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**MISSOURI VOLUNTEERS
AT THE BATTLE OF OKEECHOBEE:
CHRISTMAS DAY 1837**

by JOHN K. MAHON

THE Battle of Lake Okeechobee, which occurred on December 25, 1837, was the last large pitched battle of the Second Seminole War. Casualties among United States forces totaled 138, including twenty-six killed. Florida's native hostiles lost only eleven to fourteen men.¹ Nonetheless, army commander Zachary Taylor and his superiors hailed a great victory, and early reports of the "severe and bloody battle" claimed that "the Indians were driven in every direction."² The effect on the general's military and eventual political career was substantial. As noted by a Taylor biographer, "His victory in the only large battle of the conflict went far in earning him distinction and it shielded him from public notice of his lack of other successes."³

The Battle of Okeechobee thus played a significant role in the career of a man who would become a hero of the Mexican War and president of the United States. Taylor's ability to claim credit for the victory, however, depended in part on an assertion that volunteer soldiers from Missouri broke and ran at the opening of the engagement and that army regulars then were required to bear the brunt of the fighting. While the general's version of events was supported by others present and by his superiors, controversy flared over the allegations. Taylor, in turn, was accused of misrepresentation and opportunism.

While debate has swirled for a century and a half over the Battle of Okeechobee, one document that provides important information concerning the affair scarcely has been noticed. En-

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1. John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842* (Gainesville, 1967), 228.
2. *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier*, January 19, 1838.
3. K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 94.

titled "Journal of the Committee on the Florida Campaign; the Senate and the House of Representatives (of Missouri) to investigate the battle fought December 1823 [sic] in Florida by the Regular Army and the Missouri Volunteers," the work was the product of a committee consisting of six members of the Missouri house of representatives and three members of its senate. Prior to release of its report, the panel held hearings from December 14, 1838, to February 5, 1839, at which it interviewed nineteen men who had served in the Missouri regiment in Florida.⁴

The journal documents a conflict characteristic of United States military history, the tension between regulars and citizen soldiers whenever the two served together. That conflict, ultimately involving volunteers from Florida and other states, as well as from Missouri, affected the strategy of the Second Seminole War, established patterns of interaction between soldiers and civilians along the nineteenth-century Florida frontier, and, according to one recent work, perhaps presaged Civil War-era divisions among the inhabitants of the south Florida peninsula.⁵

The detailed story of the Battle of Okeechobee has been presented well elsewhere.⁶ A brief review of events leading up to and including the fight may be helpful, however.

The year 1837 was one of serious depression in the United States. Money was scarce, and jobs were hard to come by. Given that situation, a Missouri man could find it highly desirable to enlist for volunteer service in Florida's Seminole War. Payment was offered in coin at the rate of \$8.00 per month, and an

4. The journal, a manuscript, is in the collection of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, and hereafter is cited as "Journal." The P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History at the University of Florida, Gainesville, has a xerographic copy. Most of that copy is available on microcopy 567, roll 202, B69, 1840, entitled "Series of Resolutions and related papers adopted by the General Assembly of the State of Missouri relating to the Conduct of the Missouri Volunteers during the Florida Campaign, 1837-1839 against the Seminole Indians."

5. James M. Denham, "'Some Prefer the Seminoles': Violence and Disorder Among Soldiers and Settlers in the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 70 (July 1991), 38-54. As to Civil War-era divisions, see Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (Orlando, 1991), 53-55, 63-66, 109-10, 115-16.

6. See particularly J. Floyd Monk, "Christmas Day in Florida, 1837," *Tequesta* 38 (1978), 5-38; and Willard Steele, *The Battle of Okeechobee*, Robert S. Carr, ed. (Miami, 1987).

additional forty cents was paid per day for the volunteer's horse. So attractive was the offer that Colonel Richard Gentry was able to raise 600 mounted men, who were organized by him into six companies and two battalions. Gentry was a veteran of the War of 1812, during which he charged with Colonel Richard M. Johnson in the assault that broke the British line in the decisive Battle of the Thames. He also had seen combat in the Black Hawk War. Gentry was an important political leader in Missouri and a long-time ally of United States Senator Thomas Hart Benton.⁷

