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ENCOUNTER BY THE RIVER

by FRANK LAUMER

IT WAS MID-WINTER 1835 in Florida and the United States Army was gathering its strength at Fort Drane. Until a month ago the place was called "Auld Lang Syne," a plantation devoted to raising sugar-cane on some 3,000 acres in the center of the Territory. It had gained the status of "fort" by the expedient of erecting a twelve-foot pine-log wall in a rectangle 460 yards in circumference around the main building. For ten years the owner had tended his dual duties as planter and general, but now the hue and cry was raised again and Fort Drane was headquarters for the troops in Florida. It looked like Duncan Lamont Clinch, planter and general, might have a war to fight.¹

He felt confident of winning. Twenty years of dealing with Indians in and around the Florida Territory had failed to impress him with their fighting qualities,² and he shared with most of his fellow-officers a certain irritation and even affront that these Seminoles, like incorrigible children, could and would strike out intermittently at soldiers and civilians alike-killing, burning, and then be gone like a nightmare in the dawn. But now Indian guides had assured him that a large force of warriors were encamped less than forty miles away-south of the fort and beyond the Withlacoochee River. There was a ford, they said, where troops could cross over.³ This just might be the place - a two-day march, a quick blow, and the Indian threat could be finished. The defeat which he could surely inflict in open battle would destroy Seminole resistance and secure the frontier.

1. Henry Hollingsworth, "Tennessee Volunteers in the Seminole Campaign of 1836: The Diary of Henry Hollingsworth," ed. by Stanley F. Horn, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, I (September 1942), 269-74; (December 1942), 344-66; II (March 1943), 61-73; (June 1943), 163-78; (September 1943), 236-56; John Bemrose, *Reminiscences of the Second Seminole War*, ed. by John K. Mahon (Gainesville, 1966).

2. Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 37.

3. M. M. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns* (Charleston, 1836), 83. See also facsimile edition with an introduction by O. Z. Tyler, Jr. (Gainesville, 1964).

Preparations and reinforcements were ready by the twenty-eighth of December. The next morning by eight o'clock they were on their way south in the chilling dawn,⁴ the baggage train of seven one-horse carts and a single two-horse wagon following hard on the advance guard.⁵ Six light companies of regulars, amounting to 250 men,⁶ a mixed bag of infantry and artillery made up the center under a tough little professional named Alexander C. W. Fanning, lieutenant colonel of artillery and formerly in command at Fort King. Fanning was a soldier's soldier, as regular as they come, from the time in 1808, when he reported to West Point from his home in Massachusetts, to the battle of Lake Erie, where he was made brevet major for "gallant conduct." Along the way he had lost one of his arms but none of his courage. He was a cautious, old-time Indian fighter and no man to discount the enemy.⁷

Right and left of the main column a 100 yards out rode some 700 militia,⁸ a rag-tag collection of settlers sprung to arms at the behest of their leader, Richard Keith Call, ex-regular army captain and now territorial governor of Florida and general of Florida Volunteers. They wore ordinary planter's clothing; the swords of the officers alone setting them apart from the enlisted men. Their weapons were mostly small shotguns bought from local

4. This and subsequent references to weather conditions are based upon interpolations made from weather records of the time supplied by National Weather Records Center, Asheville, N. C.; Mark M. Boatner, III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York, 1959), 820-21; Bemrose, *Reminiscences, passim*.
5. Francis Littleberry Dancy to Duncan Lamont Clinch, August 12, 1836, *Army and Navy Chronicle*, New Series, V, 385.
6. The exact number of regulars who marched with Clinch will doubtless be open to question forever. (Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 40.) The number used here is based upon a study of some fifteen sources, all of whom took part in the movement from Fort Drane to the river, yet whose estimates nearly all vary. The substance, however, seems to indicate that about 250 men left the fort, while perhaps 200 were finally engaged in battle.
7. Sources on Fanning are George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy, 1802-1890*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1891), I, 107-09 (this volume contains a biographical sketch as well as a biography of his military service); Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, 1789-1903*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1903), I, 412. See also facsimile edition (Urbana, 1965); file on George W. Gardiner (brother-in-law of Fanning), supplied by National Archives and Record Service, hereafter referred to as NARS.
8. There can be no more certainty on the number of volunteers involved than on the regulars. The study of all sources previously mentioned, however, indicates that 700 is a reasonably accurate estimate.

merchants on Call's credit-weapons entirely unfit for the field in the opinion of Call but better than nothing. In any case he had invited them into the field to defend the frontier settlements, not to carry offensive warfare into the Seminole stronghold along the Withlacoochee.⁹

