

BATTLE AT THE KISSIMMEE RIVER

Colonel Zachary Taylor to Brigadier-General R. Jones, Adjutant General U.S. Army

Headquarters First Brigade
Army south of the Withlacoochee, Florida, Fort Gardner, 4 January 1838

On the 19th ultimo I received, at this place, a communication from Major General Jesup, informing me that all hopes of bringing the war to a close by negotiation, through the interference or mediation of the Cherokee delegation, was at an end, Sam Jones, with the Mickasukies, having determined to fight it out to the last, and directing me to proceed, with the least possible delay, against any portion of the enemy I might hear of within striking distance, and to destroy or capture him.

After leaving two officers and an adequate force for the protection of my depot, I marched the next morning, with twelve days' rations, (my means of transportation not enabling me to carry more,) with the balance of my command, consisting of Captain Munroe's company of the 4th artillery, total 35 men; the 1st infantry, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Davenport, 197 strong; the 4th infantry, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Foster, 274; the 6th infantry, under Lieutenant Colonel Thompson, 221; the Missouri volunteers, 180; and Morgan's spies, 47; pioneers, 30; pontoniers, 13, and 70 Delaware Indians, making a force, exclusive of officers, of 1,032 men. The greater part of the Shawnees having been detached, and the balance refusing to accompany me, under the pretext that a number of them were sick, and that the remainder were without moccasins.

I moved down the west side of the Kissimmee, in a southeasterly course, towards Lake Istopoga, for the following reasons: 1. Because I knew that a portion of the hostiles were to be found in that direction; 2. If General Jesup should fall in with the Mickasukies, and drive them, they might attempt to elude him by crossing the Kissimmee, from the east to the west side of the peninsula, between this and its entrance into Okeechobee, in which case I might be near at hand to intercept them; 3. To overawe and induce such of the enemy who had been making propositions to give themselves up, and who appeared very slow, if not to hesitate, in complying with their promises on that head, to surrender at once; and lastly, I deemed it advisable to erect block-houses and a small picket work on the Kissimmee for a third depot, some forty or fifty miles below this, and obtain a knowledge of the intervening country, as I had no guide who could be relied on, and by this means open a communication with Colonel Smith, who was operating up the Caloosahatchee, or Sanybel river, under my orders.

Late in the evening of the first days' march I met the Indian chief Jumper, with his family and a part of his band, consisting of fifteen men, a part of them with families, and a few negroes, in all sixty-three souls, on his way to give himself up, in conformity to a previous arrangement I had entered into with him; they were conducted by Captain Parks and a few Shawnees. He (Parks) is an active, intelligent half-breed, who is at the head of the friendly Indians, both Shawnees and Delawares, and who I had employed to arrange and bring in Jumper and as many of his people as he could prevail on to come in. We encamped that night near the same spot; and the next morning, having ordered Captain Parks to join me and take command of the Delawares, and having despatched Jumper in charge of some Shawnees to this place, and so on to Fort Frazer, I continued my march, after having sent forward three friendly Seminoles to gain intelligence as to the position of the enemy.

About noon on the same day I sent forward one battalion of Gentry's regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Price, to pick up any stragglers that might fall in his way; to encamp two or three miles in advance of the main force; to act with great circumspection, and communicate promptly any occurrence that might take place in his vicinity important for me to know. About 10 o'clock PM I received a note from the colonel stating that the three Seminoles sent forward in the morning had returned; that they had been at or near where Alligator had encamped, twelve or fifteen miles in his advance, that he (Alligator) had left there with part of his family four days before, under the pretext of separating his relations, &c., from the Mickasukies, preparatory to his surrendering with them; that there were several families remaining at the camp referred to who wished to give themselves up, and would remain there until we took possession of them, unless they were forcibly carried off that night by the Mickasukies, who were encamped at no great distance from them.

In consequence of this intelligence, after directing Lieutenant Colonel Davenport to follow me early in the morning with the infantry, a little after midnight I put myself at the head of the balance of the mounted men, joined Lieutenant Colonel Price, proceeded on, crossing Istopoga outlet, and soon after daylight took possession of the encampment referred to, where I found the inmates, who had not been disturbed. They consisted of an old man and two young ones, several women and children, amounting in all to twenty-two individuals. The old man informed me that Alligator was very anxious to separate his people from the Mickasukies, who were encamped on the opposite side of the Kissimmee, distant about twenty miles, where they would fight us. I sent him to Alligator, to say to him, if he was sincere in his professions, to meet me the next day at the Kissimmee, where the trail I was marching on crossed, and where I should halt.

