

Christmas Day in Florida, 1837

J. Floyd Monk*

Most people with an interest in Florida history are familiar (at least by name) with John T. Sprague's *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, published in 1848. Before John Mahon's *History of the Second Seminole War*, (1967), Sprague's was the only comprehensive study of that long and costly struggle: an invaluable compilation of letters, reports, orders, and the like, its connecting narrative written by an officer with first-hand knowledge of the country and the conditions under which the war was fought.

If you have a copy handy, turn to page 203, where will be found Colonel Zachary Taylor's official report of the Battle of Okeechobee. The narrative runs on for some ten and a half pages, complete enough, as such things go. It might be of interest to compare it with the pages to follow.

This report, and particularly the first two paragraphs, has been the principal – and often the only – source of information for historians writing about this fascinating fragment of our past. Rarely is the battle given more than a single paragraph of its own; and rarely has any writer gone beyond Sprague in his search for “primary sources.”

This seems reasonable. The battle was simply not important enough for a lot of time to be spent on it – only another in a long list of assaults and defenses, skirmishes, ambushes, and near-battles. It *was* the only pitched battle of the war; it *did* furnish evidence that white soldiers could meet the Indians on their own ground with some hope of success; it *did* introduce many Americans – prospective settlers – to the new Territory of Florida; and it *was* one of Zachary Taylor's first steps up the ladder to the presidency of the United States.

But, in the overall sweep of history, it was hardly of great significance: it was a dubious sort of victory, at best; certainly it did not end the war. And Sprague was always considered a primary source, close enough to the contemporary scene to be relied upon. He served in

*J. Floyd Monk is a long time member of the Historical Association of Southern Florida and a former treasurer of that association.

Florida, and understood military matters. His book, in itself, clearly shows that he had full access to all of the records.

Historians could, therefore, hurry through such a minor incident, confident that they were on solid ground since their whole argument was based (they thought) on the official record. Taylor was *there*, in command; he wrote his report within a few days following the battle, while memories were still fresh; he *must* have known the facts. And it was all set out there in black and white, in the pages of Sprague's respected book.

But much of what those historians have written is wrong – due in part to Taylor's imprecise writing, partly perhaps to the carelessness of Sprague or his printer, and partly perhaps to insufficient research. For much of the report (as given in Sprague) is erroneous or incomplete.

The Report begins, "On the 18th ultimo. . . ." This is the only solid date in the entire document. Elsewhere, Taylor says only such things as "on the following day," or "the next afternoon," or something of that sort – never pinning anything down to any particular day.

It would hardly seem necessary that he should have done so, however desirable it might be, for we can read the report with care and come up with the effective dates. Or can we?

Sure we can. Very carefully, follow each "next morning," or whatever it may be, and you will come up with the answer that Joshua R. Giddings reached (by perhaps the same line of reasoning) when he was writing his *The Exiles of Florida*, (1858). Inexorably, the count of days leads to December 24, 1837 – precisely the date of battle published in Giddings' book.

But it is wrong. Every historian *knows* that the Battle of Okeechobee took place on Christmas Day, but few – if any – have ever questioned Giddings' finding, or bothered to inquire into the curious reason for it.

But – what happened to the lost day? That was one of many discrepancies that led to the present study.

The Professor would say, at this point, "In case of doubt, go back to the original records." A reasonable suggestion, except that Taylor's original report is missing from its place in the National Archives in Washington. On the roll of microfilm covering the relevant documents for this month there is a typed notice to the effect that the report cannot be located. Letters written to the Archives in the hope that something might have come to light since that microfilm record was made have produced the same result. Taylor's report is *still* missing. Can it be (as

some have suggested) that Captain Sprague “borrowed” the document while compiling his book, and never returned it?

It is easy to convince ourselves that the loss of this original is unimportant, since we have the published version. And perhaps it is, in that “grand overview” of the historian who deals in sweeping themes rather than niggling little details. But in the interest of accuracy, the search for truth, the possibility of correcting – and even augmenting – the existing record, let us now examine more closely that published version.

By good fortune, a diary kept by Lieutenant Robert Christie Buchanan has survived (*FHQ*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, October 1950). Covering the entire Okeechobee campaign in careful detail, perhaps it can be correlated with Taylor’s report. Immediately, however, we notice that the Diary dates are not the same as those inferred from the Report as published.

So the search expands. Surely there must be some record of that lost original, somewhere. And there is. For the Report, in its entirety, was submitted to the Congress by Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett, as Senate Document No. 227, on February 21, 1838. And at once (as we compare the two) we are struck by the fact that the third word in the Report, as published, differs from that in Senate Document No. 227. In the latter, the narrative begins, “On the *19th* ultimo.” Not the *18th*, as quoted earlier. That one day shift in time squares Taylor’s report with Buchanan’s diary, the battle comes on the right day, and we are on our way to other problems.

One of them relates closely to that correlation already mentioned. If Lieutenant Buchanan was present with Taylor’s forces from late in November, 1837, until the return to Fort Brooke (Tampa Bay) in January, 1838, why is his name not mentioned in the Report? It is obvious that Taylor tried to cite every officer there, for even the slightest action, knowing as he did that such notice was essential in furthering their military advancement. But, somehow, he overlooked Buchanan. And this despite the fact that during the battle, due to heavy casualties among the officers, Lieutenant Buchanan was actually in command of two companies in combat. This was far removed from his customary duties as Adjutant—usually a deskbound job. Surely, such action was worthy of note in Taylor’s list of *kudos*. . . .

For a while there grew a suspicion that the whole diary was nothing more than a fabrication. It was not until a photocopy of his manuscript was acquired that things fell into shape. For, from the same file at the

Maryland Historical Society, a copy of a letter was obtained – from Buchanan to Lieutenant-Colonel William S. Foster, his regimental commander. In that letter he complained bitterly about the omission; and Foster immediately fired off a full written report to Taylor pointing it all out in considerable detail. Too late, of course, to do Buchanan's career much good, for the record could not be altered. But at least his presence was solidly confirmed.

In the second paragraph of his report Taylor enumerates the various units making up his command as he started out from Fort Gardiner. If we add all of his numbers, we arrive at a total of 1,067 men. As Taylor put it, "making a force, exclusive of officers, of 1,032 men." Could anything be more clear, more lucid? If there was a total of 1,067 men, and "1,032 men exclusive of officers," it *must* follow that there were thirty-five officers. Too obvious to be questioned. But all wrong.

Let us examine those numbers in their order.

That total force of 1,067 men has been quoted in many history books and articles. And most of them say – or at least imply – that this was the force *engaged in the battle*. This is demonstrably wrong.

Taylor's report (SD-227) lists only 803 men engaged; and the inscription on the monument placed near the scene of battle a hundred years later says "about 800 men." These figures are much closer to reality: when we study the rosters, the additions and departures, the numbers left behind at Fort Bassinger, those out of action due to illness or other causes, we come up with just about Taylor's reported total. But, again, writers have been too willing to accept Sprague uncritically: it is so much easier that way. *And Sprague omits the section of the report that gives this figure!* (Sprague also omits the detailed casualty lists – a serious omission for any historian.)

Many writers, too, have fallen into the trap of that second part about "1,032 men exclusive of officers," and have come right out and said that thirty-five officers were present at the battle. Wrong again. For a careful reading of extant documents has produced the names (so far) of at least forty-two officers who saw duty on that day. And without the slightest doubt there were many more, as yet unnamed – for very few junior grade officers are listed, and we may be sure there were more of *them* than there were majors and captains. For example, in the records so far discovered, there are *no* second lieutenants listed in the Fourth Infantry regiment; and in the First Infantry no officer is listed below the rank of major! A peculiar situation, indeed. But with the omission of Lieutenant Buchanan fresh in mind we are prepared to believe that officers junior even to him were not considered worth the waste of paper and ink.

Problems assailed us from all sides, but since this paper is intended to deal (in the main) with the battle itself we shall, with regret, put them aside. Much background and biographical material has been deleted, too, to conserve space. Some problems remain unsolved, despite concentrated effort, due to conflicting reports or to an utter lack of supporting documents.

There is one point, however, of such importance that it deserves more than casual mention. This is Taylor's brusque dismissal of the First Regiment of Missouri Volunteers. In his report he says, "They mostly broke. . . nor could they be again brought into action as a body."

