

1965

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George C. Bittle

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Recommended Citation

Bittle, George C. (1965) "The Florida Militia's Role in the Battle of Withlacochee," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 44 : No. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol44/iss4/5>

THE FLORIDA MILITIA'S ROLE IN THE BATTLE OF WITHLACOOCHEE

by GEORGE C. BITTLE

THE BATTLE OF Withlacoochee, fought in a swampy wilderness on the last day of 1835, generated a controversy which was more heated than the engagement itself. It was the Florida militia's first relatively large-scale battle, and unfortunately, a subsequent bitter exchange of recriminations took place between Brigadier General Duncan Lamont Clinch, the regular army commander, and Brigadier General Richard Keith Call, Florida militia commander and territorial governor. Thus the role of the Florida men in their first serious military test became a matter of debate.

From the beginning, General Call denounced the army's method of marching to the Indian village that the joint regular-militia maneuver hoped to destroy. Call wanted to execute a rapid march so that full advantage might be taken of the element of surprise. The soldiers carried only four days rations and had left their baggage at Fort Drane where the combined regular-militia force had assembled. On the other hand, General Clinch decided that his regulars needed a heavy, slow-moving baggage train to transport their supplies. General Call claimed Clinch had agreed to a rapid march with no baggage train, and then took every wagon he could find. In addition to this problem, many of Clinch's men owned dogs which they insisted upon taking with them, thus destroying all possibility of surprise.¹

It took three days to march the thirty-five miles to the Withlacoochee River since part of the time was consumed when the troops lost their way. Clinch was accused of not having taken advantage of earlier opportunities to secure adequate topographical knowledge of the area when the column went astray only a few miles from Fort Drane, which was located on Clinch's own plantation. Obviously, personal relations between the two commanders were not altogether pleasant as they proceeded on their way to battle.

1. Richard Keith Call Journal, typescript, 351-52. Henceforth to be referred to as the Call Journal. A microfilm copy is in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville, Florida. See also *Niles' Weekly Register*, August 19, 1837, 395.

2. Call Journal, 329, 351-53.

To reach the column's goal it was necessary to cross the Withlacoochee River. Indian and Negro guides led the soldiers to a ford of the river, supposedly waist-deep, only to find that because of flood conditions, it would be impossible to make a crossing. On the opposite bank was a 200 yard-wide hammock in which the guides thought Seminoles were lurking. However, a reconnaissance party which managed to traverse the river found no Indians but did discover a number of fresh moccasin tracks. Signs that Indians were somewhere nearby led to the regular troops being ferried across the river in a small, leaky Indian canoe, the only available facility. It was a dawn-to-noon operation to transport the 260 regulars.³ After crossing, the regulars marched about a quarter of a mile through the hammock to an open area bounded on two sides by a swamp and on one side by heavy scrub timber. Stacking their arms, they scattered into small groups.⁴

After the regulars had crossed the river, the militiamen followed in the same canoe. Lieutenant Maxey Dill of Colonel John Warren's Florida militia command swam across on his horse, but had to leave his weapons behind. The feat required much daring, but the technique was impractical if arms could not be carried over. In order to facilitate the militia's crossing, Clinch and Call ordered the construction of a log bridge, but, as it turned out, the battle began before this bridge was finished.⁵ At the time of the Indian attack, approximately twenty-seven militiamen had crossed the river and were guarding the horses and baggage.⁶

When the Indians first began shooting, it was not clear on which side of the river there would be the heaviest fighting, since some of the opening shots were fired at the bulk of the militia force which were waiting transportation across the water. General Call temporarily halted his crossing operation and formed his remaining men into a line of battle, standing with their backs

3. Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes; or, Florida New and Old* (Jacksonville, 1883), 202. See also Mark F. Boyd, "The Seminole War: Its Background and Onset," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXX (July 1951), 81-2.