As soon as the infantry came up, I moved on to the place designated, which I reached late that evening, and where I encamped; about 11 o'clock PM the old Indian returned, ringing a very equivocal message from Alligator, whom he stated he had met accidentally; also, that the Mickasukies were still encamped where they had been for some days, and where they were determined to fight us.

I determined at once on indulging them as soon as practicable. Accordingly, the next morning, after laying out a small stockade work for the protection of a future depot, in order to enable me to move with the greatest celerity, I deposited the whole of my heavy baggage, including artillery, &c.; and having provisioned the command, to include the 26th, after leaving Captain Munroe with his company, the pioneers, pontoniers, with eighty-five sick and disabled infantry, and a portion of the friendly Indians, who alleged that they were unable to march further, crossed the Kissimmee, taking the old Indian as guide, who had been captured the day before, and who accompanied us with great apparent reluctance in pursuit of the enemy, and early the next day reached Alligator's encampment, situated on the edge of a cabbage-tree hammock, in the midst of a large prairie; from the appearance of which, and other encampments in the vicinity, and the many evidences of slaughtered cattle, there must have been several hundred individuals.

At another small hammock, at no great distance from Alligator's encampment, and surrounded by a swamp, impassable for mounted men, the spies surprised an encampment, containing one old man, four young men, and some women and children. One of the party immediately raised a white flag, when the men were taken possession of and brought across the swamp to the main body. I proceeded with an interpreter to meet them. They proved to be the Seminoles, and professed to be friendly. They stated that they were preparing to come in. They had just slaughtered a number of cattle, and were employed in drying and jerking the same. They also informed me that the Mickasukies, headed by A-bi-a-ka, (Same Jones,) were some ten or twelve miles distant, encamped in a swamp, and were prepared to fight.

Although I placed but little confidence in their professions of friendship, or their intentions of coming in, yet I had no time to look up their women and children, who had fled and concealed themselves in the swamp, or to have encumbered myself with them in the situation in which I then was.

Accordingly, I released the old man, who promised that he would collect all the women and children and take them in to Captain Munroe, at the Kissimmee, the next day. I also dismissed the old man who had acted as guide thus far, supplying his place with the four able warriors who had been captured that morning.

These arrangements having been made, I moved, under their guidance, for the camp of the Mickasukies between two and three PM. We reached a very dense cypress swamp, through which we were compelled to pass, and in which, our guides informed us, we might be attacked. After making the necessary dispositions for battle, it was ascertained that there was no enemy to oppose us. The army crossed over and encamped for the night, it being late. During the passage of the rear, Captain Parks, who was in advance with a few friendly Indians, fell in with two of the enemy's spies between two or three miles of our camp, one on horseback, the other on foot, and succeeded in capturing the latter. He was an active young warrior, armed with an excellent rifle, fifty balls in his pouch, and an adequate proportion of powder. This Indian confirmed the information which had previously been received from the other Indians, and, in addition, stated that a large body of the Seminoles, headed by John Co-hia, Co-a-coo-chee, and no doubt Alligator, with other chiefs, were encamped five or six miles from us, near the Mickasukies, with a cypress swamp and dense hammock between them and the latter.

The army moved forward at daylight the next morning, and after marching five or six miles reached the camp of the Seminoles on the border of another cypress swamp, which must have contained several hundreds, and bore evident traces of having been abandoned in a great hurry, as the fires were still burning, and quantities of beef lying on the ground unconsumed.

Here the troops were again disposed of in order of battle, but we found no enemy to oppose us, and the command was crossed over about 11 a.m., when we entered a large prairie in our front, on which two or three hundred head of cattle were grazing, and a number of Indian ponies. Here another young Indian warrior was captured, armed and equipped as the former. He pointed out a dense hammock on our right, about a mile distant, in which he said the hostiles were situated and waiting to give us battle.

At this place the final disposition was made to attack them, which was in two lines; the volunteers under Gentry and Morgan's spies to form the first line in extended order, who were instructed to enter the hammock, and in the event of being attacked and hard pressed, were to fall back in the rear of the regular troops, out of the reach of the enemy's fire. The second line was composed of the 4th and 6th infantry, who were instructed to sustain the volunteers, the 1st infantry being held in reserve.

