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CUBAN BLOODHOUNDS AND THE SEMINOLES

by JAMES W. COVINGTON

Throughout history man has made use of animals in his warfare. During the Middle Ages the "Man on horseback" gained many victories against those on foot who opposed him and it was not until the effective use of the long bow and gun powder that the foot soldier could hold his own in combat. The first animal that European man domesticated was the dog. Even as late as World War II canines of several breeds were used by both sides to guard against surprise attack and to track down fleeing foes and prisoners.

One of the most successful uses of dogs came during the Maroon Revolt in Jamaica. This rebellion lasted from 1655 to 1737 and was extremely hard to crush since the revolutionists hid in the mountains and could not be found by search parties. The British government decided to equip each army post with a pack of bloodhounds which could be used in tracking down the Negroes. Within a space of a year the dogs proved to be so effective that the revolt was crushed.

In 1795, another Maroon War broke out and the Jamaican Assembly sent to Cuba for one hundred bloodhounds. As soon as they arrived and were seen by the Negroes, memories of the sharp noses of the bloodhounds were revived and the Maroons sued for peace in one month's time. Some one wrote concerning the revolt: "It is pleasing to add that not a drop of blood was spilt after the dogs arrived in the island."¹

When in December 1835 the Seminole War began, the Indians fled into the almost inaccessible interior areas of Florida and from there waged a bitter warfare. The use of the Cuban bloodhounds was recalled, and how the dogs had brought that war to a quick end. Hence it was suggested that the Cuban dogs

1. Quoted from "Edwards' West Indies" in *Army and Navy Chronicle*, X, 125.

be tried. Joel R. Poinsett, who was Secretary of War from 1837 to 1841 reported: "From the time I first entered upon the duties of the War Department, I continued to receive letters from officers commanding in Florida, as well as from the most enlightened citizens of that territory, urging the employment of bloodhounds as the most efficient means of terminating the atrocities daily perpetrated by the Indians on the settlers in that territory."² General Zachary Taylor, in 1838, requested and was granted permission to use the bloodhounds, but active campaigns near Lake Okeechobee in which the Seminoles were relentlessly pursued probably caused "Old Rough and Ready" to lay aside the project.³ While fighting against the Seminoles in a campaign which demanded quick action, Taylor acquired his nickname.⁴

It was Governor Richard K. Call of the Territory of Florida who started the wheels in motion to bring the dogs from Cuba when he sent Colonel Richard Fitzpatrick to the island.⁵ Colonel Fitzpatrick, assisted by Colonel Joseph Alzuarde, proceeded to Cuba where he found a plentiful supply of dogs and men who could handle them, and four handlers were hired. The Cubans were to be furnished transportation to and from Florida, were not to expose themselves to any danger and could return when they so desired.⁶ The boatload of thirty-three bloodhounds (costing \$151.72 each), four Cubans and two Florida militia officers left Matanzas, Cuba, and proceeded to Port Leon which

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2. Joel R. Poinsett to Rep. Henry A. Wise, December 30, 1839 printed in *Army and Navy Chronicle* X, 115.
 3. General Zachary Taylor to Adjutant General, July 28, 1838, *ibid.* Grant Foreman's *Indian Removal* (Norman, 1932) contains an excellent account of the steps leading to the Seminole War of 1835.
 4. Brainerd Dyer, *Zachary Taylor* (Baton Rouge, 1946), 126.
 5. Arthur L. Magenis to Poinsett, February 8, 1840 printed in *Army and Navy Chronicle*, X, 115. Mr. Magenis, of St. Louis, Missouri, visited Tallahassee and gave Poinsett a verbal and written report concerning the bloodhounds.
 6. Contract (translation) enclosed with letter of Governor Raymond Reid to Taylor, March 6, 1840, Records of United States Army Commands, Department of Florida, *Records of East Florida 1838-40*, National Archives, hereafter cited as *R.E.F.*

was the port closest to Tallahassee.⁷ The voyage was a most unhappy one and the boat landed in Florida with a load of seasick and hungry hounds. They had run into stormy weather which caused the boat to be forced off the route and thus exhaust the supply of food.⁸ The *Tallahassee Star* hailed the arrival of the dogs with: "If these hounds are put into service, we have more confidence in the speedy close of the war than ever before."⁹

The bloodhounds were taken to Magnolia and placed under the charge of Colonel John B. Collins, Quartermaster-General of the Territory of Florida. They went through a training process in order to adjust them to this new environment. A negro was told to run a mile into the woods and climb a tree, and one hour after his departure a bloodhound was set upon the trail and had no difficulty in finding the hidden man.

The *St. Augustine Herald* described the dogs thus:

So various are these dogs in color, shape, size and age, that at first sight they appear like an ordinary pack barking about a planter's dwelling, but examination proves them quite another thing. To describe a dog so as to be understood is difficult. I must therefore convey a general idea by requesting you to imagine a short-haired, black, red, yellow, brindled, or spotted dog, or any color that ever bedecked the species, 24 inches high and 36 inches long (or thereabouts), with a head, breast, fore-legs and shoulders like a light-made mastiff, and snout somewhat elongated, ears erect like a grey-hound, (mostly cropped where they bend) and loins, croup, haunches, and tail, like a grey-hound, only thicker set. This combination, you may con-

7. Account, Territory of Florida to the United States Government, enclosed with letter of Reid to Taylor, March 17, 1840, *ibid.* Port Leon was a thriving town and prosperous port until destroyed by a hurricane in 1842. St. Marks located three miles further up the St. Marks River began to prosper after the destruction of Port Leon.