Richard Keith Call was forty-three years old, married, and the father of two daughters. A one-time member of congress, he was already established as a lawyer, was considered to be a shrewd land dealer, and had attained a position of considerable power in Florida politics - he was a man of great ambition whose abilities were just a step behind. He took criticism as a personal affront, yet he rarely missed a fault in others. He was a good soldier in the popular fashion - unquestionably brave, confident, and dashing in appearance, but in a coordinated movement such as this he was not comfortable. His confidence amounted to egotism, and his feeling toward General Clinch was, at best, one of condescension. He chafed over Clinch's insistence on the long wagon-train of supplies for his regulars, maintaining reasonably enough that speed was essential and pointing out that his own men carried their rations on their backs. He neglected to notice that the regulars also carried three-days rations in their haversacks, and that the principle part of the load borne by the wagons was grain for the horses of his own volunteers. He was general of the territory's militia who could raise, organize, and march his troops 200 miles within thirteen days of the alarm, yet assure them that they would not be detained from their homes more than a few weeks. Now he was riding to battle with men whose enlistments would be up in three days. Call was running a pretty close schedule, and if the Seminoles weren't prompt his militia might miss the show.¹⁰

Fifty yards from the rear, between the main column and the flankers on the right, General Clinch and his staff rode in double file. Duncan Clinch was a man of plain habits, called by his fellow officers "the Spartan General," and at forty-eight he was rather young for his rank. He topped six feet and had a good deal of muscle in his 250 pounds. His hair was grey but there was plenty of it, and his men had a great liking for this kindly, open-

9. Richard Keith Call to Alexander Macomb, August 3, 1837, *Army and Navy Chronical*, V, 136-39.

10. The primary source on Call is a biography by Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., *Richard Keith Call: Southern Unionist* (Gainesville, 1961).

faced man, but perhaps that was not too good a thing in a general.¹¹ Trading human lives in battle comes hard to a kind man, and critical decisions can take time that you might not have. And he was very much aware that his decisions from here on might be more critical than for most generals in time of war - these rough and tumble volunteers, three-quarters of his total force, had never been mustered into the service of the general government, and their placing themselves under his orders were voluntary acts on their part and his right to exercise authority over them would cease whenever they chose to dispute that authority.¹²

South and east of the fort the vague path that was referred to as the "road" wound over low hills and around swampy hammocks, up and down, in and out, the tangled growth nourished by a thousand ponds that twinkled like coins in the winter sunlight. The main column marched two abreast, foot and horse, the banter of marching men dying out as the hours passed-their strength consumed in freeing wagons mired to their axle-trees in the sand, slogging along with sodden boots from the morasses crossed instead of skirted.¹³ The monotony of hills and ponds was broken by thickets where the road narrowed and horsemen in single file pushed through, followed by the "pioneers" - men whose task was to cut and hack the underbrush back sufficiently for the wagons to lumber through. In their flattened path, the regulars followed.

General Call was sweating out a deadline, but Clinch set an easy pace. The first day they angled southeast, then south, covering twelve miles since they left the fort-not a forced march, but not a bad day's hike. Dogs, the heralds of their journey, ran ahead and behind, giving full voice to uninhibited enthusiasm as they flushed

11. The best study of Clinch is Rembert W. Patrick, *Aristocrat in Uniform, General Duncan L. Clinch* (Gainesville, 1963). Some detail not used by Patrick is found in Bemrose, *Reminiscences*. Bemrose served during this period as secretary to the general. Additional Clinch material was supplied the author by NARS.
12. Clinch to Lewis Cass, May 13, 1837, *New York American*, July 11, 1837.
13. The course of the road was determined by a study of the original government survey of the townships involved, made during the 1840s when this road, as well as others, still served as a highway for soldiers and settlers. It was clearly indicated on these surveys. Examination of the accompanying field notes gave exact location every mile as the road crossed each section line. Transfer of the route was made by the author to modern geological survey maps which thereby indicated its course relative to modern highways, railroads, buildings, etc., making it possible to pick it up in the field at nearly any given point.

game in field and swanp, amusing the men but grating on the senses of Richard Call. He lived in an aura of drama that excluded barking dogs, and he dismissed them now, confident that they belonged only to the men of the regular army.¹⁴