4. John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837), 222-23.

5. Long, *Florida Breezes*, 202. See also Boyd, "The Seminole War," 81-2.

6. *Niles' Weekly Register*, January 30, 1836, 366. See also the Tallahassee *Floridian*, February 20, 1836; Williams, *The Territory of Florida*, 222-23.

to the river.⁷ Call's action was perhaps the wisest under the circumstances, since no one seemed to know where the Seminoles were hiding.⁸

When it became apparent that the main segment of the militia force would not be seriously attacked, Call resumed his efforts to move his force across the river. At one point, Call ordered his men to mount their horses and charge across, but the steep bank plunged the horses directly into swimming depth, and weapons and ammunition were soaked. Obviously this technique had little value. Even Call was forced to use the canoe, rather than go across astride his horse.⁹ In a letter written three years later (January 1838) to Call, Militiaman Thomas Johns insisted that no man could have swum the river without losing his arms or wetting his powder.¹⁰ The actual battle lasted approximately an hour, and the hardest part of the fighting occurred during a twenty-five minute period. Thus it would seem that it would have been impossible for General Call to have gotten all his men across the river, using the single canoe, in so short a time.¹¹

While moving his force, General Call also had to contend with an attempted desertion effort by a number of his men. John Bemrose, a regular army medical attendant, revealed that a group of mounted Florida men came to his hospital camp demanding rations. Suspecting them to be deserters, Bemrose said that he refused their requests. The men then threatened to use force, but the sick and injured regulars in the hospital scared them off.¹²

When the battle actually started, Colonel John Warren and Lieutenant Colonel W. J. Mills, militiamen who had crossed the river voluntarily, took up the defense of the regulars' flanks.¹³ General Call, who made his crossing during the action, played an important role in the defense of the right flank. General Clinch admitted that the militia who joined in the battle met the Indian

7. Tallahassee *Floridian*, February 20, 1836. See also Myer M. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns* (Charleston, 1836), 82.

8. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*, 82.

9. Long, *Florida Breezes*, 204.

10. Tallahassee *Floridian*, January 1, 1838.

11. *Ibid.*, January 9, 1836. See also Niles' *Weekly Register*, August 19, 1837, 395-96; Rembert W. Patrick, *Aristocrat in Uniform: General Duncan L. Clinch* (Gainesville, 1963), 105.

12. John Bemrose, "Reminiscences of the Seminole War," 56-7. Microfilm copy in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville.

13. *Jacksonville Courier*, January 7, 1836.

attack with firmness and vigor.¹⁴ Call credited the militia's role in the fight with preventing the regulars from having their retreat route to the river bank cut.¹⁵ What General Call claimed is probably true; defending this flank was an important service. However, the fact remains that very few militiamen actually took part in the fighting.

There is no question that the regulars bore the brunt of battle. However, even these soldiers were at least partly under the command of militia officers. Colonel Samuel Parkhill, Florida Militia, served as Clinch's adjutant, and Colonel Leigh Read, also of the militia, was inspector general.¹⁶ At the first Indian volley, the regulars retreated pell-mell about a hundred yards before General Clinch or Colonel Parkhill could reform them. As the regulars' rank were thinned, the soldiers forgot their discipline and huddled together. Realizing what was happening, General Clinch ordered a charge, followed by a second one that ended the battle.¹⁷

It was not until after this victorious charge that Call advised Clinch that he would not support pursuit of the Seminoles with his militia. In his report General Call argued that the large number of wounded and the lack of supplies made retreat necessary. However, on the battlefield, Call gave as a reason for his decision the fact that many of his men's enlistments ended the following day, making their further services of limited value. From the beginning of the campaign, Call had informed Clinch that his militiamen could serve only a few days.¹⁸ It is difficult to determine which of Call's stated reasons was the one he really believed. There is also the fact that Call probably was not exactly sure when the enlistments ended.

14. General Duncan L. Clinch Papers. Henceforth referred to as the Clinch Papers. Microfilm copy in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville. See also *Niles Weekly Register*, January 30, 1836, 366.

15. R. K. Call to John H. Eaton, January 8, 1836, *House Documents*, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 78, 324. See also *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 7 vols. (Washington, 1832-1861), VII, 220.

16. Clinch Papers. See also *Niles' Weekly Register*, January 30, 1836, 366.

17. Long, *Florida Breezes*, 203-04. See also R. C. Stafford, "The Bemrose Manuscript on the Seminole War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XVIII (April 1940), 289-90.

18. Williams, *The Territory of Florida*, 221, 223. See also Samuel E. Cobb, "The Florida Militia and the Affair at Withlacoochee," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XIX (October 1940), 133; Call to Eaton, January 8, 1836, *House Documents*, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 78, 324; *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, VII, 220.

