From the Archives: Sherman and the Reporter

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From the Archives

Sherman and the Reporter

DALE E. BROWN

Despite the recent successes of embedding, relations between the military and
the press sometimes are contentious. Yet even the greatest animosities of our
current era seldom reach the depth of the hatred that existed between General Wil-
liam Tecumseh Sherman and the newspapermen who followed his army. Enraged
by newspaper listings of the Union order of battle prior to engagements, Sherman
banished reporters from his lines and referred to them as “dirty newspaper scrib-
blers who have the impudence of Satan.” A reporter for the New York Tribune
wrote that being “a cat in hell without claws is nothing to [being] a reporter in
General Sherman’s army.” His brethren were not so kind; they circulated reports
of Sherman’s alleged insanity.

The tension reached a head when a reporter for the New York Herald, Thomas Knox, defied Sherman’s orders and forwarded an account of the Union
defeat at Chickasaw Bluffs. Sherman had Knox arrested and bound over for
court-martial. The reporter responded, “Of course, General Sherman, I have no
feelings against you personally, but you are regarded as the enemy of our set and
we must in self-defense write you down.” The court found Knox guilty and or-
dered him banished from the theater. As the Herald was a strong supporter of Lin-
coln, the President countermanded the sentence on the condition that Sherman’s
superior, U. S. Grant, agreed. Grant would do no such thing, and Knox was forced
to appeal to the man he defamed. Sherman’s reply:

Come with a sword or musket in your hand, prepared to share with us our
fate . . . and I will welcome you as a brother; but come as you now do ex-
pecting me to ally the reputation and honor of my country and my fellow-
soldiers with you as the representative of the Press which you yourself
say makes so slight a difference between truth and falsehood and my an-
swer is Never!

Knox left the theater.