The second day the force moved due south spanning a twelve-mile pine barren; it was a bleak day of stunted trees and choking dust. Slower and slower moved the column, pioneers working like demons to clear a way through the woods sufficient for the cumbersome vehicles. The wagon and the three carts, overloaded with corn for the horses, continually bogged down until finally a halt was ordered, and the burden of grain was transferred to the mounted volunteers whose mounts would after all, consume nearly the whole of it. In a quarter of an hour, Lieutenant Frances Littleberry Dancy, acting quartermaster, had completed the transfer, and now with the vehicles bearing only their load of pork and flour, the command pushed on.¹⁵

Nightfall brought them within three miles of the Withlacoochee River. Here they bivouacked, tired but keyed up, for the approaches to the river ahead were dark and shadowed places, tangled and foreboding. By night the brilliant moonlight shone across the half-mile wide camp and beyond to the lush growth that flourished in the flood land along the dark water. Fires had been forbidden, and men sat in quiet groups talking over biscuits and pork. Negro scouts had said they would find Seminoles beyond the river and doubts were mixed with fear. Some men boasted of the ease with which the Indians would be beaten, but others, apart in their tents, confided their dread of battle to their tent-mates.

Sergeant John Bemrose, hospital steward of Company D, 2nd Regiment of Artillery, a remarkably literate young man, commented later on a companion named Fisher. "[We were] feeling rather lonely although surrounded by many comrades. . . . Tomorrow we were to reach the river, and as it was believed the enemy would dispute the crossing, this poor boy was melancholy and full of dread. His forebodings caused him to be terribly afraid of a col-

14. Ellen Call Long, "History of Florida," quoted by Patrick, *Aristocrat in Uniform*, 100. The Long mss. is in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina. See also *Bemrose, Reminiscences*, 41.

15. Dancy to Clinch, August 12, 1837, *Army and Navy Chronicle*, V. 385.

lision and he passed a sleepless night. The fact of his term of service being nearly expired made him doubly anxious to be in his beloved New York again.”¹⁶

The last day of the year was heralded early, and against orders, by a bugler of the volunteers in the utter darkness before five o'clock. Leaving behind his supply wagons, five men down with intermittent fever, their attendants and guards amounting to some fifty men under Lieutenant Dancy, Clinch, Call, and the troops moved out. Incredibly rank growth blocked the last mile and more to the river bank. Nearly 900 men and over half a thousand horses cut, felt, stumbled, and forced their way through the natural abatis, finally reaching the river at dawn. Greedy vegetation clutched the sand banks and leaned over dark rushing water. The river looked ominous and deep, but worst of all, there was no ford, no shallow. The far bank was 150 feet away and Indian footprints said clearly that if the guides had mislead them on the location of the crossing, they were right about the enemy. Seminoles had passed this way not many hours before.

The dogs left behind with Lieutenant Dancy had broken loose and now rejoined the command, racketing their glad cries into the dawn. If surprise was critical and Indians were near, then Clinch had fumbled badly. The army was piling up behind him in confusion while a veritable army of dogs dashed about barking and yipping. Clinch was bewildered. Scouts reported no ford east or west. No plans had been made for boats, rafts, or bridges - no thought crossed his mind that his Indian scouts might mislead. With 1,000 men and half as many horses he had marched this far expecting to cross the river, push on into the dread “cove of the Withlacoochee,” and force a fight with Osceola and all the Seminoles he could muster on their own ground. A bold plan and daring, but somehow no one had thought to provide a means for crossing the river. Of course, there was supposed to be a ford, but to place the fate of his army on the memory of a guide, an Indian guide at that, had proven to be incredibly bad tactics. The success of the entire operation relied now on providence.

But Clinch was lucky. The far shore was growing visible through pearly mist, and there, half-sunk, was a single dugout canoe. Two officers volunteered to swim across the river to fetch the dugout,

16. Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 43.

but the general refused their offer. Perhaps there was another way -the water was cold-the men would be in danger. He debated the matter, and then allowed two men from Brevet Captain Charles Mellon's company, 2nd Artillery Regiment, to cross over. They slipped into the water and swimming strong against the current, reached the canoe, bailed it out, and paddled back to the cheers of the soldiers.¹⁷

The crossing began. With one man paddling in the bow and another in the stern, the leaky craft could carry six men with their equipment at a time. A round trip would take a good five minutes. This would come to nearly fifteen hours for the entire command to cross, but it was better than nothing. Yet if Clinch was a little weak in the logistics that a general should have mastered, his consideration for his men had built a strength that might save the day. Shedding their equipment and pulling off their boots, a few men scrambled down the bank, edged in to bone-chilling water, and began to swim. Others followed in a rush, pushing pell mell into the river, threshing and splashing their way across. It was not a brilliant move, and it might have brought disaster, for a mob of unarmed, nearly unclothed men alone on the far shore could accomplish nothing-except perhaps for the morale of an army that was having its doubts.