The road to Florida began for Gentry's Missourians on the Mississippi River. They shipped down that stream to an embarkation point at New Orleans. Yellow fever raging there, however, caused a number of the men to turn back. A difficult crossing of the Gulf of Mexico then resulted in the deaths of all but 150 of the volunteers' horses. Faced with having to walk inland in Florida's swamps and forests, more of the men elected to return home. When Colonel Zachary Taylor led his combined force out of Fort Gardner and toward Lake Okeechobee on December 19, only 227 Missourians were with him. They were organized into two units, a regiment of 180 men and a forty-seven man detachment known as "Morgan's Spies." Taylor's force also included 727 enlisted men of the regular army, some pontooners and pioneers, and about seventy Indians. Thirty-five officers were listed with the army, but as many as forty-two may have been present.⁸

The Seminoles and Mikasukis who opposed Taylor carefully had selected the ground upon which they were to fight. The site was a dry hammock, composed of giant cypresses and other large trees, with an understory of bushes for use as cover for their line of well-armed gunmen. Lookouts and snipers swaddled themselves in moss in the tall trees. The hammock ran for about

7. At the time of the Battle of Okeechobee, Richard M. Johnson was vice president of the United States. William R. Gentry, *Full Justice: The Story of Richard Gentry and his Missouri Volunteers in the Seminole War* (St. Louis, 1937), 5-6.

8. Fort Gardner was located on the Kissimmee River some sixty or seventy miles east of Fort Brooke (present-day Tampa). Zachary Taylor to Thomas Sidney Jesup, January 4, 1838, "General Taylor's Report of Okeechobee." Senate Doc. No. 227, 25th Cong., 2nd sess., 2 (hereafter, "General Taylor's Report"); Gentry, *Full Justice*, 12; Steele, *Battle of Okeechobee*, 4; Monk, "Christmas Day," 8.

300 yards, and facing its front was a swamp of three-quarters of a mile in length. The quagmire was impassable for horses and nearly so for men. Water and mud stood waist deep, while sawgrass and other reeds reached upward for five or six feet. The defenders had notched trees in the hammock for gun rests and for twenty yards ahead had cut down reeds to open a field of fire. Lake Okeechobee lay a few hundred yards to the rear.⁹

Taylor presented his battle plan to his officers on Christmas Eve. It involved an attack directly across the width of the swamp at the prepared enemy position. When Colonel Gentry alternatively suggested a flanking movement, the general insulted him by asking if he was afraid to be in the van of the frontal attack. Gentry found the insult difficult to brook, but, because he could not challenge his superior officer, the colonel simply stated that he would follow orders.¹⁰

Taylor placed the Missourians in the front line; 132 of them were aligned there, with an additional twenty-one men left on dry ground to hold the horses. Forty yards to their rear were positioned 175 men of the Sixth United States Infantry, Colonel Alexander Thompson commanding. Forty additional yards behind were 160 men of the Fourth United States Infantry with Colonel William Foster in command. Yet another formation was placed as a reserve 100 yards further back, composed of 173 men of Taylor's own regiment, the First United States Infantry. They were formed in the charge of Colonel William Davenport. Taylor directed the Missourians to advance as long as they could bear the fire; they then were to draw back behind the regulars, reform, and return to the fray.¹¹

The battle was fought on Christmas Day 1837, and the earliest substantive account of the details of the action was contained in Taylor's report to Major General Thomas Sidney Jesup, dated January 4, 1838. In that report Taylor harshly criticized the Missouri volunteers:

9. Monk, "Christmas Day," 16; Steele, *Battle of Okeechobee*, 9; Electus Backus, "Diary of a Campaign in Florida in 1837-1838," *Historical Magazine* (1866), 280; "General Taylor's Report," 5.
10. Gentry's great-grandson argued 100 years later that, had the flanking proposal come from a lowly second lieutenant of the regular army, Taylor at least might have considered it. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 18; Steele, *Battle of Okeechobee*, 9; Monk, "Christmas Day," 14.
11. The Missouri companies were much reduced. Two of them had sixteen enlisted men; one, nineteen; another, twenty-two; and Morgan's Spies, thirty-three. Monk, "Christmas Day," 18; "General Taylor's Report," 5.

[O]n reaching the borders of the hammock the volunteers and spies received a heavy fire . . . which was returned by them for a short time, when their gallant commander fell mortally wounded; they mostly broke, and instead of forming in the rear of the regulars as had been directed, they retreated across the swamp to their baggage and horses, nor could they be again brought into action as a body, although efforts were made repeatedly by my staff to induce them to do so. . . .

So far as the regular troops are concerned, no one could have been more efficiently sustained than I have been. . . .

