

Richard Keith Call's 1836 Campaign

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During 1836, two major military campaigns were carried out in Florida against the Seminole Indians. The first, led by the nationally known General Winfield Scott, clearly ended in failure. The second campaign was commanded by Richard Keith Call, who for a time combined the offices of civilian territorial governor and federal military commander in Florida. On January 9, 1836, Governor Call began an intensive drive to secure the command of all the regular and militia troops in the territory by pointing out that he thought he could rapidly conclude the war and that he also thought General Duncan Clinch, then current senior federal army officer in Florida, to be an inadequate commander.¹

Call barraged the War Department during the early part of 1836 with an almost continuous stream of unsolicited advice on the conduct of affairs in Florida.² For example, in the month of May he sent to federal officials twenty-one letters dealing with the war effort.³ The Governor did suggest the innovation of a summer campaign as the only method of adequately protecting the frontier.⁴ However, as late as June first, Call was still repeatedly expressing his ardent desire to be given direction of all of the troops in Florida and continued to complain about the United States Army's inadequate frontier warfare skills.⁵

Later Call denied that he had ever sought complete control over Florida military affairs and said that he had merely wished for a separate military

¹ Governor Call to President A. Jackson, January 9, 1836, U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 31.

² Governor Richard K. Call *Letterbook*. This manuscript is located in the Florida Historical Society Collection, Special Collection, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida. A microfilm copy is available at the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida. The *Letterbook* is a series of copies of letters sent and received by Governor Call and does not have consistent page numbers for reference.

³ U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., pp. 1-55.

⁴ Governor Call to Secretary of War, April 20, 1836, and May 4, 1836. Governor Richard K. Call *Letterbook*.

⁵ U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 55.

district in which the militia could operate unhindered by the regulars.⁶ Shortly after his campaign was over, Call not only again stated that he had never sought the honor of command, but also said that once he had been given this responsibility, he had been determined to reduce the Seminoles to submission or give up his own life.⁷ The success of the Governor's campaign may be judged by the fact that contrary to his declaration he survived while a significant number of Indians remained in the field.

Governor Call began to recruit men for active militia duty in early May 1836, even though, he had not yet been given his federal command. Call's first enlistment effort took the form of an open letter asking for one hundred sixty volunteers who would be allowed to elect their own officers. Only one hundred thirty men volunteered. The other thirty needed to meet the quota had to be drafted.⁸ By the middle of July, it was apparent that Call could not raise the one thousand member army which had been federally authorized following his first informal efforts to create a new Florida Militia force.⁹

After beginning to enlist his proposed army, Call was notified on May 25, 1836 that he was authorized to make a summer campaign if, as seemed likely, Brigadier General Duncan Clinch, regular army commander in Florida, left the federal service. The following day, Call was informed that when Major General Thomas Jesup, regular army, appeared in Florida the command was to be turned over to him.¹⁰ Thus, Governor Call was given a tentative and at best a temporary authority to make a summer campaign. General Winfield Scott wished Call success, but said that the shortage of men and the normal high disease rate in summer, would probably cause Call's plan to fail.¹¹

The Secretary of War formally gave the Florida command to Call on June twenty-fifth. Call was authorized to purchase steamboats for gulf and river use and to build supply depots in the Seminole dominated areas.¹² There

⁶ Governor Call Memorial to U. S. Congress, February 26, 1840. This memorial is found in Clarence E. Carter (ed.), *The Territorial Papers of the United States* (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1934-), Vol. 22, p. 394.

⁷ *St. Augustine Examiner*, December 31, 1836, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, May 7, 1836, p. 3. See also *Apalachicola Gazette*, May 14, 1836, p. 1.

⁹ U. S. Congress, *House Document 78*, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 507. See also Governor K. Call *Letterbook*.

¹⁰ Secretary of War to General Call, May 25, 26, 1836, U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 438.

¹¹ U. S. Congress, *House Document 78*, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 441.