By the canoeload, dry but precarious, and singly as they swam, wet and cold, Colonel Fanning and his regulars began to form up on the south bank. Clothes and weapons were ferried over, and once again they began to take on the appearance of an army. Scouts reported an open field ahead, surrounded on three sides by hammock and swamp. Here, a few hundred yards from the river, the men were formed in order of battle. Fanning placed the center companies in double rank facing the hammock, the others in single rank to right and left, and prepared to repel attack. With sentries stationed at all points well out in the hammock to give the alarm if Seminoles were sighted, he allowed the men to rest on the ground while maintaining their positions and waiting for the splashing mob to follow. Dr. Richard Weightman and Dr. Hamilton with four militia surgeons were in the lee of the south bank, the slight

17. This account is from John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837), 221-22. (Facsimile edition with an introduction by Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., Gainesville, 1962.) See also Clinch to Cass, May 13, 1837, *New York American*, July 11, 1837.

rise of land between them and the troops affording some small protection for the wounded if a battle should develop.

Scouts out, the men organized and at ease, his reserves steadily building up, Fanning's short, slight figure was constantly on the move, his shrill voice ringing out energetically. Here was "a soldier of tested courage and an officer of approved skill - with full experience in . . . savage warfare."¹⁸ And that experience had brought respect for the fighting quality of American Indians. He was pretty sure what he might be facing and he knew their position was still weak - less than 200 men on hand - and at the moment the militia on the north shore might as well be home in bed. If an attack came now it would be won or lost with the men on hand.

Along the riverbank, 1,000 feet behind the deployed regulars, Clinch and a dozen officers, regular and volunteer, labored mightily to expedite the crossing of the hundreds of men and horses still crowding, jostling, and shouting on the north shore. For awhile it had looked like the volunteers were not planning to cross, voluntarily or otherwise. Even before Clinch had made the crossing, Call had told him that the men from Middle Florida would not follow.¹⁹ Sensible enough from their point of view-their enlistments would be up in a scant twelve hours and they would be leaving anyway, but it was all a little awkward for the commander. With part of his force on one side, part on the other, and the rest in the middle of the river, it was a poor time to discover that he commanded only one-quarter of the men with whom he had started out. Call's peculiar sense of honor seemed more concerned with the prompt discharge of volunteers according to schedule than supporting the commanding general on the eve of battle.

Call had ordered some of his men to construct rafts in order to float over their equipage while others were directed to drive the horses across, then the general seemed prepared, once the horses and equipage were across, to wait on the fancy of the men. Those who cared to cross in the canoe would find mounts and weapons ready, but how many would go? Already some thirty men had left, but not for the south bank-they were heading north up the road to home.²⁰

18. Gardiner file from NARS, author unknown.

19. Clinch to Cass, May 13, 1837, *New York American*, July 11, 1837.

20. John Warren to Clinch, September 25, 1837, *Army and Navy Chronicle*, V, 391-92.

Colonel John Warren, an Englishman and regimental commander of volunteers, perhaps spurred by Call's unjust accusation that these deserters were his men, approached General Clinch and asked for permission to order the crossing of his men immediately. Permission was granted - he was told to do so "as quick as he pleased." Warren gave the order for his men to load their saddles and baggage onto the rafts and to bring themselves over in the canoe.²¹

The order cut through indecision. From the ranks rode private Maxey Dill [Dell], a volunteer from Alachua County. He handed his musket and powder to the ferrymen, spurred his mount into the cold, swift current, and crossed to join whatever was coming.²² Others followed while Clinch, standing on the bank, white-haired and red-faced, led the cheers.

Downstream from the crossing an island stood in the river, more or less connected with the south bank by a ledge of rocks. It was nearly noon before Call directed Clinch's attention to the spot and suggested that with the logs lying about it might be possible to form a rough bridge to the north shore and expedite the crossing. Clinch and the other officers immediately set to work floating off the logs which were then pulled toward the north bank by Call and his men with the aid of ropes. The green log rafts which rode so low in the water as to be nearly useless were being abandoned, but between swimmers and the canoe more men were steadily added to the fighting force. A little more time and the bridge would bring them in a rush - but time had run out.

