

John Milton Chivington

January 27, 1821 – October 4, 1892

John Milton Chivington was a 19th century United States Army officer noted for his role in the New Mexico Campaign of the American Civil War and in the Colorado War. He was celebrated as the hero of the 1862 Battle of Glorieta Pass, and later became infamous for his role in the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre.

Chivington was born in Lebanon, Ohio. Drawn to Methodism, Chivington decided to become a minister and was ordained in 1844. During 1853, he worked in a Methodist missionary expedition to the Wyandot people in Kansas. Because of his outspoken hatred of slavery, Chivington received a threatening letter from pro-slavery members in his congregation in 1856. As a result the Methodist Church transferred Chivington to a parish in Omaha, Nebraska. In 1860 Chivington moved with his family to Denver, Colorado, having been made the presiding elder of the Rocky Mountain District of the Methodist Church.

When the American Civil War broke out the following year, Colorado Territory governor William Gilpin offered him a commission as a chaplain, but Chivington refused it, saying he wanted to fight. Thus, he was made a major in the 1st Colorado Volunteers under Colonel John P. Slough. During Henry Hopkins Sibley's offensive in the East Arizona and New Mexico Territory, Chivington led a 418-strong detachment to Apache Canyon on 26 March 1862, where they surprised about 300 Texans under Major Charles L. Pyron. The startled Texans were routed with 4 killed, 20 wounded and 75 captured, while Chivington's men lost 5 killed and 14 wounded. This small victory raised morale in Slough's army. On 28 March, Slough sent Chivington and his 400 men on a circling movement, with orders to hit Sibley in the flank once Slough's main force had engaged his front at Glorieta Pass. Chivington got into position above the Pass, but waited in vain for either Slough or Sibley to arrive. While they were waiting, scouts reported that Sibley's entire supply train was nearby at Johnson's Ranch. Chivington's command descended the slope and crept up on the unsuspecting supply train. They waited for an hour in concealment, then attacked, driving off or capturing the small Confederate army guard detail without anyone being killed or wounded. Chivington ordered the supply wagons burned and the horses and mules to be slaughtered. Meanwhile, the Battle of Glorieta Pass was raging at Pigeon's Ranch.

Chivington returned to Slough's main force to find it falling back in a hurry. The Confederates had won the Battle of Glorieta Pass. Thanks to Chivington, however, they had no supplies to sustain their advance and were forced instead to retreat. Chivington had completely reversed the result of the battle and Sibley's men reluctantly retreated all the way to Texas, never again to threaten New Mexico.

Chivington earned great praise for his decisive stroke at Johnson's Ranch, even though his discovery of the Confederate supply train was accidental. It has also been suggested that had Chivington had hurried back to reinforce Slough's army as soon as he heard the gunfire coming from Pigeon's Ranch, his 400 extra men might have allowed the Federals to win the Battle. Chivington was unusual in becoming a (minor) military hero of the Civil War for an incident in which no one was actually killed or injured. He was appointed colonel of the 1st Colorado Volunteer Regiment of Cavalry in April 1862. The darker side of Chivington was revealed in the complaints of a captured Confederate chaplain, who wrote that Chivington had threatened to kill the prisoners that he took at Johnson's Ranch. In November 1862 he was appointed brigadier general of volunteers, but the appointment was withdrawn in February 1863.

Black Kettle, chief of a group of around 800 mostly Southern Cheyennes, reported to Fort Lyon in an effort to establish peace. After having done so, he and his band, along with some Arapahos under the chief Left Hand, camped out at nearby Sand Creek, less than 40 miles north. The Cheyenne Dog Soldiers, who had taken part in the conflict with the whites, were not part of this encampment. Assured by the US government's promises of peace, Black Kettle sent most of his warriors to hunt, leaving only around 60 men in the village, most of them too old or too young to participate in the hunt. A US flag was flown over Black Kettle's lodge as he had been instructed in the past that "as long as he flew the American flag, he and his people would be safe from U.S. soldiers."^[1]