Knowing of Taylor's dislike for militia or "irregular" troops of any description, we felt that this was perhaps not the full story. In studying contemporary newspapers and letters and several State and County histories of Missouri, as well as through correspondence with authorities in that State, we learned that the Volunteers did not remember it quite as Taylor told it. Upon publication and wide circulation of the report, feeling reached such a pitch in Missouri that a special commission was appointed by the State Legislature to look into the matter. Testimony was heard from all surviving officers, as well as many enlisted men, and the consensus was unanimous: Taylor had maligned Missouri manhood beyond acceptance. In statement after statement, the commission heard that the Volunteers fought bravely; that Taylor was a liar and a poltroon; that he slandered citizen soldiers as a class; and that his report was "not founded on facts as they occurred." The ultimate result was a group of resolutions, later passed at a full meeting of the legislature, one of which stated plainly: "A commanding officer who has *wantonly* misrepresented the conduct of men who gallantly sustained him in battle, is *unworthy of a commission* in the Army of the United States." The Governor of Missouri was directed to submit the whole series of resolutions to the President of the United States, with a *demand* that prompt disciplinary action be taken.

But nothing ever came of it.

It is interesting to contemplate what the results might have been if President Van Buren had acted in the matter. Surely, Taylor would have been unlikely to reach the White House with such a blot on his record.

Earlier it was noted that the Battle of Okeechobee rarely gets more than a paragraph in the history books. Curiously enough, even Colonel Taylor himself devoted barely a page of his report to the actual fight! Sufficient, perhaps, for the record. But *not* enough to assuage our thirst for knowledge about what really happened there.

What really happened *where*? That was an early question. Maps drawn by military men in the mid-1800's locate the battle site rather well, on the north shore of the Lake, a few miles east of Taylor Creek. The late Albert Devane (*FHQ*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 3, January 1961) places the location precisely in "Section 31, Township 37 South, Range 36 East; Section 36, Township 37 South, Range 35 East; and Section 6, Township 38 South, Range 36 East." Comparison with modern large-scale maps tends to confirm his reckoning; though most of the sawgrass is now gone and the hammock greatly changed, we can still find terrain that fits the contemporary descriptions closely enough to be convincing.

With Taylor's report and Buchanan's diary as foundation, we have added bits of information from dozens of sources in our effort to synthesize a coherent picture of the battle. Taylor's single page is multiplied by many times its length. Every effort has been made to pull together every scrap of detail found during several years of diligent searching.

While the present paper has been much reduced from the original manuscript, to fit the space requirements of *Tequesta*, the reader may still agree with the specialist who once examined the full study. His verdict was, "There may be more about this battle than anybody wants or needs to know." Perhaps he was right, but it seems that the only way to reconstruct a historical incident is to do it as thoroughly as possible, from every viewpoint. There cannot be *too much*, provided the material is properly presented — there seems to be an irreducible minimum beyond which we cannot go without losing the spirit of the event.

With this premise in mind we have, in the pages to follow, re-created the picture of Christmas Day in Florida, 1837. The word "picture" is used advisedly, for the material has been presented in as *visual* a manner as possible. One student of history who has read it reported that "it would make a great movie." We hope this is the case — that the scenes "come to life."

Though the story has been told somewhat informally, every statement of fact has been based upon careful documentation. Footnotes have been deliberately omitted in order to maintain the uninterrupted flow of the narrative.

THE BATTLE

Christmas Day, that traditional day of "peace on earth and good will toward men," dawned clear and cold, with a cutting wind from the northeast. The heavy rains of the preceding day had worn themselves out, leaving their marks in many shallow puddles and much fresh mud.

By full daylight the brigade was on the trail – a clearly defined trail, now, pounded through the grass and mud by many moccasin-shod feet. Indian sign was more plentiful than it had ever been before in the two years of campaigning – numerous camps had been discovered, the hides and bones of many slaughtered cattle, and multitudes of tracks going hither and thither.

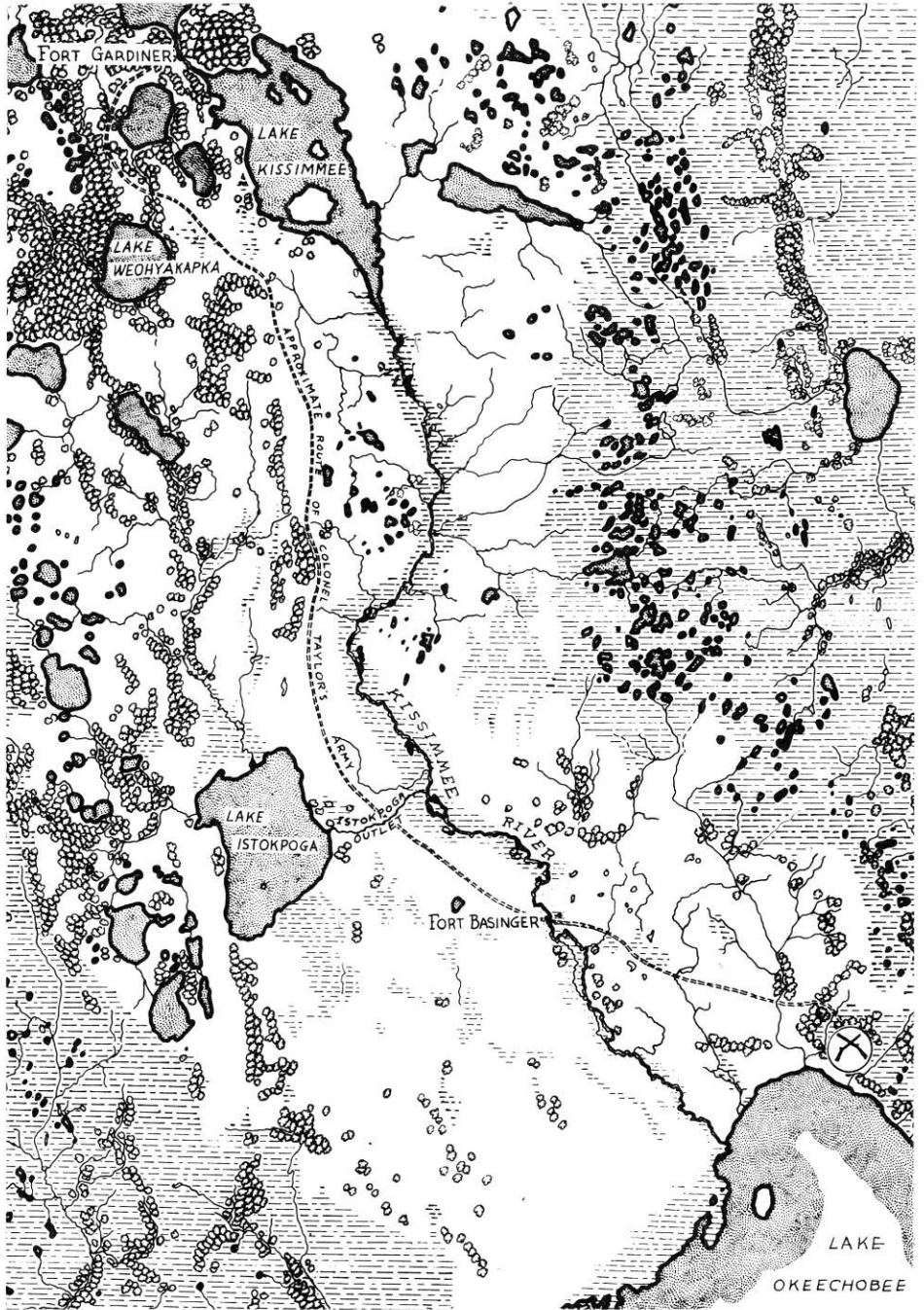
For a long time there had been rumors that the big Lake Okeechobee region was a prime place for hunting Seminoles – but nobody had been quite certain just where it was. As recently as this very year of 1837 John Lee Williams did not enter the lake on the map which accompanied his new book, *The Territory of Florida*. He commented that “when I visited Charlotte Bay in 1828 the Indians could not confirm anything about such a lake. . . . Not one of the writers has been able to obtain any certain intelligence relating to this part of the peninsula.”

But Lake Okeechobee was there, the soldiers now knew for sure: there has been too much talk from scouts and captives for them to doubt it any longer.

After some three miles of marching, mostly through scattered pine woods, they approached a dense stand of trees, seemingly a branch of a swamp they had recently left. Expecting attack in a place so favorable for the Indians, the Sixth Infantry moved forward slowly on the right, while the Missourians led the advance of the left wing, composed of the First and Fourth Infantry regiments.

The crossing was completed without incident by about eleven o'clock, when they entered into another large open prairie, fairly dry, on which three or four hundred cattle grazed, along with a large number of Indian ponies. It was perhaps at about this point that one of the scouts picked up a palmetto leaf on which two rifles had been drawn, muzzle to muzzle – left there deliberately as a sign of Mickasuki defiance. Earlier, the Negro Abraham had seen strange signs marked in the sand, supposed to have been left by Alligator, which he interpreted to mean that the Indians intended fighting to the death.