Moving on in the direction of the hammock, after proceeding about a quarter of a mile, we reached the swamp which separated us from the enemy, three-fourths of a mile in breadth, being totally impassable for horse, and nearly so for foot, covered with a thick growth of saw-grass, five feet high and about knee deep in mud and water, which extended to the left as far as the eye could reach, and to the right to a part of the swamp and hammock we had just crossed, through which ran a deep creek. At the edge of the swamp all the men were dismounted, and the horses and baggage left under a suitable guard. Captain Allen was detached with the two companies of mounted infantry to examine the swamp and hammock to the right, and in case he should not find the enemy in that direction, was to return to the baggage, and in the event of hearing a heavy firing, was immediately to join me.

After making these arrangements I crossed the swamp in the order stated. On reaching the borders of the hammock the volunteers and spies received a heavy fire from the enemy, which was returned by them for a short time, when their gallant commander, Colonel Gentry, fell, mortally wounded; they mostly broke, and instead of forming in rear of the regulars, as had been directed, they retired 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.

The enemy, however, were promptly checked and driven back by the 4th and 6th infantry, which, in truth, might be said to be a moving battery; the weight of the enemy's fire was principally concentrated on five companies of the 6th infantry, which not only stood firm, but continued to advance until their gallant commander, Lieutenant Colonel Thompson, and his adjutant, Lieutenant Centre, were killed, and every officer, with one exception, as well as most of the non-commissioned officers, including the sergeant major and four of the orderly sergeants, killed and wounded of those companies; when that portion of the regiment retired a short distance and were again formed, one of the companies having but four men left untouched.

Lieutenant Colonel Foster with six companies, amounting in all to 160 men, gained the hammock in good order, where he was joined by Captain Noel, with the two remaining companies of the 6th infantry, and Captain Gillam, of Gentry's volunteers, with a few additional men, and continued to drive the enemy for a considerable time, and by a change of front separated his line, and continued to drive him until he reached the great Lake Okeechobee, which was in rear of the enemy's position, and on which their encampment extended for more than a mile. As soon as I was informed that Captain Allen was advancing, I ordered the 1st infantry to move to the left, gain the enemy's right flank and turn it, which order was executed in the promptest manner possible; and as soon as that regiment got in position, the enemy gave one fire and retreated, being pursued by the 1st, 4th, and 6th, and some of the volunteers, who had joined them, until near night, and until these troops were nearly exhausted, and the enemy driven in all directions.

The action was a severe one, and continued from half-past twelve until after 3 PM, a part of the time very close and severe. We suffered much, having twenty-six killed, and one hundred and twelve wounded, among whom are some of our most valuable officers. The hostiles probably suffered, all things considered, equally with ourselves, they having left ten dead on the ground, besides, doubtless, carrying off many more, as is customary with them, when practicable.

As soon as the enemy were completely broken, I turned my attention to taking care of the wounded. To facilitate their removal to my baggage, where I had ordered an encampment to be formed, I directed Captain Taylor to cross over to the spot and employ every individual which he might find there in constructing a small foot-way across the swamp. This, with great exertions, was completed in a short time after dark, when all the dead and wounded were carried over in litters made for that purpose, with one exception, a private of the 4th infantry, who was killed and could not be found.

And here, I trust, I may be permitted to say that I experienced one of the most trying scenes of my life; and he who could have looked on it with indifference his nerves must have been very differently organized from my own. Besides the killed, among whom were some of my personal friends, there lay one hundred and twelve wounded officers and soldiers, who had accompanied me 145 miles, most of the way through an unexplored wilderness, without guides, who had so gallantly beat the enemy, under my orders, in his strongest position, and who had to be conveyed back, through swamps and hammocks, from whence we set out, without any apparent means of doing so. This service, however, was encountered and overcome, and they have been conveyed thus far, and proceeded on to Tampa Bay on rude litters constructed with the axe and knife alone, with poles and dry hides, the latter being found in great abundance at the encampment of the hostiles. The litters were conveyed on the backs of our weak and tottering horses, aided by the balance of the command, with more ease and comfort to the sufferers than I could have supposed, and with as much as they could have been in ambulances of the most approved and modern construction.

The day after the battle we remained at our encampment occupied in taking care of the wounded and in the sad offices of interring the dead; also in preparing litters for the removal of the wounded, and collecting, with a portion of the mounted men, the horses and cattle in the vicinity belonging to the enemy, of which we found about one hundred of the former, many of them saddled, and near three hundred of the latter.

