them, while researching a project on Edward R. Murrow. In 1957 the entire collection of transcriptions was turned over to the university, where it has since been transferred to audio tape for use by present-day researchers. What a fitting way to study so crucial a period of world history...and to honor the people who first told us about it. ■