The right company of the Fourth was hardly across the swamp when a young Indian, apparently guarding the cattle and horses, was seen on horseback, running along “like a good fellow.” As soon as he realized that he had been discovered he raised his hands and moved at a quick trot toward the head of the column. Without hesitation, he came forward and surrendered himself – he was well-armed and well-equipped, like others captured earlier. Upon being questioned, he pointed to a large hammock, not very far away, where he said Sam Jones had his camp.



Taylor's route from Fort Gardiner to Battle.

The prisoner identified himself as a brother-in-law of John Cavallo, that notorious half-breed who had recently escaped (along with Wildcat and others) from the ancient Spanish fort at St. Augustine. He said that there were more than two thousand Indians – men, women and children – and a number of Negro slaves in that big hammock. Among them, he said, were well over two hundred of the best warriors in the Mickasuki nation, all of them well armed, with good rifles and equipment, at least as good as the excellent weapon he himself carried – and all of them were expert in the use of such weapons. Other Seminoles were reported to have joined with the Mickasukies, with an equal or greater number of braves. It became certain now, too, that Alligator was there to lead the Seminoles in person: he had been one of the chief architects of the Dade ambush, a man of many plans, a shrewd field commander and an excellent organizer.

The captive warned that this big force would be found in a very bad place, where the army would have a hard time getting at them. He talked freely, taking a certain delight in embroidering the facts to make the white man's case seen as hopeless as possible. (It should be noted here, perhaps, that tradition among Seminoles of a later generation told that this young man *allowed* himself to be captured, as part of a master plan. Thus he might direct the troops toward a cleared approach through the sawgrass, to reach the hammock at the point where the welcoming committee waited.)

The Missouri Volunteers and Spies worked their way ahead, to try to confirm this new information; and as soon as they returned to report and the rear guard had cleared the swamp at the edge of the cypresses, Colonel Taylor called all of the officers together for a council of war. If we can believe the available records, it was not much of a council, for Taylor seems already to have made up his mind what he planned to do. Buchanan states plainly that "Taylor called the officers together and informed them of the plan of attack;" and Captain Thomas Noel says that at this meeting "the order of battle was made known to the officers."

But it appears likely that the Colonel, a stickler for form, would have outlined the situation, furnishing such information as was available, and asked for suggestions. Perhaps several ideas were sketchily outlined, though details in the records are vague; but it seems in fact that the others were merely waiting for Taylor to get on with it.

Then Colonel Richard Gentry of Missouri, as the senior officer present, proposed a flanking attack to the north or south, for in some unknown manner he had reached the belief that the ground would be passable for horses in either direction. It was observed that the hammock

in which the Indians were said to be hidden was only three or four hundred yards long, and Gentry believed the brigade—cavalry as well as foot—could cross the swamp at either extremity and drive the enemy easily from one end to the other. Carefully, heeding the military maxim “never attack a position which you can gain by turning,” he pointed out that a direct attack across the open swamp would offer too good a target for the Indians; and that the men, already worn out with their struggle through the deep mud, would not have enough energy left to fight, once the hammock was reached.

The question of whether or not such a maneuver was practical was never really considered, nor were the flanking approaches seriously reconnoitered. Gentry’s proposal seems a sound one, with the benefit of hindsight— at least deserving of a quick scout around the ends of the enemy position. But the plan had one fatal flaw: it had been offered by a volunteer. (William Gentry, the Colonel’s grandson, even suggests bitterly that Taylor might have reached the same conclusion as the Missourian: “Had the suggestion been made by the youngest, greenest Second Lieutenant of the Regulars, it would have been praised and adopted, but coming from a Volunteer, it was ridiculed.”) There seems to be no doubt that Taylor, along with General Jesup and most other Regular officers, still retained a hearty dislike for volunteers as a class, and refused to listen to any suggestion from such a source. He was not the kind of man to resort to devious methods, anyway, when straightforward ones had a chance to work.

Colonel Taylor waited for Gentry to complete the outline of his plan. Then he responded in a manner true to his usual form in dealing with militia. In a superior and perhaps insulting tone, he brusquely asked, “Colonel Gentry, are you *afraid* to attack the center through the swamp?”

At the words Gentry stiffened as though a blow had been struck. Though highly incensed at the churlish reception of his proposal, he did not press the matter. He became at once the taut, rigid military man, the soldier who follows orders without question. “No, sir,” he replied, “if that is your order, it will be done that way.”

As no better proposal was forthcoming, the troops were again put in motion under the guidance of the new captive; and after a circuitous route of about a mile more their guide motioned for them to halt. Pointing ahead, he indicated that in the cypress hammock just before them was the big camp of Sam Jones and all his party.

Cautiously, the brigade spread out to encircle the cypress head. This did not look like the “bad place” that the captive had described, but it

would do no harm to be careful – they might even catch old Sam napping! The advance party moved swiftly into the cypresses, and on high ground just within their borders came upon a large encampment – quite deserted. There must have been several hundred Indians there, within the few minutes just passed, for campfires were still burning, and large quantities of beef and other provisions lay scattered about the fires – some still cooking in the big black pots – along with other evidence of a hasty departure. They were really getting close, now!

This was, in fact, the camp of old Sam Jones the Fisherman himself, even as the captive had said – the most dreaded of them all. Sam Jones had been preparing to cook some beef when the near approach of the Federal troops was first discovered by his outposts. He had dropped the beef, and retreated with his people to the Sand Ridge that runs near the north shore of Lake Okeechobee. It was hardly a “retreat,” really, for he was simply performing an orderly withdrawal to a strongly prepared position, all according to plan.

The troops, disposed in battle order, swept through the camp and the hammock, finding not a living soul to oppose them. This was not a time for hesitation, no matter how much they would have liked to poke around in things to see what they could find. Instead, the call soon came to re-form, outside the hammock.

As they left the camp of Sam Jones most of them “drew their charges” by firing at random at nearby trees. This was to make sure their weapons were in good order, undamaged by the dampness. A wise precaution, indeed, considering the nature of their arms. It is a curious fact that, although such things as rifling and percussion caps and even breech-loading were not unknown, most of the men in the brigade carried muzzle-loading flint-lock muskets, with smooth-bore barrels of caliber .69. A ball that size could knock a man from a horse, *if* its aim could be directed – but without rifling the weapons were highly inaccurate, good only for close combat. To paraphrase novelist C. S. Forester, “With a musket you might miss a house at fifty yards, but with a rifle you could hit a man at two hundred.” Though their merits were well recognized, here not one man in twenty possessed a rifle. On the other hand, almost every Indian brave had a rifle, of a superior sort, thought to be of Spanish-Cuban manufacture. Smaller of bore, they were less deadly at close range; but their accuracy could be far superior.

The brief “fire-works” over and their weapons freshly loaded and primed, the soldiers could see just before them the hammock where (so their guide said) the enemy awaited their onslaught. It was a dismal prospect, for the position chosen by the Indians was perhaps the most

difficult of access in the whole history of the long war. The hammock sat alone, its right end moored to the swamp through which the brigade had passed with so much effort that morning – a swamp with a deep creek running through it. The other end hung free, shielded by more mud, impassable mud, as far as the eye could reach; and, according to the guide, the Indians' rear ran along the sand ridge of the Lake's north shore. The Lake itself was perhaps less than a mile farther on – its open beaches furnishing regular highways for retreat, should Indian retreat become necessary.

But it was the front of the position that demonstrated their careful planning. A swamp about three-quarters of a mile wide and several miles long separated their position from the nearest solid ground, over which the troops were now passing. Wide open as it was, there could be no chance of surprise across that expanse, for the mud and water were knee-deep and more, with rank sawgrass growing five or six feet high. Some sources mention a sluggish stream running across the middle of the swamp, but this does not appear to be confirmed by eye-witness accounts from those who actually crossed. If it existed, such a stream would certainly have added to the difficulties.

The swamp was quite impassable for horses, and nearly so for men on foot, which meant that the advance would be devilishly slow – giving the enemy plenty of time for careful and accurate fire. And, to make that fire even more deadly (though these details were unknown at the moment), the Indians had cleared away all of the low palmettoes and much of the tall sawgrass within rifle range of their center, leaving a clear field of fire, removing the last chance of cover; and the big trees along the fringe of the hammock had been notched to furnish solid support for the rifles of the best marksmen Sam Jones could find. (The Prophet – Otolke-Thlocko – was just behind the Mickasuki lines, preparing his magic, singing and dancing to inspire the combatants. His power was purported to be even greater than that of Sam Jones: gifted in healing, knowing the uses of herbs and potions, his magic and ritual dancing infused the Indians and Negroes with a confidence beyond their usual character. If he followed the pattern of other such medicine-men, he had convinced them all that his charms made them invulnerable to the white man's bullets.)