Only the fact that Clinch had been misguided had saved his troops from ambush. Two and a half miles upstream was the ford they had expected to find, guarded by 220 Seminole warriors and thirty armed Negroes since the morning of December 30. Word of the movement of the army south toward their stronghold in the cove of the Withlacoochee had been brought by scouts, and the Indians had gathered to meet and destroy the threat. Attributing to the enemy their own knowledge of the wilderness, the Seminoles assumed, reasonably enough, that even white men would cross the water where nature had provided the easiest way.²³

21. *Ibid.*, 392.

22. Williams, *Territory of Florida*, 222; John S. Lytle to Clinch, August 1837. *Army and Navy Chronicle*, V, 387-88.

23. John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1848), 92. See also facsimile edition with an introduction by John K. Mahon (Gainesville, 1964).

Only this morning had they discovered the error when the voice of a dog pack carried through the still winter air, and instantly its meaning was clear - only the incomprehensible white men would allow their presence to be announced to the world by Efa, the dog.²⁴

With the innate ability to re-evaluate the constant change of military operations that is a prime requisite of a successful guerilla fighter, Osceola was already moving downriver, Alligator and his warriors in a shifting, silent group behind him. The young leader, still in his thirties, moved with little sound through heavy growth, his buckskin leggings in strange contrast to the dark-blue double-breasted military coat that covered his hunting shirt. He moved with confidence - the coat a grim trophy of Alligator's victory over the men of Major Francis Dade's command,²⁵ gained three days before, December 28, while he himself had been lifting the scalp of General Wiley Thompson at Fort King. Two blows had been struck and two victories had been won - he marched now to win a third.

The regulars waited on the plain. Behind them, between their position and the crossing troops, lay dense palmetto scrub cut through by a narrow trail. The palmetto wrapped around their exposed position on the right, continuing in a semi-circle across

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24. The suggestion that Osceola discovered the error of his location through the sounds of the dog pack is an assumption on the part of the author, based upon the conditions that are known to have existed and upon the Seminole version of the incident as related by Sprague, *Florida War*, 92 (and taken by him from Halpather-Tustenuggee, or Alligator): ". . . the troops had come over. . . ." The author who lives on the bank of the Withlacoochee River; can verify that the sound of a dog pack will carry at least several miles along the river. Finally, the Seminole word for dog is taken from Williams, *Territory of Florida*, 277.
25. W. W. Smith, *Sketch of the Seminole War, and Sketches During a Campaign* (Charleston, 1836), 47. Smith speaks with authority of this battle, though it is not known whether he was involved in it. He states that Osceola ". . . was distinguished by several (soldiers), having on a uniform coat of our army. . . ." Accepting that this was the case it remains to determine the unwilling donor of the coat. In the action three days previous at Fort King, two officers, Thompson and Lieutenant Constantine Smith, were slain. Thompson is known to have generally worn non-regulation clothing and so Smith would have been the likely source here, but no mention is made in contemporary reports of missing garments. With Major Dade, however, were seven other officers, and contemporary reports indicate that much clothing was taken from the bodies. Hence, some officer here would seem to have lent his coat to the Seminole.

their front to fade into a dense, dry hammock on their left, some forty yards out. Below the trees the vines and brush looked like a barrier-actually it acted as a screen. Sentries stationed in the hammock stood in underbrush waist and chest high, watching and listening. Until they were almost upon them the guards were unaware of the savage warriors who had crept silently among them carrying high-quality Spanish-made rifles.²⁶ When they saw the danger, it was almost too late. Scrambling back toward the clearing, they shouted out the warning - "Indians! Indians!"

Captain Charles Mellon, a twenty-year veteran, was the first to spot a Seminole. Musket thrown to his shoulder, cheek against the walnut stock, he squeezed off the first round of the battle, the charge of black powder throwing a one-ounce lead ball rattling through the brush.²⁷ His shoulder was thrown backward by the violent kick as he stared through bluish-grey smoke searching for the enemy. The Indian war-whoop, a low growling sound that rose to a wild and terrifying scream, shattered the air as the underbrush suddenly bloomed with dreadful apparitions.²⁸ Red men and black, wrapped in crazyquilt patterns of bright colored cotton trade cloth and hung about with silver pendants, beads, and plumes, were everywhere, blasting into the soldiers with leveled rifles, reloading and blasting again. The savages sighted in through the long grass, rose, aimed poorly, fired and fell to the left, leaving only a flash and a puff of smoke for a target. The smooth-bore, seven-pound musket of the troopers could only be expected to hit a target the size of a man once in three shots, even on a target range²⁹ - this was no practice and the targets here rose and fell impossibly fast, filling the air with slugs of lead that could strike and maim and kill.