The Missouri volunteers under the command of Colonel Gentry and Morgan's spies who formed the first line and of course were the first engaged, acted as well or even better than troops of that description generally do; they received and returned the enemy's fire with spirit for some time when they broke and retired, with the exception of Captain Gilliam and a few of his company and Lieutenant Blakey, also with a few men who joined the regulars and acted with them until after the close of the battle. . . . The volunteers and spies having as before stated, fallen back to the baggage, could not again be formed and brought up to the hammock in anything like order; but a number of them crossed over individually and aided in conveying the wounded across the swamp to the hammock, among whom was Captain Curd and several officers whose names I do not now recall.¹²

Taylor did not immediately release the details of his report to the surviving Missouri volunteers. On February 8, 1838, and prior to learning of its criticisms, eight of the Missouri officers who had been in the battle expressed in writing their high regard for Taylor and his regular officers. The same day Taylor, still in the field at Fort Bassinger with the Missourians, replied lauding the volunteers for their willingness to leave home to cope with the bad climate, privations, and danger in Florida. By April 5, however, other officers of the Missouri force belatedly had read the report. They were furious. "We cannot separate and depart in peace to our homes," they pronounced, "until we have

12. "General Taylor's Report," 5-8.

made an effort to vindicate the memory of the dead." The officers accused Taylor not only of misusing the Missouri regiment but also of misrepresenting what it had done in the battle.¹³

The Missouri perspective also was expressed in the United States Senate on February 14, 1838. Senator Thomas Hart Benton argued that the volunteers had been treated badly in the action and in the official report. "They had been put in the forefront of the battle," he stated, "which was not their place . . . and they had been censured for misconduct, when applause and not censure was due them." Benton continued: "It was clear that the Volunteers had had a desperate service assigned them. They were to go forward as a forlorn hope to draw the fire of the hidden enemy and to absorb their bullets. It was service for regulars and not volunteers. It was a service for disciplined troops and not for citizens fresh from the plough, who might have courage but who could not have discipline. No allowance was made for undisciplined troops who had faced a terrible danger - who had lost their commander - who had suffered severely - who had their killed and wounded friends to take care of - who had discretionary orders to retreat - and who saw two hundred regulars idle as a reserve." Benton asked for the documents needed to carry out an official inquiry.¹⁴

Despite their commitment to refuting Taylor's charges, Senator Benton and the Missouri officers could do little. Their anger, however, served to keep the issue alive and to encourage the creation by the Missouri legislature of the joint committee of inquiry. That panel commenced its work on December 14, 1838. Its approach in examining witnesses basically was to pose three questions: 1) What opportunity have you had of becoming acquainted with the conduct of the Missouri volunteers? 2) Were you in the Battle of Okeechobee? 3) Have you read Colonel Taylor's report of the battle and do you find the conclusions related to the Missouri volunteers valid?¹⁵ Of the nineteen men who appeared to answer these questions, two had been among those who praised Taylor on February 8 and four had been among the twelve who criticized him two months later.

13. H. H. Hughes, William Henry Russell, et al., to Taylor, February 8, 1838, Senate Doc. No. 356, 25th Cong., 2nd sess., 6; *ibid.*, "Statement of officers of the Missouri Volunteers," April 4, 1838, 1-2.

14. *Congressional Globe*, 25th Cong., 2nd sess., VI, 182-83.

15. "Journal," 2; Steele, *Battle of Okeechobee*, 19.

The testimony given to the committee established that Taylor had flared at Colonel Gentry several days prior to the battle. On December 23 the colonel had crossed his force to the east side of the Kissimmee River, taken a position there, and sent word for Taylor to come to his support. Taylor came, but his intention was to deride, not support, the Missourian. Thomas Bryan, the volunteers' quartermaster, described the general's conduct toward Gentry as violent and abusive. Lieutenant Israel Hendley of Morgan's Spies also overheard the interchange and had the same reaction to it as did Bryan. Dr. I. A. Hannah, surgeon for the Missourians, watched Gentry struggle to accept this treatment then turn and walk away from his commander.¹⁶

Four of the committee's witnesses overheard the final conversation between Taylor and Gentry. The colonel, dying of a wound received in the battle, requested that Taylor come to his tent. There, he implored the general to see that the Missourians received full justice as to their role in the engagement. First Lieutenant Charles B. Rogers, also wounded and lying a few yards away, heard Taylor's reply. "You have born the brunt of the engagement," Rogers recalled Taylor saying, "when I intended it otherwise. . . . You should have fallen back to the rear of the infantry." Gentry, although in fearful pain, responded that the volunteers were not as well supported by the regulars as they had had a right to expect. Taylor conceded, according to witnesses, that the Missourians had fought well and promised to do them full justice.¹⁷