All of the men were dismounted now, for horses would have been worse than useless in that muddy swampland – bogged to their bellies after a few steps. Disposition of the troops was made in quick order, while they were yet on firm ground, and the lines organized and orders issued. The men were directed to divest themselves of every unneeded

thing – the going would be tough enough without carrying a lot of extra weight. The horses and all of the baggage were left under a small guard in some dry pine woods at the rear, out of Indian range. Captain George W. Allen and a small contingent of seventy-one men were the only ones retaining their mounts – with two companies, Allen was sent to reconnoiter off to the right. He was to search for hostiles in that direction, and try to drive them off if found. If he encountered no opposition, he was to return to the baggage dump – to join Taylor, if he heard heavy firing.

Instead of the flanking action proposed by Colonel Gentry, Taylor ordered a direct frontal assault, although he could not have failed to recognize its dangers. But there was no hesitation, even though attack was precisely what the Indians had invited. The decision to send in raw troops to bear the first brunt of battle, almost as a sacrifice to open the way for the Regulars, was just one of those difficult choices that often face a field commander.

For the first time in the war – perhaps the only time – the commander knew almost exactly what he was up against. It would be like storming a medieval fortress, across a moat, and it would be brutal. But Taylor's plan was basically simple. The Volunteers and Spies would form the first line, with the second to consist of the Fourth and Sixth Infantry regiments. The First Infantry would be held in reserve. They would attack across the swamp, assault the hammock head-on, and capture the Indians or kill them or drive them out. There was nothing complicated about it. The units had their orders: all they had to do was to follow them.

It was now simply a matter of waiting for the command, and then going ahead. The muddy swamp was not encouraging, but it could be crossed. It would be difficult – but it *could* be crossed. And now, at least, the waiting was about over.

With the battle lines thus forming according to orders, the army paused there in the pleasant sunshine, ordering itself for its move into desperate action – a thin wave of armed might, washing forward against the uncharted reef before it. The sky was washed clean of clouds, and in a temperature of about sixty-five degrees those kersey uniforms were beginning to feel uncomfortably warm. The wave was not a powerful one, by modern standards, but never before in all his twenty-eight years of service had Zachary Taylor commanded so many soldiers.

The Missourians who were to make up the first assault line had been directed to cross the swamp, enter the hammock, and engage the enemy by inviting attack. If they were hard pressed, they were to try to

hold their ground; but if that proved impossible, they were to fall back behind the second line and re-form, out of reach of enemy fire, and there await further orders. Following those orders, Colonel Gentry began to move his men into position.

First, Acting-Major John Sconce led his forty-three Spies off in column across the swamp, their feet bogging at once deep in the dense and tenacious muck. Behind them, at a slight interval, came the First Battalion of Missouri Volunteers under Lieutenant-Colonel John W. Price, consisting of companies led by Captains James Chiles, Congreve Jackson and William C. Pollard – Pollard's company, by this time, had withered away to only sixteen men, from an original muster roll of fifty. Before them went the flag-bearer, proudly bearing aloft the regiment's fine silk banner, and buglers to sound the orders. Following immediately came the Second Battalion commanded by Major Harrison H. Hughes, comprised of companies under Captains John H. Curd and William Henry Russell. A total of 153 Volunteers had reached the scene of battle, but only 132 were actually engaged, for one man out of every eight had been told off to hold the horses and guard the baggage.

Somewhat less than a quarter of a mile they advanced into the swamp, still in column, and there they paused briefly. After a few minutes rest they advanced a few more yards, watching behind them for the next line to get in motion – but the Regulars had not yet made a start. Soon they halted again, laboring for breath, legs sore and muscles twitching – this time, they saw the Sixth Infantry begin its move behind them.

As soon as all of the Spies and Volunteers had resumed their progress, they broke the column and formed neatly into an extended skirmish line, spreading to right and left, almost as expertly as Regulars might have done it.

Colonel Gentry was now in the center, a little ahead of the line with the flag-bearer. On his right was Colonel Price with the First Battalion; on his left, Major Hughes with the Second. Still farther to the right were the forty-three Spies, made up of Captain Sconce's company and Captain Cornelius Gilliam's small detachment. The extreme right was composed of some thirty Delaware Indians, who had crossed the bog in their own fashion, led by Captain Joseph Parks.

As this line – thin, stretched out with almost two yards between men and covering a front of almost three hundred yards – got into position, the Sixth Infantry formed in close order, in two ranks, and moved into place some fifty yards or so behind them, 175 strong. About the same distance farther back, 160 men of the Fourth Infantry got into

their assigned spot and began moving off toward the left of the Sixth, eventually coming up almost even with them. A hundred yards or more behind the Fourth rested the First Infantry regiment – Taylor’s own, with 173 men engaged – held as reserve just on the edge of the swamp. (Only six companies of the Fourth were to play a part in the main battle, the others having been detached as part of the horse-and-baggage guard or assigned to Captain Allen’s reconnaissance party.)

Looking up and down the long line of Spies and Volunteers, Gentry took the salutes of Price and Hughes, at last giving the signal to advance at about half-past twelve. They had left firm ground just after noon: it had taken a few minutes to get into place.

Sword held high, Gentry suddenly swept the bright steel forward, its point toward the dark hammock, and stepped off bravely. (While drumming up enlistments back home in Boone County he had insisted, “I’ll never say ‘go ahead’; I will say ‘come on!’” He was living up to that promise, to the letter.) Bugles rang out sharp and clear in the cool, still air, sounding the advance. The raw soldiers followed their flag and their Colonel, maintaining extended order, keeping the skirmish line as straight and orderly as the difficult terrain would permit. There were perhaps some bitter glances back toward the stubborn Regular commander who was thus sparing his own troops at their expense, but there was no faltering.

There was an uncanny stillness as the men floundered ahead in the pleasant sunshine, half walking and wading, half crawling, their muskets and powder containers held high above their heads to keep them out of the wet. No matter how hard they peered into the shadows of the hammock before them, they could see no living creature – high overhead, like dark omens of disaster, a few buzzards circled slowly in the still air: but there was no life, no movement, among the bearded cypresses. The army itself was strangely silent, as though listening for some sign – any sign – of Indian activity: only the sloshing of water about their hips and the sucking of mud on their boots gave sound to the scene. Save for their opening blasts, even the bugles were mute.

Taking advantage, where they could, of the remaining clumps of sawgrass roots, the Missourians pulled themselves ahead. Long before they reached the half-way point there were traces of red in the clear water – the red of blood from arms, hands, and legs cut and torn by the sharp-edged sawgrass. Frequently more than waist deep in the slimy black ooze, they fought their way, a step at a time. . . . There was nothing like this in Missouri – absolutely nothing!

Three quarters of a mile is not much of a distance. Under normal

conditions it might be covered in ten minutes without strain. But when every step required superhuman strength, with sucking mud holding fast like the very devils of the deep, even so short a way can become a horror. The thick trees did not seem much closer, although they had struggled well over half way across the evil swamp. They paused again briefly, just past the half-way mark, to try once more to catch their breath, recovering strength for the remaining and even more treacherous part of the crossing. They paused, but not for long – for Gentry kept urging them forward, waving his sword and shouting encouragement. Reluctantly they moved ahead once more, slowly, slowly. . . .

The eerie silence remained unbroken. Exhausted and fighting for breath and footing, they wallowed on, interminably on – straight toward the dark line of shadowy cypresses, where gently swaying Spanish moss was the only moving thing. Closer and closer they came, almost to the edge of the hammock, and still the tense silence remained inviolate. Some began to wonder if perhaps it were not all a bad dream, if perhaps the Indians had not already vanished. . . . Only a hundred yards left now to the edge of the timber. . . . Seventy-five yards. . . . on . . . on . . . step by slithering step. . . . Only fifty yards more to go now. . . .

Then, almost before they could comprehend what was happening, a withering fire burst from the shadows, a thunder-clap of sudden noise, from almost point-blank range – little spurts of red-orange and yellow marking where the Indians lay behind their trees and fallen logs. High in the tree-tops, too, they saw cottony puffs of smoke, from snipers concealed in the branches. The sharp, ringing reports of the enemy rifles – so different from the sound of American guns – rattled from the trees. (Indian spies, as well as marksmen, had climbed to the very tops of those tall trees, carefully concealed, watching every move of the white army, relaying information to their comrades below.) The sudden hail of lead seemed to burst simultaneously from everywhere.

In that first fierce volley almost twenty percent of the Missourians fell, wounded or dead. The remainder threw themselves headlong in the stinking mud. . . wavered. . . stopped. Then, miraculously, still following orders in reasonably good military fashion, they sought cover and tried slowly to continue their advance. But cover was scarce, almost non-existent. They were practically crawling now, crouched as low as the water would allow; exposed at every move to a galling fire, some were slithering along on their bellies, in spite of the water. But even the screen of sparse sawgrass between them and the hammock could not hide them from the view of those marksmen in the tree-tops, and bullets rained down upon them. Their ragged line thin and broken, they inched forward

like big worms, not daring to raise a head above the sharp grass which was being mowed down all about them by clipping lead.