Let us return to a chronological account of the battle events before exploring the problems connected with militia participation. Clinch accepted Call's plan of retreat across a makeshift log bridge, partially built during the fight. The line of battle was now formed in the shape of a horseshoe, the left flank resting on the bridge and the right on the river bank. The retreat was accomplished from left to right with the men defending their perimeter by facing the enemy. The last man to recross the river was Lieutenant Colonel W. J. Mills, a Florida soldier. Call actually commanded the retreat; Clinch was fatigued from the battle and was among the first to recross the river.¹⁹ Meanwhile, some Indians were still present on the battle side of the river, and no one was sure whether the Indians might not try to regroup and renew the attack.²⁰

On the return journey to Fort Drane, the wounded soldiers received almost no medical attention, although the Florida militiamen did what they could to make them comfortable. During the retreat, the militiamen were not the careless outriders they had been en route to the fight. Stationed as flankers, they pressed in close to the edge of the main column, and Bemrose claimed that they would have fled if they had been attacked by the Indians.²¹

It is a debatable question as to which side won the Battle of Withlacoochee since both the Indians and the Americans withdrew. Likely the Indians will have to be credited with victory; at least they achieved their objective of stopping the white military advance into their area. General Clinch's failure to achieve a decisive victory also increased the confidence of the Seminoles.²²

The three companies of Florida Militia that arrived at Fort Drane after Call's men had left for home were discharged by General Clinch since they showed signs of mutinous and insubordinate conduct.²³ The conduct of Call's soldiers may not have been completely the cause of their discharge, however, since there were questions about their terms of enlistment. In a letter to Andrew

19. Tallahassee *Floridian*, January 11, 1838. See also Long, *Florida Breezes*, 205.

20. Tallahassee *Floridian*, January 11, 1838.

21. Bemrose, "Reminiscences of the Seminole War," 70, 74.

22. *Niles Weekly Register*, February 6, 1836, 395.

23. J. A. Quigg, "Brevet Brigadier General Duncan Lamont Clinch and his Florida Service" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1963), 53.

Jackson on December 22, 1835, Call stated that he had raised his force only for a four-week period and that the men were not happy about being assigned to an offensive campaign. Call feared that many of his men would desert and go home to defend their families. Ellen Call Long said that her father, General Call, told her the men were so hastily enlisted that no stipulation concerning the length of their service had been made, and, that as the novelty of camp life wore off and the dangers of a campaign became apparent, many men decided to return home. Call lectured his men on the need of punishing the Seminoles for their actions, and thanked the soldiers for what they had already done. The militiamen, according to this account, finally agreed to serve an additional ten days.²⁴ Considering the lack of organization of the Florida Militia at this time and the traditionally independent attitude of most frontiersmen, Mrs. Long's version was probably nearer the truth than her father's correspondence with Jackson would have one believe.

When the discharge dates of the companies in Call's command are examined, there is even more reason to believe that the men had agreed upon an indefinite term of service. While the first company was discharged on January 13, the final group was not mustered out until February 6.²⁵ It would seem that even the first of the men scheduled to be discharged could have been utilized in pursuit of the Indians, at least on the day following the fighting at Withlacoochee. This might have helped convince the Indians that the whites really intended to pursue and to win the war.

Another matter relating to the militia's activities at Withlacoochee is the question of why more militia troops did not cross the river and join the fighting. Immediately after the battle there does not seem to have been any conflict between the militiamen and the regular soldiers. Even Colonel John Sprague, whose account of the war was not published until 1848, believed that the

24. Call to Andrew Jackson, December 22, 1835, Clarence E. Carter (ed.), *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, 26 vols. (Washington, 1834-1962), XXV, 216-17. See also the Call Journal, 350-51; Call to Jackson, December 22, 1835, *House Documents*, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 78, 319.