¹² *American State Papers*, Vol. 21, p. 789.

can be no question of Call's authority to secure any needed supplies. General Call was so confident that on July fifteenth he predicted a fifteen day field effort would destroy the main Seminole strongholds. On the other hand, Joseph White, territorial legislative delegate, was pessimistic and said that the resignation of General Clinch was disastrous because he was the only man that the militia, as a group, trusted.¹³ Before he got into the field, Call managed to anger Commodore A. J. Dallas, the United States Navy area commander. Call told the Commodore that formal military etiquette was not essential to their relationship. The Commodore replied that he would respond to requests but not orders from the General. Then on September 11, 1836, Call requested that the Commodore provide two hundred fifty to three hundred seamen and marines for an offensive movement up the Withlacoochee River in boats, but the general admitted that he was not sure of the water depths in the river or of the actual number of men needed. This bizarre request came after the War Department had told Call that naval officers could not be given orders by army men.¹⁴

The campaign began on September 20, 1836, when Call left Suwanee Old Town for Fort Drane with a force composed mainly of Tennessee Volunteers.¹⁵ General Call admitted that the relatively few Florida men who accompanied him had had to be conscripted and that "extreme measures" were necessary to get the drafted men to do their duty.¹⁶ General Call's plan of action required that the regular army troops at Fort Brooke and Fort Drane would move up the Withlacoochee River. Apparently, the Navy had refused to provide the requested men for this phase of the campaign. Call's militiamen were to move into the Cove of the Withlacoochee River from a northerly direction so that the Seminoles hopefully would be crushed between the two forces.¹⁷

As the march from Fort Drane began the General knew that his column carried only six to seven days food supply. This certainly was not adequate to begin a wilderness campaign, but Call believed that the bulk of his men were

¹³ Carter, *op. cit.*, Vol. 25, p. 283. See also Governor Richard K. Call *Letterbook*.

¹⁴ U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., pp. 7, 59-60, 71, 73. See also Governor Richard K. Call *Letterbook*.

¹⁵ Letters of Lientenant John W. Phelps, U. S. A., 1837-1838," *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 6 (October 1927), p. 77.

¹⁶ *Florida Herald* (St. Augustine), October 20, 1836, p. 2.

¹⁷ Call *Journal*, typescript, p. 388. The Call *Journal* is located among the Richard Keith Call Papers, Florida State Historical Society Collection, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida. A microfilm copy is available in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville, Florida.

“impatient” to engage the Indians. It was hoped that the men could utilize food crops known to have been planted on plantations since abandoned to the Seminoles. Unfortunately, Call found that the Red men had destroyed these needed food sources. The General next planned to use a second base of food supply located at a proposed depot which territorial General Leigh Read was to build on the Withlacoochee.¹⁸

The grounding and sinking of the commissary steamboat *Izard*, which was broken in half when it turned crosswise in the Withlacoochee, prevented Read from completing the proposed depot in time to meet Call’s needs. General Call blamed the destruction of the *Izard* on poorly qualified naval officers, yet at his own order she had been under the command of General Read, a territorial militia officer.¹⁹ Early in October, Call was reminded that he had authority to secure the services of more than one steamboat.²⁰ Clearly, Richard Keith Call should have made better arrangements to provide his men with sufficient food.

After leaving Fort Drane, Call’s column made two unsuccessful attempts to cross the flood-widened and deepened Withlacoochee in the face of a sharp Indian fire.²¹ The army was checked on the bank of the river opposite which was a hammock that probably contained all the women and children of the Seminole nation. General Call next tried to find the supply depot which Leigh Read had not yet established and then the soldiers retired ninety miles to Black Creek where they could secure an adequate food supply. Along the path of the retreat were strewn five or six hundred starved horses.²² It was reported that General Call’s army was “as usual, destitute of substance, horses without corn and men without bread.” After Call’s campaign closed the question arose that if Call could not cross the river, why did he not at least contain the savages in the Cove of the Withlacoochee?²³ The answer should have been obvious in that Call had not ensured a sufficient food supply for his men before starting his campaign.

The most ironic part of the campaign was that Call had access to 900,000 soldiers’ rations at the beginning of the effort. Excuses were offered why use

¹⁸ *Niles Weekly Register*, November 5, 1836, pp. 148-9. See also *American State Papers*, Vol. 21, p. 995, and Call *Journal* Typescript, pp. 386-, 390-8.

¹⁹ U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 100*, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 7-12.

²⁰ Acting Secretary of War Harris to General Call, October 7, 1836, U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., pp. 9-10.

²¹ *Pensacola Gazette*, November 5, 1836, p. 3.

²² John W. Phelps’s *Letters*, p. 70.