They had seen their gallant commander, Colonel Gentry, fall with that first fire. The Missouri Colonel had been struck in the chest in that sudden volley, and had gone down for a few moments. Quickly he rallied, regained his feet, and swung over toward the embattled left. "Come on, boys," he shouted, "we're almost there! Charge on into the hammock!" He remained on his feet for nearly an hour more, and was just about to set foot on the firm ground of the hammock when another burst of fire broke from the shadows directly before him. A second bullet passed through his abdomen. He fell — and did not rise again. Captain Chiles later recalled hearing his voice, faint and far away, even after he fell, saying, "Fight on . . . till the foe retreats!" Gentry's sergeant-major sorr, still in his teens, had fallen at almost the same instant, with a musket ball through his arm.

The Missourians could not know, for sure, whether their Colonel was now dead or only wounded; but like a snake that has lost its head they slithered around in the mud uncertainly. A few of them rushed ahead bravely, in spite of the thick-flying lead, to prevent the Indians from scalping the fallen Colonel — for a number of red warriors (the first "hostiles" they had really seen!) had clustered at the edge of the trees, knives in hand, and were rushing toward the spot where Gentry lay. After a brief hand-to-hand struggle, the Indians withdrew, back into the shadows, and the Volunteers gathered protectively about the Colonel.

Gentry was found to be still alive, still fully conscious, still urging his men to charge. Badly wounded as he was, he refused their efforts to carry him back out of the line of fire. "Charge! Charge!" he repeated weakly. "Charge the hammock!" Only when his strength had waned until further protest was impossible was he taken at last from the field by a party of loyal men, with Major William McDaniel supervising the grim and dangerous task. (Gentry still hung on to life, back there in the medical tent: it is just possible that he might have survived. But the doctors decided that his wound must be "cleansed." This was done by pushing a silk scarf through his body with a ram-rod! . . . Without anesthetics, it was too much. Just before midnight Gentry died.)

At Gentry's removal, and because of other casualties, the command of the Volunteers devolved upon Captain Chiles. He at once sent an urgent message back to Taylor's reserve unit, still waiting over half a mile behind, appealing for prompt support. The only encouragement he got from that quarter was a terse reply that "You must sustain yourselves."

For a few minutes more the Missourians tried to return the enemy fire—blindly, for even yet they could see no targets. They could hear the fiendish yelling of the Mickasukies amid the roar of the guns, and the shrilling of their turkey-bone whistles; they could see the flashes from their rifles and muskets, and smell the acrid smoke from burning gunpowder; they could hear bullets whining and sizzling about their heads—but not an enemy was visible. Each man for himself, they rose at random just high enough for their weapons to clear the sawgrass, firing their muskets and large-bore “yagers” quickly in the direction ahead—not aiming, simply trying to keep up a steady fire and keep the enemy occupied. Their bullets for the most part *chunked* solidly but harmlessly into the massive tree trunks. Only once in a long while did they see the sprawling of a dark form, struck by chance, dropping into the thick underbrush.

But they could not take such punishment for long. Captain Chiles fell, wounded, as did Lieutenants Charles Rogers and Flanagan and Hugh Vanlandingham. And Acting-Major Sconce and Lieutenants John T. Hase and William Gordon, of the Spies, were down. These were all old friends, from Boone and the neighboring counties of Missouri—and more familiar figures on every hand were dropping into the mud, not to rise again. In addition to the seven officers out of action, close to thirty men had fallen, dead or wounded. And the rest were pinned to the ground there, helpless, unable to advance another foot under so wicked a fire. And still the reserve stood motionless. There was to be no help.

At about that moment, when it seemed that things could not get any worse, things *did* get worse: the advancing Sixth Infantry began shooting through the broken line of Volunteers, who, caught between two fires, became totally demoralized. Some tried to continue. They flopped down in the water and muck to reload, rising only to fire, then flopping down again. Few things can be more disconcerting in battle than being fired on by one’s own supporting troops. The shock was beyond bearing for many of those green Missourians.

For only a few minutes they tried to return the enemy’s fire. But almost untrained militia could hardly be expected long to endure such a punishing position. Virtually leaderless, many of the raw troops broke under the pressure. They turned their backs to the enemy, in utter disorder, crawling and running back toward the high ground that they had left a seeming lifetime ago. Back through the advancing line of Regulars they ran, according to orders—but then it appears that orders and all discipline were forgotten. Rather than re-grouping behind the second line, as directed, those nerve-shattered Volunteers continued

their precipitate flight, out of the swamp, beyond the waiting First Infantry, all the way back to where the horses and baggage had been left. Some were shot in the back during that flight, before they could get out of range. (One, a private Elihu Stanley, survived, but his name has come down ingloriously as “shot in the back from a tree.” Perhaps he was shot in place, for those down-ranging bullets could catch a man in the back if he were lying face down in the mud. Perhaps it would be unjust to accuse Stanley of being one of those who ran, without further evidence.) Some, wounded, fell face down in the mud and water, at the risk of drowning: it is reported that a few *did* drown, bubbling their lives away, unable to rise. Men reeled and toppled, unnoted, their comrades powerless to see or help them in that tall sawgrass and suffocating slime.

This was more than flight. It was a rout. Panic. Sheer panic. Those untried troops, with but the sketchiest of military training, had been thrown into one of the most difficult spots in the annals of military history. And they had broken. Taylor’s report says they could not be rallied. They cowered there with the baggage and horses, many flat on their bellies with faces pressed to the good solid earth, quivering hands clawing at the blessed dirt – their weapons and glory lost somewhere out there in the deathly mud.

Not all of the Volunteers had run. Some of them, perhaps even a majority (if we can rely at all on the testimony of the survivors), held their ground, pinned down in the muck as they were, waiting for the second line to come up to them. There was not much else they *could* do at this point *but* wait – but they lay or crouched firm, still facing the enemy, still firing an occasional round whenever they could sense a fair opening.

The various Missouri histories, as well as the later testimony of Colonel Price and others – perhaps with more local pride than historical accuracy – insist that the fall of Colonel Gentry did not dismay or dispirit the Missourians: they pressed right on and soon entered the hammock and drove out the savages; they did not relax their exertions, but continued to fight for several hours longer, until the Indians were entirely vanquished. It was perhaps not exactly that way: almost certainly not. But it is true that a few of those who fled shortly recovered enough to re-enter the battle, perhaps shamed by their rout. Captain Gilliam had kept together a handful of men, and Lieutenant John C. Blakey found a few more still ready for action. Partly due to the nature of the terrain, they had gradually drifted toward the left, to join there with the right wing of the Regulars, fighting at their side until the battle was over.

But, as a unit, the Missouri Volunteers were through.

Though survivors were to protest for years the many aspersions cast against their courage, the record stands just as Taylor wrote it.

In spite of the heavy losses the Volunteers had suffered before their very eyes, the second line advanced in close order, the men in two ranks, apparently as cool as though parading on a drill field. But no drill field was ever like this! They could not really march forward in close order, as Taylor's report says they did. They could crawl. They could struggle ahead in the deep mud, already churned to a thick gumbo by the men ahead. They could advance in a fashion by putting a foot precariously upon a clump of sawgrass roots and feeling ahead for another such clump. It would have been virtually impossible for them to maintain their ranks for long.

But advance they did, in reasonably good order, without hesitation. Even when the demoralized Missourians came barreling back through their lines there was no panic: they let the frantic Volunteers pass, and then closed the gaps in their lines as best they could, to continue the prescribed maneuver. Past dead men and past men dying, in water reddened by Missouri blood, the Regulars followed a steady course. Shoulder almost touching shoulder, they covered a front of only about a hundred yards, somewhat to left of center of the front line. (From the rear, Zachary Taylor watched with grim satisfaction. The Volunteers had broken and run away, as expected; but his Regulars were performing like a well-adjusted machine. . . .)

Every man was exhausted, long before the swamp was crossed, by the simple task of extricating one foot after another from the deep, sucking mud; but on they went, coolly, efficiently, many of the more experienced among them holding their fire until it could do some good. Others, half maddened by the blood-lust of battle, fired ahead as fast as they could re-load their pieces – like the Missourians, they aimed at nothing in particular, simply keeping up a steady fusillade and a mind-deadening noise. Some tried to aim for the rare flashes of Indian guns, but long ago the Indians had learned that trick. Now they had tricks of their own: after each shot, a brave (if not fully protected behind tree or log) would screech forth his disconcerting “*ho-hoo-hoo-ooooeee!*,” cast himself prone and roll over on his left side, leaving his right arm free to re-load his weapon. And the seasoned soldiers learned to follow him – aiming, not at the flash itself, but a little below and to the right.