25. *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, VI, 1068. See also *Niles' Weekly Register*, February 6, 1836, 394.

few Florida men who had managed to cross the river rendered efficient service.²⁶

The West Florida militiamen were honored with a public dinner in Tallahassee after their return from the fighting. Toasts were made to the good relations between the Florida and regular soldiers. *The Pensacola Gazette* reported, January 16, 1836, that all the militiamen behaved well under fire and that many officers and men had distinguished themselves on the occasion. The *St. Augustine Examiner* also praised the Florida men and said that by the standard of Indian fights, this one had been severe. The *St. Augustine Florida Herald* reported that the fighting was mainly between the regulars and the Seminoles, but levelled no criticism of the militia. In a second article, the paper said General Clinch had distinguished himself at Withlacoochee. The *Key West Inquirer*, at least through March 1836, made no mention of the battle.²⁷ Apparently the controversy over the conduct of the Florida militia at the battle developed at a later date.

The debate over the militia's failure to cross the Withlacoochee did not become widespread until some time later, in 1837 and 1838. There were rumblings, however, in newspapers in 1836. The *Savannah Georgian* in January 1836 claimed that about 300 Florida men had crossed the river, only to huddle together on the river bank and then to flee back across at the first shots.²⁸ The *Washington Globe* asked why the bulk of the militia did not take part in the fighting, but placed the blame on no one.²⁹ In his 1836 annual report, General Alexander Macomb, commander of the United States Army, said he did not know why only twenty-seven Florida men had been involved, but that if all of the militia troops had shown the zeal of those men, the war, in all likelihood, would have ended with this battle.³⁰ In answer to a letter from General Call, Macomb, on August 23, 1837,

26. John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1848), 92. While Sprague was not in Florida at the time of the battle, he is considered an authority on the war.

27. *Pensacola Gazette*, January 16, 1836. See also the *Tallahassee Floridian*, January 9, 16, 1836; *Key West Inquirer*, December 1835 through March 1836; *St. Augustine Florida Herald*, January 6, 1836, and *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, VI, 21.

28. *Niles' Weekly Register*, January 30, 1836, 369.

29. *Tallahassee Floridian*, February 13, 1836.

30. *Call Journal*, 326-27.

wrote that at the time of his report he had not known all the facts but would now be glad to publicize Call's views.³¹

General Clinch wrote to Secretary of War Lewis Cass on July 22, 1837, and stated that after the fighting began, he had sent Colonel Leigh Read to find out why the volunteers were not crossing the river. At the end of the fight, Clinch claimed Call had appeared and said that the volunteers were at their posts. Several militiamen, according to Clinch, stated that Call had ordered them not to cross the river. As a further insult to Call, Clinch asked why he had ever been appointed governor of Florida when his military reputation was being seriously questioned by the federal government.³² In reply, General Call published an open letter in the *Niles' Weekly Register* on August 19, 1837, explaining that it had taken all morning to cross the almost 260 regulars in a canoe. He wondered how Clinch expected the Florida Militia to cross in the twenty-five minutes while the battle was at its peak.³³ This exchange of public letters included much personal recrimination, particularly on Call's part, that had little or nothing to do with Clinch's professional competence. *Niles' Weekly Register* published letters to Call from Samuel Parkhill and R. G. Wellford, both Florida militia officers, supporting Call's statements.³⁴

The crux of the crossing argument was reached on January 11, 1838, when the Tallahassee *Floridian* devoted three pages to letters from General Call and his fellow militiamen, all giving essentially the same reasons why the bulk of the Florida troops had not joined in the fighting. From this correspondence, it is concluded that General Call had never given an order forbidding his men to cross the river, and that every effort, including the constant use of the one available canoe, was made to reenforce Clinch's regulars.³⁵ John Bemrose's statement that only a few of the Florida militiamen tried to cross the river appears to be true in a strict sense, but at best is misleading.³⁶ During the

31. Major General Alexander Macomb Letter, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina. Microfilm copy in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville.

32. Tallahassee *Floridian*, July 22, 1837.

33. *Niles' Weekly Register*, August 19, 1837, 395-96.

34. *Ibid.*, 397-98.

35. Tallahassee *Floridian*, January 11, 1838. See also Call Papers for the original letters and copies.

36. Bemrose, "Reminiscences of the Seminole War," 68.

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one-hour battle, only a few men could have made use of the canoe and no other practical means of crossing the river was at hand. It seems that with the exception of a potential pursuit of the Indians after the fighting, the Florida militia participated to the fullest extent possible in the Battle of Withlacoochee.