Fanning's voice rose above the blast and crackle of firing to order a charge, and the men, glad of any change in their exposed position, moved in ones and twos across the narrow field toward

26. *Army and Navy Chronicle*, I, 178; Woodburn Potter, *The War in Florida* (Baltimore, 1836), 174; Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 51.

27. Gustavus S. Drane to Clinch, August 23, 1837, *Army and Navy Chronicle*, V, 385-86.

28. Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 52.

29. An informative article on the characteristics of the musket and other weapons is given in the *Army and Navy Chronicle*, V, 201.

the enemy. It hardly constituted a charge³⁰ for Fanning, with artilleryman's care, had placed men in double ranks-fine for defense, but not too good in a charge. More like an armed mob than trained soldiers, their ranks thinned and staggered by the wounded who lay among them, the little army straggled forward, some walking, others in a sensible crouch, while men dropped behind any growth in their path to reload before moving on. Officers moved with the men, the brothers William and Campbell Graham, both West Pointers, urging on their separate companies; William, the older, already severely wounded but still at the head of his command.

Experience had shown that Indians rarely stood up to a charge, even this kind of charge, usually falling back, slipping right and left in single fragments, not beaten, but so dispersed that their volume and firepower were reduced and assuming once more their basic role (and most effective), as guerillas. But it was beginning to look like this disorganized advance was running into something solid.³¹ Not an Indian was giving way. They continued to rise and fall, fire and reload, but now the range was shorter, and the fire more effective. Nearly into the scrub, soldiers were stopping, moving back. Officers shouted orders, motioning men on with their swords and knowing the taste of panic as the advance faltered, for a retreat would bring the savages in a rush and battle would turn into execution.

At the river Clinch heard the firing and the shouting, and without a word he was in the saddle and spurring his mount to a gallop, followed by his aide, Major John Lytle. They came up behind the left of the line, meeting Lieutenant Thomas Ridgely, wounded and bleeding badly. Clinch reined in, inquired if the wound were serious, urged Ridgely to see to his injury, and then galloped onto the field. Ahead, his command had crossed the field, still in double rank, had reached the scrub line and was stopped. Clinch pulled up in the rear, took in the double ranks-men stumbling into one another, those in the rear inevitably shielding themselves from fire by those in front-rose in the saddle and bellowed

30. This appears to be a case of artillery tactics being used instinctively by an artillery officer when battle conditions tended to preclude their success. Better that Fanning had heeded the example of George Washington in the battle before Fort Duquesne eighty years earlier.

31. This unexpected firmness would seem to be attributable not only to the previous victories over Dade and Thompson, but to the power of command exercised by Osceola and gained by him through the planning and execution of those victories.

out an order, "Extend-extend and charge the enemy!"³² The men were giving and receiving continuous heavy fire, with scarcely more than one platoon officer left to a company, and three of those badly wounded. But slowly the shift to right and left was effected, thinning but extending the line, presenting less of a target, the men taking confidence from Clinch's presence with them.

The Seminoles, seeing the lengthening of the line, made a move against the far right flank, coming in at them from the scrub and concentrating their fire. Now it was the Indians who were at a disadvantage; never trained to work in close support of one another, they could not hold up against men who had been trained for just that. Captain Lemuel Gates, commanding one of the two companies under attack, ordered his men to fix bayonets, and at their head, he charged "in handsome style," stopping the push of the Indians, yet he was not quite strong enough to press the advantage. Captain Mellon and his company joined the attack, and together with Gates drove the enemy back, pursuing them through the scrub, troopers firing, shouting curses, sweating under heavy coats in the cold bright sunlight, while dark, half-clad Seminoles scuttled back from brush to tree, firing as they withdrew, but their surge of power on this flank done.

So the right flank was held, insuring the safety of the crossing in the rear where some 200 horses of the volunteers waited patiently for their riders, and where doctors and wounded men had no defense. During the flank attack Clinch had sent orders for Call to bring up his volunteers to plug the hole and help carry the counterattack, but Gates and Mellon returned to the line and still not a volunteer was in sight.

Now the focus of battle was on the front where unauthorized word to retire had been given. All along the line men were falling back, retreating slowly across the open field toward the river, doubt and uncertainty suddenly clutching them, pushing them back, beating them, where the screaming enemy in front had not. They had crossed the river only as the vanguard of an army-had fought hard and held their place this long, but with their jack-in-the-box

32. George Henry Talcot to Clinch, August 28, 1837 *Army and Navy Chronicle*, V, 389; Campbell Graham to Clinch, August 23, 1837, *ibid.*, 387.

tactics, the Indians seemed to be getting stronger all the time—through the brush and smoke it was beginning to look like a thousand of them, while frantic glances to the rear confirmed that there was no help there. In a set-up like this, no one could blame a man for giving ground.