Ahead of the soldiers the hammock became again ominously still. As before, the Indians patiently held their fire – they knew better than to waste irreplaceable lead and powder.

There was not quite the same deathly stillness as before, for now an occasional shot splintered the silence as a sharp-shooter high in a tree-top took careful aim at one of the white leaders – and there was now the unnerving sound of wounded men, groaning, screaming, crying for help.

Near the center of the enemy line (though there could be no way for the soldiers to know it) Alligator himself waited, with his own band of 120 picked warriors. On his left, facing the army's right wing, was Wildcat with eighty more – bitter at what he regarded as the perfidy of General Jesup, desperate to avenge himself for that vile imprisonment in the white man's dungeon. The Mickasukies – near two hundred of them – formed the Indians' right. Figures obtained from the Indians some time after the battle placed the total at 380, though other sources add another hundred to that number. (And an uncounted number of black men were joined and intermixed under their respective chiefs.) Alligator later said that the great and fearsome Sam Jones – the most important and most dreaded name in all of the army's calculations – had fled at the first firing, taking his people with him in hurried retreat along the lake shore.

There is here one of those problems which the historian is hard put to solve, in the final analysis requiring a judgment based wholly on extraneous material: Sprague says that "Halleck-Tustenuggee rallied those who threatened to follow him," but we believe this is in error. Halleck-Tustenuggee was a chief of some importance, surely important enough to warrant mention in the narratives of Taylor or Buchanan or others – *if he were present*. A search of the literature seems to indicate that he was far away from Okeechobee on December 25th. It seems more likely that Sprague got two Indian names – of some similarity – confused: Alligator's tribal name was "Halpatter Tustenuggee," close enough to "Halleck-Tustenuggee" to justify such confusion. It is more probable that Alligator – not Halleck-Tustenuggee – whipped his line back into shape, forging the somewhat disheartened Seminoles again into a powerful force.

The Sixth Infantry's right wing followed the way which had been prepared for it: a broad, open trail, wide enough to accommodate a full company without crowding, leading directly to those concealed defenders. The going was a little easier there, for the brush and much of the taller sawgrass had been cleared away; and the Sixth advanced a little ahead of the Fourth, which was still slogging and slipping through the deeper mud on the left. Still in reasonably close order, the Sixth approached the hammock where the Indians waited, ready, hidden behind their logs and notched trees. With bayonets gleaming, the Regulars came

up to the thin line of Volunteers, still pinned down and crouched immobile in the water, and slowly worked their way ahead – their extreme right was about midway of Colonel Price's First Battalion, leaving part of that unit and all of the Spies and Delawares still unsupported. Those pinned-down Missourians were precisely in front of the enemy's strongest point: after an hour or more of impotence, frozen in place, a few of them readily joined with the Sixth in its advance.

A handful of Seminoles, themselves draped in Spanish moss, still watched invisible from their perches in the moss-shrouded trees, keeping a sharp look-out on every movement, reporting to runners on the ground for immediate relay to the chiefs. Their best marksmen (other than those in the trees) had their stations where the "trail" through the sawgrass met the hammock. Others lay still, to the right and left, behind fallen logs in the undergrowth at the hammock's edge. All were alert, rifles at the ready, waiting. Patiently waiting. Fingers tense on triggers. Eyes squinted into the bright sunshine. Waiting. . . . (And from the rear, the sound of The Prophet's drumming and his keening chant carried high above the slosh of water about the soldiers' knees and waists.)

Still the close-ranked infantry inched forward. That morning, a little before noon, Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander R. Thompson had called his regiment together for a short and pithy address, preparing them for what was to come. With his many months in the field in Florida he knew well what to expect – the effect of the sight of broken men, torn bodies; the sound of their moanings. And, so far, the facts were living up to his advance billing.

The Sixth had reached the zone where all of the brush and most of the sawgrass had been cleared away. Completely without cover, they moved to within easy rifle range of the hammock. With his usual firm, cool, and decided manner Thompson led them on, repeatedly cautioning his men not to throw away their fire. And yet the Indians waited, with incredible discipline. For what seemed like hours in that slow-moving pantomime, nothing happened.

But soon the temptation grew too strong for the Indians to resist. The Sixth Infantry (now considerably in advance of the Fourth) was within too easy reach: if the Indians could knock off one unit after another, without the whole brigade reaching them at one time, they had more than a fair chance of winning the fight. Aiming at the officers and non-coms (for even without distinctive uniforms they could be recognized, by position and bearing), at a signal the Indians squeezed their triggers. Another sudden volley exploded from the thickets – a stabbing fire so accurate and so deadly that many soldiers in the front rank were

literally mowed down, either dead, dying, or disabled. The weight of the fire was concentrated principally on five companies, which not only stood firm but continued slowly to advance. But the sudden carnage was appalling – great gaps appeared in the close-ordered line as men fell from sight.

That furious burst had caught the Sixth while it was yet in close formation, the men almost touching one another, shoulder to shoulder. Such a target would be hard to miss, and the Indians made the most of it. At once, however, those Regular troops – the ones of them still able to move – spread wide, in extended order, forgot their drill-field precision, and sought what cover they could find – but still they crawled forward through the mud. Rifle and musket balls whistled and screamed overhead. Men dropped by twos and threes. A wild screeching and howling poured from the bushes: commencing with a low growling noise, the Seminole battle-cry mounted to a fiendish yell that rang through the forest. Soldiers listened, some unnerved by the clamor. And men fell.

Colonel Thompson had already been struck twice, early in the assault – once through the abdomen to the left, and a second time in the right breast – but he seemed to brush off such wounds as of little importance. Either of those earlier wounds would have proved fatal (in the opinion of the doctors later that day) but he had continued to command, as efficiently as ever. But now a third ball struck him, just as he was about to reach the edge of the hammock. Ranging in at a downward slant from high in the tree-tops, it penetrated his chin and lodged in his neck just above the breast-bone. He was bowled over by the impact, to a sitting position. He struggled to rise, once more, still obsessed by duty, but it was beyond his strength. As he fell back he called out, in a voice already weakening, “Steady, men steady! . . . Charge the hammock! . . . Remember your regiment!” And so he died, at about two o’clock or a quarter past two. Lieutenant George H. Griffen was near him when he fell, and stood by his side until he was carried from the field on the shoulders of his devoted men.

But Ramsay Thompson did not go friendless to death. Captain Joseph Van Swearingen, a few steps ahead of his company and already thrice wounded, took a ball in the lower part of his neck. He spun about, staggering toward the rear. Clutching at the spouting fountain of blood, he wavered uncertainly. Suddenly, he raised both hands to his head – his knees buckled, and he pitched forward on his face. His world, too, had come to an end.

First Lieutenant John P. Center, adjutant of the Sixth, fell – shot through the head by one of those tree-top snipers. And First Lieutenant

Francis J. Brooke died instantly from a bullet through the heart – a contemporary newspaper reported, curiously, that “he died with a smile on his face.”

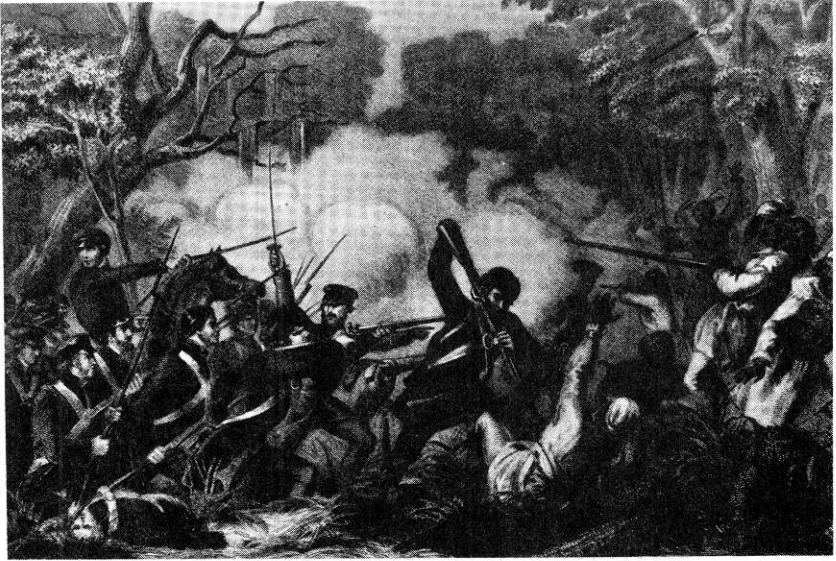
Taylor had sent Captain Noel off to the left, during the heat of battle, to urge the lagging companies there to maintain their line. As he was passing back down the line to rejoin his own company, Noel was hailed by Captain Andrews. George Andrews had been badly wounded, with a shattered wrist, but he had carried on for as long as he could. Now, loss of blood and the resulting weakness was forcing him to retire. And Lieutenant William H. T. Walker, not far away, though wounded in several places, had continued to direct his company until he, too, was cut down. Lacking any orders from Colonel Taylor, and with Thompson dead, Noel took charge of the men left leaderless by these losses, directing the three companies on the left to charge and enter the hammock. This was promptly attempted, under a heavy and destructive fire, and the enemy began to give way before them. Making contact with a part of Colonel Foster’s Fourth Infantry, Noel proposed that his men join with Foster’s right, acting under Foster’s orders for the rest of the fight.