²³ *Apalachicola Gazette*, October 15, 1836, p. 1. See also November 5, 1836, p. 1.

was not made of these supplies; but, the fact remains General Call failed to make use of his assets.²⁴

After securing the needed staples, Call renewed his campaign and made a successful crossing of the Withlacoochee on November 13, 1836.²⁵ Next, at about noon on November seventeenth, Call encountered a large group of Indians. The Tallahassee militiamen, who were nearest the Seminoles, dispersed the enemy with a single charge, which was followed up by a determined pursuit of the retreating red men. On the following day, Call fought the Battle of Wahoo Swamp in which the few available Florida troops spearheaded the attack and behaved like veterans by not firing a shot until the enemy was in sight. After a short, sharp fight the Indians retreated in such a manner that it was difficult to determine what direction their main body had taken. Contact with the Seminoles was renewed by a group of Creek Indians who were campaigning with Call. Another brisk action ensued until dark when the engagement broke off. At this point, the soldiers had been on half-rations for several days and the horses had had no corn for a similar length of time.²⁶ It is a tribute to the rank and file that they reacted so well when they and their horses must have been in a state of semi-starvation.

By December 1, 1836, Call's troops had retired to the regular army supply depot at Volusia on the St. Johns River. There Call received official word that President Jackson was disappointed with the outcome of the campaign. Also, the General learned that he had been removed from his command. President Jackson was particularly disturbed because Call had not taken adequate food supplies with him and had not tried harder at his first attempted crossing of the Withlacoochee River. It was also believed that General Call was suffering from fatigue and sickness.²⁷

General Call bitterly announced that the letter which removed him from his command was "the most extraordinary document I have ever read." Call said that he was fired on the basis of rumor and that his October 19, 1836 report demonstrated no officer could have better provided for the troops'

²⁴ *Niles Weekly Register*, November 5, 1836, pp. 145, 149, and November 12, 1836, p. 2. See also the *Pensacola Gazette*, November 13, 1836, p. 2.

²⁵ U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 92. See also Call Journal, typescript, pp. 404-7.

²⁶ U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., pp. 92-5.

²⁷ *Apalachicola Gazette*, December 1, 1836, p. 2. See also John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York: Appleton 1848), p. 163, and Secretary of War Butler to General Call, November 4, 1836, U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 100*, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 1-3.

needs.²⁸ Secretary of War Butler twice told Call that he had not been discharged because of rumors or misconduct and that the War Department had required a report of Call's actions which was not received until late December 1836.²⁹ Major General Thomas Jesup, who replaced R. K. Call as regular army commander in Florida, said that he would stake his professional reputation on the fact that Call had acted as well as any man could have under the circumstances.³⁰ Thus, Call's actions were supported by at least one man who had achieved a high status in American military circles.

Call was given a warm welcome on his return to Tallahassee. Territorial press comments about the campaign ranged from the idea that it had closed brilliantly to the concept that Call had been no worse than the regular commanders who had gone before him.³¹ Apparently, the people of Florida were not dissatisfied with their Governor's conduct in the field.

Probably, Richard Call's campaign received a minimum of support from regular army officers. He complained that the Quartermaster at Charleston, South Carolina, was one among many federal army officers, who threw every possible embarrassment in his way.³² If the General's relations, with Commodore A. J. Dallas of the Navy, can be considered an example of what he believed to be proper decorum, his poor relations with other officers may be readily explained.

The Richard Call campaign may be credited with the innovation of a summer effort to keep the Seminoles from being able to grow their own food stuffs. As important as this idea is, it must be recognized that if Call had made sounder preparations before going into the field, he might have been more effective.

²⁸ General Call to Secretary of War Butler, December 2, 1836, U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 100*, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 1-3.

²⁹ Secretary of War Butler to General Call, December 13, 1836, and January 14, 1837, U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 100*, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 13-16. See also Richard K. Call *Letterbook*.

³⁰ Major General Jesup to Secretary of War, January 1837, U. S. Congress, *House Document 78*, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 49-50, *Appendix*, p. 142.

³¹ *St. Augustine Examiner*, December 10, 1836, p. 3. See also *Pensacola Gazette*, January 7, 1837, p. 3, and *Niles Weekly Register*, January 10, 1837, p. 321, and *Florida Herald* (St. Augustine), December 29, 1836, p. 2.

³² General Call to Secretary of War Butler, December 20, 1836, U. S. Congress, *Senate Document 278*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 111.