General Clinch may have appeared to his men “a fine grey-haired old man . . . beaming with kindness,”³³ but he was still a general - and he was in as tight a spot as he had ever been. Gone now were any hopes for pushing on and taking an easy victory. Instead his regulars were fighting for their very lives against three-to-one odds - and losing. The killing could not be stopped with kindness. One bullet had torn through his cap, another through his left sleeve as he held the reins, and his horse was staggering from wounds in neck and hip.³⁴ Deliberately he dismounted, made his way through the center of his faltering lines, stood in no-mans-land between his troops and the enemy. Officers and men alike could hear his voice above the crash of battle, “My brave fellows-be firm. I am determined to win (this) battle or die on the field. It shall either be death or victory.” To any soldier who might consider a third alternative, he warned, “I shall shoot down any man I see fall back.” Captain Campbell Graham recalled later that, “after this address, I could plainly see in the countenances of those near me, a more determined resolution.”³⁵

The command to charge was given once more, and the men rose in a spirited rush, pushing across the plain, firing as fast as muzzles could be loaded. Captain Graham was struck in the face, the bullet fracturing his jawbone and smashing his teeth. Clinch, remounted nearby, urged him to go to the rear, but he refused, and he moved forward with his men. Minutes later he was struck again, this time in the hip. Now he had to turn back, giving command of the company to a Sergeant Johnson who was less seriously wounded. Officers on horseback, most of them wounded, rode in front of and among the men, motioning with their swords and shouting encouragement to their dwindling commands.

33. Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 59.

34. *Niles' Weekly Register*, XLIX (February 6, 1836), 394; Daniel F. Blanchard, *An Authentic Narrative of the Seminole War* (Providence, 1836), 19.

35. Graham to Clinch, August 23, 1837, *Army and Navy Chronicle*, V, 387.

The fighting force was little more than 150 now, over thirty men disabled and either on their way to the rear for treatment or lying on the field.

At the river the medical officers did their best for the men. According to Sergeant Bemrose, "the wounds were dangerous and vitally situated, . . . in the lungs, head, face, and abdomen, but owing to the smallness of the balls only one out of more than 100 cases (and having possible 250 wounds) caused death."³⁶

Upriver, beyond the wounded, Colonel Warren had gathered his few volunteers together and was urging others to cross in support of General Clinch and his regulars. The sounds of battle could be heard distinctly, yet strangely enough General Call had formed some 600 of his men up on the north shore facing the woods behind them, their backs to the river and the battle that raged beyond. He had given orders that no more men should cross the river under peril of their lives - surely one of the strangest orders ever given by a military leader. It is true that there existed, at least theoretically, a possibility of Indian attack on the north bank, but the danger on the south bank was a fact, made painfully clear by the steady stream of wounded and bleeding men gathering on the far shore. In spite of orders, Acting First Lieutenant Oran Baxter of Company B and Major James G. Cooper of the 4th Volunteer Regiment swam the river and joined Colonel Warren.³⁷

Now for the first time Indians were seen along the river itself. A dozen of them had emerged from the swamp further up the south bank to fire across the water at the volunteers bunched in full view. Warren immediately threw his small detachment forward, charging at full tilt, pausing only to fire and reload. The Seminoles may have had some idea of outflanking the main body of troops around this left wing, but in any case Warren's quick action drove them back, breaking them up, to disappear in the cover of the swamp. Colonel Warren, together with Major Cooper, reformed

36. Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 51.

37. This paragraph covering one of the most controversial events in connection with the battle calls for specific verification. This has been found attested to in substance by five regular officers, one volunteer officer, and two volunteer enlisted men, and specifically by two volunteer officers (Colonel John Warren and Acting First Lieutenant Orem Baxter) and three enlisted volunteers in the *Army and Navy Chronicle*, V, 385-92. Francis Littleberry Dancy, a regular army officer, gave a testimonial, but he was not actually involved in the fighting.

his men and moved inland along the narrow trail to join the left flank of the regulars, adding the only body of volunteers that was to engage the foe.³⁸

Beyond Warren and his men the line of regulars was strung out to the right, swinging in an arc across the clearing and back toward the river on the far flank, their line shaped like a horse-shoe, the curve toward the enemy and the open end toward the river but not quite resting on it. Not a bad defensive position - both wounded and reserves were protected to some extent by the flanks with a safe avenue left for reinforcements to approach and bolster the fighting line - reinforcements that were desperately needed.