While the battle still raged, Andrews and Walker were carried from the field, back to the medical tents, where Walker was found to have been almost cut to pieces, with at least three rifle balls lodged in his body – wounded in the neck, left arm, chest, and knee, with a number of other bullet holes in his clothing. Just graduated from West Point in the preceding June, Walker’s baptism of fire there at Okeechobee was to earn him a brevet as First Lieutenant “for gallantry in action.”

And Sergeant-Major Henry Sleephack, of the Sixth, was shot through the abdomen – a terrible wound. There seemed to be little hope for his survival.

In sober fact, in those five companies of the Sixth Infantry, every officer – with one exception – was killed or wounded; and the non-commissioned officers suffered almost as heavily. Of the officers in the whole regiment, only Captains Noel and Dow and Second Lieutenant Samuel Woods remained untouched. And almost seventy enlisted men were down!

All of the companies making up that butchered right wing were so cut up and leaderless that they wavered, stopped. They had stuck to the fight for almost an hour, worked their way up to the line tenuously held by the Missourians, and a little beyond – but further advance seemed impossible. They were too disorganized, too exhausted, and – above all – too weakened in force by all that killing. Slowly, carefully, they were compelled to give way. They fell back for a considerable distance,



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Zachary Taylor at the Battle of Okeechobee, Florida, in 1837.

staggering back out of range of enemy fire, the Volunteers withdrawing with them – leaving the field of battle fully under Indian control.

Where, they all wondered, was the support they were supposed to rally behind? Where were the reserves? It was obvious that the First Infantry had not come up as expected, for none of them had encountered a fresh man during the withdrawal. It seemed peculiar, but fact, that the First was now placed far over on the left side of the line, far behind Foster's Fourth which, as yet, had been but little engaged. So far, the Missourians and the Sixth Infantry had borne the full weight of that terrible enemy fire. In later months, when the controversy boiled over, even the Missourians had nothing but praise for those hard-fighting Regulars. One of Taylor's most outspoken adversaries wrote, "The Sixth Infantry behaved gloriously – fought bravely; they were a moving battery of stout hearts, and strong hands; and none but brave men could march where they did."

But, unlike the Volunteers in their rout, the Sixth fell back only far enough to reform. Their retrograde movement slowed, halted; the men rallied. One company – Company "K" – in gathering itself together, found only four men untouched by enemy lead. Other companies, too, had taken heavy losses. A dozen or more men lay dead on the field; and almost three-score more, wounded, were writhing in agony in the morass or making their painful way toward the rear. Some of those badly

hit were carried, during that brief respite, back across the swamp to the baggage dump, where the doctors had set up tents and tables – they could not be left where they fell, for in such a spot they would have drowned, even if bullets did not finish them off first: no man, weakened by wounds, could long have held his head above the water and mud.

The able-bodied men, disposing of their burdens, returned promptly to the fight. Hardly taking time to catch their breath, the mangled remnants of the Sixth, with a few Volunteers, pulled themselves together, formed again in ragged line, and once more moved forward – to paraphrase that Missourian’s remark, none but brave men could willingly have reentered such a battle. . . .

But by that time the main battle had shifted.

The six companies of the Fourth Infantry making up the left of the line, consisting of 160 men, faced a somewhat less formidable foe. The Mickasukies there seemed (for the moment, at least) to have lost some of their will to fight – Sam Jones had deserted them, and all of The Prophet’s powerful medicine had not prevented some of them from dying. The enemy fire on that wing, though still strong and deadly, could not match the hail of lead that had nearly destroyed the Sixth.

As that battered right wing had slowly withdrawn, Colonel Foster’s Fourth Infantry came at last almost in reach of the hammock. Although the enemy now opened a heavy fire, the left advanced like a walking battery, firing, re-loading, methodically firing again, maintaining a heavy hail of musket-balls against the dark shadows ahead. Foster later declared that his regiment approached the cypresses virtually as the “front line,” regardless of Taylor’s plans, for there were no Volunteers before him at any stage of the action – neither at the beginning nor during the actual fighting. He seems to be borne out by statements from the Missourians themselves, who said that the right of the Sixth reached only to the center of Colonel Price’s line – which would have left Foster’s Fourth dangling far off to the left, far over-reaching the left end of the Volunteers.

They came on steadily – as steadily as men could through such an evil muck. They continued to feel losses. Lieutenant John L. Hooper took a musket ball through his arm but ignored the wound, continuing to command until the fighting ceased.

As they came closer to the hammock, almost within the shadow of the big cypress trees, Colonel Foster ordered a charge, on the double, and the gallant Fourth responded valiantly. They covered those last few yards on the run – as rapid as the sawgrass, mud, and water would

permit. They entered the hammock in a single thin rank, with the men about one pace apart.

The Mickasukies had again come to life under Alligator's exhortations, and their fire increased. As the far left wing entered the hammock, on the run to keep abreast of the remainder of the regiment, the Mickasukies drove forward with an unexpected flanking attack. Major William M. Graham and Lieutenant Richard B. Screven, whose companies "B" and "C" formed that extreme left, met the screeching and howling Indians head-on, breaking the force of the charge, driving them for a considerable distance until they had crossed a creek that ran transversely through the thick woods about half a mile on the left.

In spite of continual sniping on their front, the main body of the Fourth, consisting of four companies, managed to take its own first tentative steps to penetrate the screen of trees, climbing from the mud up a low slanting rise to dry ground. Their losses, though moderately heavy, were few when compared with the massive casualties of the Sixth, which was now re-forming and coming to join them. Several mighty discharges of concentrated musketry were poured into the trees, sending many an Indian howling for cover in the denser woods behind them. The Indian fire, still strong, seemed again to be dwindling a little. Shots were less frequent, less organized, poorly coordinated – but at such close range the aim was still too good for comfort. Men continued to fall. And the remaining Indians were still virtually invisible. . . . That right segment of the line moved on, and after its first tentative steps, its four companies progressing boldly into the dim-lit cypresses, began to drive the enemy (still for the most part unseen) before it.

It was gloomy dark within the hammock, but as their eyes became accustomed to the shadows the soldiers could see down long lanes of tree-trunks, fairly clear of underbrush – the thick screen of sun-loving bush along the hammock's edge seemed like a narrow wall. Beyond that screen, cattle had grazed away much of the greenery within their reach, leaving wide stretches of ground relatively open, save where fallen timbers blocked the view. Here and there a fleeting shadow ducked behind a tree as the white men surveyed the scene across the sights of ready muskets. Once in a while a dark form drifted into the line of those sights, to be picked off by sudden fire.

The two companies of the Sixth that remained fairly intact (Company "K" under Captain Noel, and "B" Company now commanded by Second Lieutenant Woods because all of the other officers were out of action), with remnants of the rest of the broken regiment, were shifting

toward the left. Finding their own front relatively quiet, they moved into position on Foster's right flank, together with Captain Gilliam and Lieutenant Blakey and fourteen of the remaining Volunteers. From the noise they could tell that Indian fire had picked up a little over to the left, where Major Graham's private little battle was going on, and where Alligator kept urging on the wild Mickasukies. But where the main body of the Fourth's right wing had entered the hammock only a random scatter of shots *ping*-ed through the air, the fire ragged and uncertain. This was not rifle country – this was a place for bayonets and knives.

Captain Graham's far left wing had by that time managed to push the Indians on across that little creek; and the other red warriors seemed to be giving ground, too, before the main part of the army's line. Once the soldiers had climbed up the gradually sloping ground into the midst of the thick trees, the double-time had slowed to a cautious walk. Foster urged his men on: they continued to press forward in line across the hammock, firing steadily, while the left wing began moving slowly to rejoin them.

There were blood-curdling shouts and yells, from American throats now, as the men urged one another on in the face of still stubborn resistance – and those yells were answered and almost overpowered by the screeching battle-cries of the Indians. One man noted that “the Seminoles were screaming like insensate brutes, looking like gaunt wolves thirsting for blood and springing at their prey.”