8. Magenis to Poinsett, *loc. cit.*

9. *Tallahassee Star*, January 9, 1840.

ceive, produces an animal of great nerve, strength, and agility, and such, to all appearances, are these bloodhounds.

There are 34 in number - 5 or 6 old dogs, well trained - the remaining younger - some I should think not a year old; one of these, a lady bloodhound, walked about in the village with me as familiarly and lovingly as a spaniel; but her kindness was inoperative upon the rest of her clan, for such a set of ferocious beasts I never before saw.¹⁰

When the dogs had commenced their training at Magnolia, the newly appointed governor of the Territory, Robert R. Reid, wrote to General Taylor and offered their services to the United States Army.¹¹ General Taylor was pleased with the action taken by the territorial authorities and accepted the offer. He sent Lieutenant George Wood to Tallahassee to secure the governor's sanction for use of two Cubans and their dogs.¹²

Ten bloodhounds were turned over to Lieutenant George Wood on February 2 for use of the First Infantry. On the next day six dogs were delivered to Lieutenant R. B. Lanton of the Second Regiment, U. S. Dragoons.¹³

Northern newspapers had taken notice of these activities and soon there was a most noticeable react on from their readers. They used an effective weapon by writing their Congressmen and protesting against the use of the bloodhounds in the Seminole campaign. Senator James Buchanan of Pennsylvania presented a petition from the representatives of the Society of Friends in Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and letters from citizens of Philadelphia, which attacked the intended action of the military authorities.¹⁴ Senator Thomas Benton of Missouri stated that the petitions sent to him had been signed by "the best people" and that the United States Government had no

10. *St. Augustine Herald*, February 6, 1840.

11. Reid to Taylor, January 16, 1840, *R.E.F.*

12. Taylor to Reid, January 27, 1840, *ibid.*

13. Reid to Taylor, March 17, 1840, *ibid.*

14. *Army and Navy Chronicle*, X, 108.

previous knowledge of the action taken by the territorial government.¹⁵ Representative George Proffit of Indiana demanded the name of the Army officer that had sanctioned the bloodhound plan and offered a resolution enquiring into the matter, but withdrew it when another member objected.¹⁶ Other protests came from throughout the country and during the period from January 1840 to April 1840 the various Congressmen were busy noting the arrival of the memorials and referring them to the Committee on Military Affairs. That great orator and statesman Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, seeing that the petitions had not forced the government to abandon the test of the bloodhounds, wanted "something decisive on this from some authoritative source so that the public might be disabused."¹⁷

Former President John Quincy Adams, now serving as a member of the House of Representatives, sought to inject some humor into this serious situation by asking the Secretary of War to check into the number and cost of the dogs and also present their family, political and marriage history in order to show that they were fit to be part of the United States Army. He also asked Secretary Poinsett if the pension laws were to be extended to the canines and their off-spring.¹⁸

Governor Reid saw the reaction to his scheme and defended the course of action that had been taken by Florida in a message to the legislature:

No occasion has yet occurred for testing the usefulness of the dogs brought from Cuba. It is still believed, however, that they may be used with effect; and why should they not be used? If robbers and assassins assail us, may we not defend our property and our lives even with blood-

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Niles Weekly Register*, LVII, 321.

17. *Ibid.*, LVIII, 10.

18. *Congressional Globe*, 26 Congress, 1 Session, 252.

hounds? Shall we look upon our ruined dwellings - upon the mangled bodies of men, women and children, and then meekly say, "the poor Indians have done this - we must be merciful and humane to them - we will not set our dogs upon them - oh, no! that would be more horrible than these butcheries." Those who are safe from Indian alarms, in distant cities and peaceful lands, may indulge in gentle strains of humanity and brotherly love; were they dwellers in the log cabins of Florida, they would atune their notes to harsher measures.¹⁹

The Navy and the Marines, not to be outdone by the Army, decided to use the bloodhounds in their raids against the Seminoles. Consequently, Lt. McLaughlin was dispatched in the schooner *Flint* to Cuba to secure a supply of dogs. It was intended that the dogs would be used in conjunction with light canoes built in South Carolina which could be easily moved into the various shallow lakes and swamps. Lt. McLaughlin reached Matanzas and secured the services of several Cubans and a number of dogs.²⁰

The Army tried a series of experiments with the dogs near Garey's Ferry on Black Creek a tributary of the St. Johns River, located about thirty miles southwest of Jacksonville. One such field trial was the release of an Indian prisoner who was told to travel five miles and climb a tree. The logs were put on the trail and they went directly to the tree where the Indian had concealed himself.²¹ Other experiments were tried with the dogs and from published accounts in the newspapers it appeared that the scheme would be a huge success. Several Indians were captured on scouting parties with the aid of dogs

19. *Army and Navy Chronicle*, X, 187.

