

Lt. Gen. Nelson Miles, U.S. Army

Major General Nelson Miles received his Medal of Honor citation for the Battle of Chancellorsville in the Civil War: "Distinguished gallantry while holding with his command an advanced position against repeated assaults by a strong force of the enemy; was severely wounded."

Biography: Nelson Miles was born in Westminster, MA. He worked in Boston, read military history, and mastered military principles and techniques, including battle drills. Miles was working as a crockery store clerk in Boston when the Civil War began.

Civil War: He entered the Union Army on 9 September 1861, as a volunteer and fought in many crucial battles. He became a lieutenant in the 22nd Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, and was commissioned lieutenant colonel of the 61st New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment on 31 May 1862. He was promoted to colonel after the Battle of Antietam. Other battles he participated in include Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and the Appomattox Campaign. Wounded four times in battle (he was shot in the neck and abdomen at Chancellorsville), on 2 March 1867, he was brevetted a brigadier general in the regular army in recognition of his actions at Chancellorsville. He was again brevetted, this time to the rank of major general for his actions at Spotsylvania Court House. He was appointed brigadier general of volunteers as of 12 May 1864, for the Battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House. On 21 October 1865, he was appointed major general of volunteers at age 26. After the war, he was commandant of Fort Monroe, VA, where former Confederate President Jefferson Davis was held prisoner. During his tenure at Fort Monroe, Miles was forced to defend himself against charges that Davis was being mistreated.

Indian War: In July 1866, Miles was appointed a colonel in the Regular Army. In March 1869 he became commander of the 5th U.S. Infantry Regiment. On 30 June 1868, he married Mary Hoyt Sherman, niece of William T. Sherman. Miles played a leading role in nearly all of the U.S. Army's campaigns against the American Indian tribes of the Great Plains. In 1874–1875, he was a field commander in the force that defeated the Kiowa, Comanche, and the Southern Cheyenne along the Red River. Between 1876 and 1877, he participated in the campaign that scoured the Northern Plains after Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's defeat at the Battle of Little Big Horn, and forced the Lakota and their allies onto reservations. In the winter of 1877, he drove his troops on a forced march across Montana and intercepted the Nez Percé band led by Chief Joseph. For the rest of Miles' career, he would quarrel with General Oliver O. Howard over credit for Joseph's capture. While on the Yellowstone, he developed expertise with the heliograph for sending communications signals, establishing a 140-mile-long (230 km) line of heliographs connecting Fort Keogh and Fort Custer, Montana in 1878. The heliographs were supplied by Brig. Gen. Albert J. Myer of the Signal Corps.

In December 1880, he was promoted to brigadier general in the Regular Army. He was then assigned to command the Department of the Columbia (1881–85) and the Department of Missouri (1885–86).

In 1886, Miles replaced General [George Crook](#) as commander of forces fighting against Geronimo in the Department of Arizona. Crook had relied heavily on Apache scouts in his

efforts to capture the Chiricahua leader. Instead, Miles relied on white troops, who eventually traveled 3,000 miles (4,800 km) without success as they tracked Geronimo through the tortuous Sierra Madre Mountains. Finally, First Lieutenant Charles B. Gatewood, who had studied Apache ways, succeeded in negotiating a surrender, under the terms of which Geronimo and his followers, agreed to spend two years in a Florida reservation. Geronimo agreed on these terms, being unaware of the real plot behind the negotiations (that there was no intent to let them go back in their native lands.) The exile included even the Chiricahuas who had worked for the army, in violation of Miles' agreement with them. Miles denied Gatewood any credit for the negotiations and had him transferred to the Dakota Territory. During this campaign, Miles's special signals unit used the heliograph extensively, proving its worth in the field. The special signals unit was under the command of Captain W. A. Glassford. In 1888, Miles became the commander of the Military Division of the Pacific and the Department of California

In April 1890, Miles was promoted to major general in the Regular Army and became the commander of the Military Division of the Missouri. That same year, the last major resistance of the Sioux on the Lakota reservations, known as the Ghost Dance, brought Miles back into the field. His efforts to subdue the Sioux led to Sitting Bull's death and the massacre of about 300 Sioux. This included women and children at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890. Miles was not directly involved at Wounded Knee and was critical of the commanding officer. Just two days after the event, Miles wrote to his wife, describing Wounded Knee as "The most abominable criminal military blunder and a horrible massacre of women and children".^[6] After his retirement from the army, he fought for compensation payments to the survivors of the massacre. Overall, he believed that the United States should have authority over the Indians, with the Lakota under military control.

Spanish–American War: In his capacity of commander of the Department of the East from 1894 to 1895, Miles commanded the troops mobilized to put down the Pullman strike riots. He was named Commanding General of the United States Army in 1895, a post he held during the Spanish–American War. Miles commanded forces at Cuban sites such as Siboney.

After the surrender of Santiago de Cuba by the Spanish, he personally led the invasion of Puerto Rico, landing in Guánica in what is known as the Puerto Rican Campaign. He served as the first head of the military government established on the island, acting as both head of the army of occupation and administrator of civil affairs.

Upon returning to the United States, Miles was a vocal critic of the Army's quartermaster general, Brigadier General Charles P. Eagan, for providing rancid canned meat to the troops in the field during what was known as the Army beef scandal.

He was promoted to the rank of [lieutenant general](#) in 1900 based on his performance in the war.

To show that he was still physically able to command, on July 14, 1903 - a month away from his 64th birthday - General Miles rode the 90 miles from [Fort Sill](#) to [Fort Reno](#), OK, in 8 hour's riding time (10 hrs 20 mins total), in temperatures between 90 and 100 °F (32 and 38 °C). The distance was covered on a relay of horses stationed at 10-mile intervals; the

first 30 miles were covered in 2 hours, 25 minutes. This was the longest horseback ride ever made by a commanding general of the army.

Called a "brave peacock" by President Theodore Roosevelt, Miles nevertheless retired from the army in 1903 upon reaching the mandatory retirement age of 64. Upon his retirement, the office of Commanding General of the United States Army was abolished by an Act of Congress and the Army Chief of Staff system was introduced. A year later, standing as presidential candidate at the Democratic National Convention, he received a handful of votes.

When the U.S. entered [World War I](#) in 1917, the 77-year-old general offered to serve, but President Wilson turned him down.

Miles died in 1925 at the age of 85 from a heart attack while attending a circus in Washington, D.C., with his grandchildren. He was one of the last surviving of those who served as a general officer on either side during the Civil War. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in the Miles Mausoleum. It is one of only two mausoleums within the confines of the cemetery.

Military Awards: Medal of Honor, Civil War Campaign Medal, Indian Campaign Medal, Spanish Campaign Medal, and Army of Puerto Rican Occupation Medal.

Masonic History: Brother Miles was a Mason and National Sojourner.