For the curved line was caving in once more. Fighting from an exposed position, outnumbered, and with inferior weapons, the men had given it everything they had. Many were down, but other wounded still stood their places, blood and dirt mixed with the sweat and tears of giving and taking human life, yellow teeth clamped as tight as traps between bearded lips. One man, Private Woods, took a bullet in the side of his head and dropped like a stone, only to rise moments later, wrap a handkerchief around his head and take his place in line. Another man, his collar soaked with blood from a neck wound, stood his ground. A second shot smashed one hip, but still he fought. Finally, with a third bullet in his shoulder he was forced to join the wounded that moved to the rear. In Company D the men found a strange haven of safety near the person of Lieutenant John Graham, a young West Pointer. He was a big man, standing well above the men about him, but wherever he moved the lead balls flew less thickly. Osceola had counted him as a friend in better days and had given orders that he was not to be fired upon.³⁹

But courage alone was not enough. Osceola and Alligator were making the best of a favorable situation, fighting on their home ground, and with plenty of cover. Osceola was frequently visible, his blue military coat the target of every soldier who saw him. His shrill voice rose above the crash of continual firing as he encouraged his warriors, and he was seen time and again, firing, lowering his rifle, coolly wiping it out, reloading, and firing again, bullets smacking the trees behind him but seemingly missing the con-

38. *Ibid.*

39. Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 52.

stant taunt of the captured coat. Everything was in his favor now except time-his was a hit-and-run group and they had been hitting for nearly an hour; they wouldn't stick much longer. Their unity in battle was a thin facade created by their hatred of the whites and maintained by Osceola's leadership. Each man was fighting his own battle, moving and firing at his own discretion, and when each had had enough, he would leave the same way. Again the Indians had pushed the white soldiers back - they were thirty or forty yards into the clear field on which they stood - and it looked like this time they might break.

It looked that way to Clinch, too. From horseback he ordered a halt to the men drifting slowly back across the field, and his command was echoed by officers up and down the line. Clinch, at the left of the line and in view of Colonel Warren and his volunteers, dismounted for the second time, and carrying his sword moved through the men to the front, and deliberately exposed himself to the enemy while talking calmly to the men, encouraging and animating them, moving in what seemed to the soldiers to be a storm of bullets as the Indians recognized him. Training and experience overcame exhaustion and fear. By the time another horse had been brought and the general had remounted, every man able to stand was moving back to the fight.

The watching warriors had had enough. The incredible white men were coming back for more. The sight of them alone was terrible-a ragged line of bearded devils, long guns with fixed bayonets leveled before them belching lead and smoke as though there was no end to it, a thousand buttons twinkling in the sunlight like evil eyes-deadly men who leaked blood with no more concern than if it were water and who kept fighting as though the Great Spirit itself were leading them. No man could hope to win against such men as these and only a fool would continue to try. Far better to let them have it now and save lives and strength for the next encounter.

Quickly now, thought and word leaping from man to man, and with rifles silent, the Seminoles slipped back from the advancing line, disinterested in futile gestures, for the land could not be held by heroics, and women and children could not be cared for by dead warriors. Gradually the soldiers' firing lessened and faded out, and men straightened, one by one, to stare across the bush and

branches, cut up by more than 1,000 rounds of ball and buckshot. Somehow it brought little joy. Torn flesh and broken bones were suddenly painful and going back was all that mattered.

And what did it mean, this encounter by the river? Men, red and white, had done their best for what they believed - they had fought and bled and had been hurt to the limits of courage and beyond, and nothing had been gained. The fear and the killing had proven only that in the obscure scale of war justice has no weight-that the strong, whether in numbers, time, or power, can overcome the weak.

Osceola, recovering from a wound in his arm,⁴⁰ sent word to General Clinch a month later, and, while not quite meaning to but with terrible perception, he foretold the years ahead and the end to come: "You have guns, and so have we - You have powder and lead, and so have we - your men will fight, and so will ours, till the last drop of Seminole's blood has moistened the dust of his hunting ground."⁴¹ It was tragic but it was true.

40. Sprague, *Florida War*, 93. W. W. Smith, in his *Seminole War*, 47, also mentions a wound, but states it was in the hand.

41. Cohen, *Notices of Florida*, 126.