Six of the nineteen witnesses resented the way in which the general had used them in the approach march. If a hammock needed to be reconnoitered or a swamp waded, they recalled, Taylor ordered the Missourians to dismount and accomplish the task. In camp he placed them in the most exposed areas because, felt the six veterans, the general desired to spare his regulars. Three of the men also claimed that they received rations and forage inferior to the supplies issued to the regulars.¹⁸

16. Testimony of Thomas V. Bryan, Israel R. Hendley, and I. A. Hannah, "Journal," 10, 26, 42.

17. Testimony of Thomas V. Bryan, John Reed, Charles B. Rogers, and James Drake, "Journal," 13, 50, 56, 63.

18. Testimony of Cornelius Gilliam, H. G. Parks, Israel R. Hendley, I. A. Hannah, John Sconce, Charles B. Rogers, R. H. Gentry, James Drake, and James Chiles, "Journal," 6, 18, 25, 44, 47, 56, 59, 61, 66.

The testimony clarified numerous details about the battle. According to witnesses, the Missourians— as the front line— entered the swamp first. They advanced in column for the first 200 yards and then, almost as smoothly as professionals, deployed into a skirmish line with two-yard intervals between each man. Until they were within 100 yards of the hammock, they fought only mud, water, and sawgrass. Then the Indians discharged their first volley and killed or wounded 20 percent of the volunteers. The survivors squatted in the sawgrass and returned the fire; however, they had no visible targets.¹⁹

A volunteer officer soon was sent back to the regulars with a plea for close support, but he was informed that they— the regulars— could not move without direct orders from Taylor.²⁰ Shortly thereafter, the contingent from the Sixth Infantry, who were positioned in the second line, began advancing and shooting. The volunteers thus were caught in a crossfire between the Indians and the army. The regulars remained standing while they fired, and, according to some volunteers, this fact caused casualties among the infantrymen to soar to 43 percent of their number. By comparison, the Missourians lost 25 percent of their men; the Fourth Infantry, 10 percent; and the First Infantry, General Taylor's own, only four wounded.²¹

Each of the nineteen witnesses denied that their regiment had broken and fled. The only volunteers to return to the dry ground, they insisted, had carried there the wounded. Where regular army discipline might have required otherwise, the Missourians could not leave their wounded friends perhaps to be scalped or to drown in the shallow water. The withdrawal, however, was to the dry land and not as their orders required to the swamp behind the advancing regulars, but the volunteers denied that any regular officer— or any other officer— had ordered or even urged them to reform and rejoin the action.²²

Six of the individuals who testified before the committee considered Taylor's report merely an egregious extension of the contempt that professional soldiers had shown toward the volun-

19. Monk, "Christmas Day," 20.

20. Testimony of Robert Raphael, Charles B. Rogers, and James Chiles, "Journal," 14, 57, 68.

21. "Statement of the Officers" in "General Taylor's Report," 2; Gentry, *Full Justice*, 22.

22. "Report of the Subcommittee, Feb. 1, 1839" in "Journal," 98-99.

teers throughout the campaign. Captain Gilliam quoted the general as stating that the volunteers always were too far forward when not needed there and too far back when needed up front. Robert Raphael reported that, when he was wading to the rear because he was wounded, he was halted by Colonel Davenport who called him a “[d]amned cowardly volunteer.” Raphael cursed Davenport and threatened to shoot him, words and action that no regular would have dared to chance.²³ Had the Missourians enjoyed access to the journal of regular-army lieutenant Robert Christie Buchanan, their suspicions would have been confirmed. His entry for New Years Day 1838 noted: “I am more and more convinced every day that volunteers are worthless as troops.”²⁴

The feelings of some of the volunteers were harsher yet. H. G. Parks, Colonel Gentry’s adjutant, asserted that Taylor intentionally had misrepresented the Missourians’ actions. Lieutenant Hendley agreed. The general, Hendley said, never had bothered to check with a single Missouri officer to get a volunteer perspective of the battle. Captain John Sconce referred to Taylor’s report using words such as “maliciously” and “actuated by prejudice.” One member of Morgan’s Spies, W. Claude Jones, testified that Taylor’s pen had been “[d]ipped in malice and guided by prejudice.”²⁵

