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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 William 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 scribblers 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 ordered him banished from the theater. As the *Herald* was a strong supporter of Lincoln, 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 expecting 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 answer is Never!

Knox left the theater.

Source: Joseph H. Ewing. “The New Sherman Letters.” *American Heritage*, July-August 1987.