



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sand Creek Massacre
National
Historic Site

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Sand Creek Massacre NHS News Release

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What's in a word? U. S. Volunteer v. Territorial Militia

Visitors often come to the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site bringing ideas and words about what happened here. Some of those impressions include words, like “these troops were Colorado militia, right?”

The troops who attacked the Cheyenne and Arapaho village on the Big Sandy or Sand Creek on November 29, 1864 were United States Volunteer Cavalry. The approximate 675 men and officers that composed Colonel Chivington’s “Indian Expedition” were detachments of companies from the 1st Regiment Cavalry and 3rd Regiment Cavalry, Colorado Volunteers. Both regiments and their officers were within the chain-of-command of the United States Army and had been authorized by the United States War Department. They were not territorial “militia” and they were not “regulars.”

It is important to understand the distinction, in that the United States government has never denied responsibility for the actions of its military at Sand Creek because these were United States troops. During the Civil War most of the two million federal or Union troops were U. S. Volunteers, something akin to the modern U. S. Army Reserves, and served at the direction of President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton. These men were wearing federal uniforms, enlisted for definite terms of service, and were using government issued firearms, horses and equipment.

“Militias” had a separate chain-of-command ending within the boundaries of a state or territory and whose Commander-in-Chief was a governor. That word implies part-time citizen soldiers who may or may not be in uniform, had little training or equipment and many times had to provide their own horses and weapons. The word is sometimes used to diminish responsibility and the level of training and equipment the attacking men and officers had received. State and territorial militias have evolved in the last 150 years into what we now uniformly call the National Guard.

For more information contact the Sand Creek Massacre NHS administrative office in Eads, CO at 719-438-5916 or call the site at 719-729-3003.

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