For a short while the fighting became hot and close. Muskets were clubbed and swung; bayonets ran red with Indian blood drawn in that close contact. Dark, tawny forms, some clad only in breech-clouts and paint, others dressed fantastically and fearfully, still filtered from tree to tree. Their deep black eyes glared from their red-painted faces like the eyes of demons.

Despite the continued close opposition, the army – those in the hottest action amounting to only about one hundred and eighty-five – drove the Indians for a while, farther across the hammock. As the Fourth was thus advancing in a fairly orderly line, combing the bushes as it went, one of the men farthest to the front ran back to report to Foster that the great Lake Okeechobee was actually in sight. It was only a few more yards now.

But it was not to be so easy.

As the Fourth Infantry had almost completed its sweep across the hammock, still in rough line and forcing the Indians before it, all eyes had been strained ahead, along the deep shadowy aisles of the cypresses and on to the sparkling blue waters of the lake. Intent as they were upon

the exacting work at hand, the soldiers had almost forgotten the Seminoles who had cut the Sixth to ribbons. But those Seminoles, having succeeded in crippling the Sixth to such an extent that it had temporarily withdrawn, now had full opportunity to turn their attention to the Fourth.

Due to the severe shortage of officers, Lieutenant Buchanan had been ordered to take command of two companies of the regiment – Companies “G” and “I.” Usually a desk-bound officer, on that day he was in the thick of the fighting. By chance he turned, perhaps to urge on stragglers, and caught a frightening glimpse: a thin wave of Seminole warriors was pouring onto the rear and right flank! Buchanan yelled to Colonel Foster, waving his arm frantically toward the advancing horde. One glance was enough for the Colonel. He immediately ordered a change of front, by inversion to the right, bringing the main strength of his regiment face to face with the enemy. It is in maneuvers such as this that trained military men far outclass any militia: their experience and training made their response automatic, without hesitation or questioning. One flank now rested on the lake shore, the regiment now lying entirely across the narrow hammock, while the other flank was anchored to the sawgrass from which they had started. The two re-formed companies of the Sixth Infantry served as pivot for the line there on the sawgrass side. Muskets and rifles quickly re-loaded, bayonets ready, the soldiers ducked behind convenient trees or fell behind sheltering logs to await the charge.

The charge came, with more screeching and howling. Straight toward the now-ready soldiers. Straight into a heavy fire. Ignoring their falling comrades, the ragged line of nearly naked men came on, attempting futilely to drive the whites from the hammock. They came close enough for the soldiers to smell the sweet stink of greased and sweaty bodies, and to see the fantastic patterns of their “war medicine” – faces and bodies streaked with bizarre symbols in red and black paint. Naked savages crept close through the shadows, long knives in hand. Some, strangely clad in tattered white shirts and turbans and nothing else, moved from tree to tree. Closer they came. Closer. Now it was hand-to-hand. Here and there a gun-stock crashed into an Indian skull. Bayonets darted and pierced, drank deep, ran red with Seminole blood. . . For a while the Seminoles tried to sustain the assault, but the fire was too heavy, the opposition too disciplined, the welter of shouts and shots and sharp cold steel too demoralizing. The red wave broke, faltered, and receded. For a scant few moments the woods were almost quiet again.

Then another charge materialized out of the underbrush. And then

occured one of those strange happenings which can only be called the "misfortunes of war."

As the new line of Indians came within a few yards of the waiting soldiers, some of the men thought they recognized familiar faces among them. They called out, to inquire if they were Delawares – not wanting to fire on their own allies. Even Foster was uncertain: he hailed the Indians himself, asking if they were Delawares.

"Yes, Delaware! Delaware!" the answer came promptly back. But at the same time those tawny bodies continued to slip into position behind trees and stumps, vanishing from sight. . .

During that brief interval several men had their muskets at their shoulders, taking deliberate aim at the oncoming Indians. Lieutenant Buchanan recalled that at least six of them crossed the bead of his sights during those few moments. Like others, he brought his weapon down without firing, thinking that these were indeed the Delaware allies – all of the Indians seemed to look alike. At the same time, Buchanan motioned to a soldier nearby who was just about to pull his trigger, ordering him not to shoot. . .

Even as he spoke, a searing volley burst forth from that point-blank range, tearing through the trees like a scythe. For so few Indians, the fire was unbelievably heavy. Soldiers fell from sight on every hand, a few wounded, most simply diving for cover in purely reflex action. The Seminoles were well concealed, and that one heavy fusillade – so unexpected and so unnecessary – caused more Fourth Infantry casualties than any other action in the whole battle.

There was no time for orders. It was every man for himself now. But again, training and experience came to the fore: as soon as they could orient themselves to this new danger, almost as a body the embattled infantry rushed forward, straight into the firing, not allowing time for the enemy to re-load, to close with the Indians in hand-to-hand combat. Knives and bayonets were again put to their deadly work. The big horse-pistols of the Volunteers spat flame and heavy lead – with a six shooter in each hand, those few remaining Missourians poured metal into the thickets. The Seminoles cared little for such close attention, and again retired – disappearing so suddenly that they could not be effectively pursued. Some of the men, the heat of the battle upon them, rushed headlong into the undergrowth, but found not an Indian!

Captain Allen and his two mounted companies, sent out earlier to reconnoiter the right, had encountered no hostiles in that vicinity, and had found it impractical to try to cross the deep creek and heavy mud there. By the time of that deadly "accident" the detachment had returned

to the place where Colonel Taylor stood far out on the sawgrass prairie, in the mud, in full view of the army, directing operations in a cool and efficient manner.

Allen was at once ordered to advance, his men now dismounted, to the support of the army's right wing. He moved his men into position adjacent to Captain Noel's company of the Sixth Infantry, which still served as "anchor" on the sawgrass side of Foster's right flank.

As soon as those two companies were in motion, Taylor sent Colonel William Davenport and the fresh First Infantry – until then held in reserve far to the rear – hurrying off farther to the left, to complete the flanking and turning of the enemy's right wing.

As that veteran regiment got into position with its 173 fresh men, firmly pushing the Indians before it, that right flank began to crumple – but the Seminoles on the army's own right made one more charge. That third charge was but a weak and puny thing, when compared with their earlier fury. Their numbers were much reduced; their fire-power almost vanished. The third attack withered away, almost unnoticed. (Colonel Foster mentions a fourth charge – but it was so feeble that it has not found mention in any other account of the battle.)

The First Infantry came on from the left, along the length of the hammock, meeting with little opposition; and Captain Allen's unit moved in on the right. If they were expecting to have a hand in the fighting they were doomed to disappointment. For the fighting was almost over.

All of the soldiers still able to advance now massed together – the First, Fourth, and Sixth Infantry regiments, a fair number of Missouri Volunteers and Spies, and a few Delawares. They pressed forward as the fleeing Indians scattered in all directions. Out of the woods they forced them, across the sand ridge, and on to the open sandy beach beyond – abandoned Indian camps were strewn along the lake shore for more than a mile.

By that time, the army was too jaded for any serious thoughts of pursuit, although Colonel Foster kept a few of his fresher men at the attempt until almost sundown; and the First Infantry kept beating the bushes for stragglers. Most of the Sixth and the Volunteers rested where they could, not joining in any efforts at pursuit – having been engaged in the battle from its very beginnings, they had had enough. (Captain Pollard's company, which began the engagement already reduced to sixteen men, found its strength now cut in half – only eight men left fit for duty.)

It was after three o'clock in the afternoon when the actual fighting

ended, and many of the soldiers had been in that muddy swamp for almost three hours, much of that time spent in severe action. They were utterly exhausted. But the fresh First Infantry continued to move up and down the length of the hammock, searching, probing – but they made no real efforts to follow the Indians out onto the open beaches and beyond. Scattered as the Seminoles were, it would have been futile to try to round them up.

The Battle of Okeechobee was over. There remained now the difficult task of bringing out the rest of the wounded and giving them such attention as could be rendered there in the wilderness. The doctors would have their hands full. . .

And, too, there remained the melancholy task of burying the dead.

Shortly after the battle Zachary Taylor was breveted Brigadier General, and on May 15, 1838, succeeded General Jesup as commander of all the troops in Florida – all in recognition of his great victory. But was it indeed such a great victory?

An authentic victory, traditionally, would result either in severe enemy casualties, or in the attainment – even at great cost – of some goal greatly desired. In this case, neither criterion applies.

Taylor admits to finding only ten dead Indians on the field, despite his statement that “the hostiles probably suffered . . . equally with ourselves.” His own losses were set at 26 killed and 112 wounded – a highly disproportionate figure for a victory.

The other major goal, that of terminating the war, was hardly approached. The war dragged on for almost five more years: it was not until August 12, 1842 that Colonel William Worth declared the hostilities at an end.

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