Jones generally was critical of Taylor. All the colonel’s military movements, he stated, were snail-like; moreover, the commander really did not know, according to Jones, the position of the foe even though friendly Indians could have located it for him and also found a far better route for the attack. Captain Chiles argued that an attack straight across the swamp into a prepared position— that is, Taylor’s plan of battle— did not make good sense. Chiles also had overheard Taylor threaten to hang a captured Indian if he gave false information, after which the captive warned that 2,000 warriors awaited the army. The actual number, unknown to Taylor, was closer to 400.²⁶ Chiles and Sconce quoted Taylor as acknowledging, “I would not have

23. Testimony of Cornelius Gilliam and Robert Raphael, “Journal,” 6; Steele, *Battle of Okeechobee*, 20.

24. Frank White, Jr., ed., “A Journal of Lieutenant R. C. Buchanan During the Seminole War,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 29 (October 1950), 150.

25. Testimony of H. G. Parks, Israel R. Hendley, James Chiles, and W. Claude Jones, “Journal,” 20, 27, 68, 87-88.

26. Testimony of W. Claude Jones and James Chiles, “Journal,” 68-69, 74, 78.

fought the battle so soon had it not been to gratify public opinion."²⁷

Upon the completion of its hearings, the Missouri committee of inquiry approved five resolutions and sent them to the state's legislature. That body passed them in 1839 and demanded that the governor lay them before the president with a request for a court of inquiry. The resolutions read:

1. That the conduct of the Missouri Volunteers and Spies was such as could only be expected from good soldiers and brave men.

2. That so much of Col. Taylor's report which charges that the Missouri Volunteers and Spies mostly broke and fell back to the baggage, and that repeated efforts of his staff could not rally them, is proved to be unfounded, not to say *intentionally false*, and that so much of said report which states that the Regular troops were joined with Capt. Gillam [sic] and Lt. Blakey with a few men, but not until they had suffered severely, is correct in this— that Gillam and Blakey were in advance of the Regular troops during most of the fight, and *never in the rear*.

3. That so much of said report which states that the Volunteers and Spies behaved themselves as well or better than troops of that description usually do, is not so much a compliment to them as *a slander upon citizen soldiers generally*.

4. That Col. Taylor in his report has done manifest injustice to the Volunteers and Spies, and that said report was not founded upon facts as they occurred.

5. That a commanding officer who *wantonly* misrepresented the conduct of men who gallantly sustained him in battle, is *unworthy a commission* in the Army of the United States.²⁸

What then is the truth about the conduct of the Missouri volunteers? Lieutenant Buchanan agreed with Taylor that they broke and fled. Interestingly, though, Taylor did not notice Buchanan in his report, although the lieutenant commanded

27. Testimony of James Chiles and John Sconce, "Journal," 50, 69.

28. "Journal," 103-04; also printed in Gentry, *Full Justice*, 26-27.

two companies. Buchanan later complained vociferously, knowing as he did that promotion and pay in the regular service depended upon favorable reports, especially when related to combat.²⁹

The War Department, of course, stood by Taylor. Secretary Joel R. Poinsett wrote the following to the Senate: “[N]o blame can rightly be attached to [Taylor] . . . for placing the volunteers in the front rank. . . . The enemy occupied a position that could not be turned and from which he could only be driven by the utmost efforts of the regular force. The task of storming such defenses could not be left to volunteer troops, nor would an experienced officer rely on irregulars to form the reserve, as on the steady conduct of this force the fate of the action depends.”³⁰

Latter-day disinterested scholars are not in agreement. Floyd Monk declares in his account of the battle that the Missourians were routed. “The record stands,” he concluded, “just as Taylor wrote it.”³¹ Willard Steele, however, laid no stress on the withdrawal of the volunteers in his 1987 narrative. Instead, he concentrated on Taylor’s faulty tactics and insisted that far better attack routes were available than the one chosen by the general.³²

The one conclusion evident from the record is that, as with American combat history in all wars, the testimony of citizen soldiers and of regulars is, as often as not, irreconcilable. That surely is the case with the interrelated questions of Zachary Taylor, the Missouri volunteers, and the Battle of Okeechobee!

29. White, “Journal of Lieutenant R. C. Buchanan,” 146; Monk, “Christmas Day,” 7.

30. Secretary of War to United States Senate, February 20, 1838, War Office Reports to Congress, Number 4, National Archives, Washington, DC.

31. Monk, “Christmas Day,” 22-25.

32. Steele, *Battle of Okeechobee*, 9-10.