In November, setting out from Fort Lyon, Colonel Chivington and his 800 troops of the First Colorado Cavalry, Third Colorado Cavalry and a company of First New Mexico Volunteers marched to their campsite. On the night of November 28, after positioning themselves around the camp, soldiers and militia drank heavily and celebrated the anticipated fight.^[1] On the morning of November 29, 1864, Chivington ordered his troops to attack. One officer, Captain Silas Soule, believing the Indians to be peaceful, refused to follow Chivington's order and told his men to hold fire. Other soldiers in Chivington's force,

however, immediately attacked the village. Ignoring the US flag, and a white flag that was run up shortly after the soldiers commenced firing, Chivington's soldiers massacred the majority of its mostly-unarmed inhabitants in an attack that became known as the Sand Creek Massacre.

Between 150 and 200 Indians were estimated dead, nearly all women and children (in testimony before a Congressional committee, Chivington gave evidence that 500-600 Indians were killed and that few of them were women or children ^[3]). One source from the Cheyenne said that about 53 men and 110 women and children were killed.^[4]

Chivington declared that his forces had fought a battle with hostile Indians and the action was initially celebrated as a victory, with some soldiers callously displaying Indian body parts as trophies. However, the testimony of Soule and his men forced an investigation into the incident, which concluded that Chivington had acted wrongly.

Soule and some of the men that he commanded testified against Chivington at his court martial. Chivington denounced Soule as a liar, and Soule was later murdered by a soldier who had been under Chivington's command at Sand Creek. Some believed Chivington may have been involved.

Chivington was condemned for his part in the massacre, but he had already left the Army, and the general post-Civil War amnesty meant that criminal charges could not be filed against him. However, an Army judge publicly stated that the Sand Creek massacre was "a cowardly and cold-blooded slaughter, sufficient to cover its perpetrators with indelible infamy, and the face of every American with shame and indignation." Public outrage at the brutality of the massacre, particularly considering the mutilation of corpses, was intense and it may have convinced the US Congress to later reject the idea of a general war against the Indians of the midwest.

Because of his position as a lay preacher, the United Methodist General Conference expressed regret in 1996 for the Sand Creek massacre and issued an apology for the "actions of a prominent Methodist."^[5]

Although never punished, Chivington was forced to resign from the Colorado Militia. Public outrage also forced him to withdraw from politics and kept him out of Colorado's campaign

for statehood. In 1865 he moved back to Nebraska and became an unsuccessful freight hauler.

After living briefly in California, Chivington returned to Ohio to farm, later becoming editor of a local newspaper. In 1883 he campaigned for a seat in the Ohio legislature, but when his opponents drew attention to the Sand Creek massacre he was forced to withdraw. He then returned to Denver where he worked as a deputy sheriff until shortly before his death from cancer in 1892. To the end of his life, Chivington maintained that Sand Creek had been a successful operation. He argued that his expedition had been in response to a series of murderous raids on white people; but he conveniently ignored the fact that he had betrayed his own agreements with the tribes and that the Sand Creek massacre had provoked the Cheyenne, Arapaho and elements of the Sioux to actually increase their raids on white settlers and kill even more people.

In 1887, the unincorporated settlement of Chivington, Colorado was established and named after John Chivington, as a railroad town on the Missouri Pacific Railroad line, fairly close to the massacre site. It was largely depopulated during the dust bowl days of the 1920s and 1930s, although some buildings still remain.

In 2005, a street called Chivington Drive in Longmont, Colorado had its name changed to Sunrise Drive by the City Council due to controversy related to Chivington's role in the Sand Creek Massacre.

Notes

1. Brown 1970.
2. Michno 2003, p. 159.
3. ["Testimony of Colonel J.M. Chivington, April 26, 1865" to the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War.](#) New Perspectives on the West: Documents on the Sand Creek Massacre. PBS.
4. George Bent, the son of the American [William Bent](#) and a Cheyenne mother, was at Black Kettle's village when Chivington's men struck. [Sand Creek Massacre National Historical Site](#) has the following information: "On April 30, 1913, Bent wrote: *"About 53 men were killed and 110 women and children killed, 163 in all killed. Lots of men, women and children were wounded."*
5. [\[1\]](#) Sand Creek Massacre research center supported