20. *Ibid.*, 265.

21. *Jacksonville Advocate*, March 17, 1840, quoted in *Niles Weekly Register*, LVIII, 72.

and the *Jacksonville Advocate* now hopefully referred to the dogs as “peace hounds.”²²

It should be noted at this time that the Army was most careful in its use of the bloodhounds. Secretary of War Poinsett warned Taylor that “. . . their use be confined, altogether to tracking the Indians; . . . that they be muzzled when in the field and held with a leash while following the track of the enemy.”²³ Taylor ordered his men that in no case would the dogs be allowed to disturb Indian women or children. He told the commanding officer to take careful note of how the dogs followed the trail so to judge their value for future operations.²⁴

Much money had been invested in the operation by the Territory of Florida and now, since the plan appeared so successful, it would be a good opportunity to ask the United States Government to pay for its share of the total cost. The four Cubans who had accompanied the dogs notified Reid that they wished to return home. Reid wrote to Taylor explaining the situation and enclosed a copy of the contract signed by Fitzpatrick in Cuba.²⁵ Taylor issued instructions that the men were to be paid for the time that they were actually in the service of the United States Government.²⁶ Reid saw that Taylor was in an agreeable mood for paying accounts due and sent him the bill of \$2,429.52 for the sixteen dogs that the Federal troops had employed. He also hoped that Taylor would pay for the cost of bringing the dogs from Cuba and for their upkeep until they were delivered to the Army. Reid did not want to push Taylor so he decided to enclose the additional unpaid account in another letter. Imagine his surprise when he received this answer: “. . . when these dogs were tendered to me, I informed you in

22. *Ibid.* See *Army and Navy Chronicle*, X, 187 for report of bloodhounds successful use.

23. Poinsett to Taylor, January 26, 1840, *Army and Navy Chronicle*, X, 116.

24. *Ibid.*, 174.

25. Reid to Taylor, March 6, 1840, *R.E.F.*

26. Extract of letter Taylor to Reid, March 10, 1840 found in letter Taylor to Reid, March 27, 1840. *ibid.*

answer that I would make trial of them to ascertain if they would be of service in trailing the Indians. Several experiments have been made with them and the officers having them in charge have reported them of no service whatever. Such being the case I do not feel authorized to order payment for them. . . " ²⁷

Taylor went on to say that he was still continuing the experiments with the dogs and if the experiment proved successful, then the Federal Government would pay for them. Reid also wrote to Poinsett but the Governor was informed that the matter was in Taylor's hands. ²⁸

A correspondent of the *Savannah Georgian* visited Garey's Ferry during March and sensed the inadequacy of the bloodhounds:

Eleven of these Florida bloodhounds, alias Cuba curs, are now at this post, feasting upon their six pounds of fresh beef each per day. They have been tried frequently within the last few days with an Indian prisonnier de guerre at this place, and if they will take his trail, it would be hard to prove it by those who were present. I have no confidence, however, in them.

As to their ferocity, it is all humbug - a child may fondle with them. They have been more grossly misrepresented than any set of animals in the world, the army not excepted. ²⁹

The bloodhounds were given repeated trials under combat conditions but the numerous swamps, bogs, lakes and streams of Florida prevented them from following a trail to any great distance. It was possible that these dogs also failed because they had been trained to pick up a scent left by the Negroes of

27. Taylor to Reid, March 23, 1840, *ibid.*

28. Poinsett to Reid, April 18, 1840, *ibid.*

29. *Savannah Georgian*, March 17, 1840, quoted in *Army and Navy Chronicle X*, 221.

Cuba who had a different racial odor than the Seminoles of Florida. One of the last tests of the dogs was noted in the *Army and Navy Chronicle* when the dogs refused to take any notice of blood-stained garments and weapons left by fleeing Seminoles and could not be induced to follow the trail.³⁰ In fact they were indifferent to the whole situation. The writer was sure that this indifference and the past failures would put an end to all hope that the dogs could help bring the war to a quick end.

The Navy had no better success with the dogs than the Army. Lt. McLaughlin took a scouting trip with the hounds to find some Seminoles. He found no Indians but one poor dog died from exhaustion.³¹

Governor Reid continued to write letters to Taylor concerning the unpaid accounts. He pointed out that the dogs were untried when turned over to the Army and he was certain that training would enable the dogs to find the Seminoles.³² These efforts were fruitless and it appears from the records that Florida was never paid for the bloodhounds.

Congress took cognizance of the entire proceedings and requested that since the matter had been closed by the Army no more bloodhound memorials would be considered.³³

30. Quoted in *Niles Weekly Register*, LVIII, 137. The Seminoles have a legend to the effect that they were able to make friends with the dogs and thus prevent any effective pursuit.

31. *St. Augustine News*, quoted in *Army and Navy Chronicle*, X, 365.

32. Reid to Taylor, April 20, 1840, *R.E.F.*

33. *Niles Weekly Register*, LVIII, 283.