We left our encampment on the morning of the 27th for the Kissimmee, where I had left my heavy baggage, which place we reached about noon on the 28th. After leaving two companies and a few Indians to garrison the stockade, which I found nearly completed on my return by that active and vigilant officer, Captain Munroe, 4th artillery, I left there the next morning for this place, where I arrived on the 31st, and sent forward the wounded next day to Tampa Bay with the 4th and 6th infantry; the former to halt at Fort Fraser, remaining here myself with the 1st, in order to make preparations for taking the field again as soon as my horses can be recruited, most of which have been sent to Tampa, and my supplies in a sufficient state of forwardness to justify the measure.

In speaking of the command, I can only say that, so far as the regular troops are concerned, no one could have been more efficiently sustained than I have been from the commencement of the campaign, and I am certain that they will always be willing and ready to discharge any duty that may be assigned them.

To Lieutenant Colonel Davenport, and the officers and soldiers of the 1st infantry, I feel under many obligations for the manner in which they have on all occasions discharged their duty; and, although held in reserve and not brought into battle until near its close, it evinced, by its eagerness to engage and the promptness and good order with which they entered the hammock when the order was given for them to do so, (is the best evidence,) that they would have sustained their own characters, as well as that of the regiment, had it been their fortune to have been placed in the hottest of the battle.

The 4th infantry, under their gallant leader, Lieutenant Colonel Foster, was among the first to gain the hammock and maintain this position, as well as driving a portion of the enemy before him until he arrived on the borders of Lake Okeechobee, which was in their rear, and continued the pursuit until near night. Lieutenant Colonel Foster, who was favorably noticed for his gallantry and good conduct in nearly all the engagements on the Niagara frontier during the late war with Great Britain by his several commanders, as well as in the different engagements with the Indians in this Territory, never acted a more conspicuous part than in the action of the 25th ultimo. He speaks in the highest terms of the conduct of Brevet Major Graham, his second in command, as also the officers and soldiers of the 4th infantry who were engaged in the action. Captain Allen, with his two mounted companies of the 4th infantry, sustained his usual character for promptness and efficiency. Lieutenant Hooper, of the 4th regiment, was wounded through the arm, but continued in the field, at the head of his company, until the termination of the battle.

I am not sufficiently master of words to express my admiration of the gallantry and steadiness of the officers and soldiers of the 6th regiment of infantry. It was their fortune to bear the brunt of the battle. The report of the killed and wounded, which accompanies this, is more conclusive evidence of their merits than anything I can say. After five companies of this regiment, against which the enemy directed the most deadly fire, were nearly cut up—there being only four men left uninjured in one of them, and every officer and orderly sergeant of those companies, with one exception, were either killed or wounded—Captain Noel, with the remaining two companies, his own company, “K”, and Crossmen’s, “B,” commanded by Second Lieutenant Woods, which was the left of the regiment, formed on the right of the 4th infantry, entered the hammock with that regiment, and continued the fight and the pursuit until its termination. It is due to Captain Andrews and Lieutenant Walker to say they commanded two of the five companies mentioned above; and they continued to direct them until they were both severely wounded and carried from the field—the latter receiving three separate balls.

The Missouri volunteers, under the command of Colonel Gentry, and Morgan 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 Gillam 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, but not until they had suffered severely; the commanding officer of the volunteers, Colonel Gentry, being mortally wounded while leading on his men and encouraging them to enter the hammock and come to close quarters with the enemy; his son, an interesting youth, eighteen or nineteen years of age, sergeant major of the regiment, was severely wounded at the same moment.

Captain Childes, Lieutenants Rogers and Flanagan, of Gentry’s regiment, acting Major Sconce, and Lieutenants Hase and Gordon, of the spies, were wounded while encouraging their men to a discharge of their duty.

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 were Captain Curd, and several other officers whose names I do not now recollect.

To my personal staff, consisting of First Lieutenant Quartermaster Hill, of the 2d, and First Lieutenant George W. Griffin, 6th infantry—the latter aide-de-camp to Major General Gaines, and a volunteer in Florida from his staff—I feel under the greatest obligations for the promptness and efficiency with which they have sustained me throughout the campaign, and more particularly for their good conduct and the alacrity with which they aided me and conveyed my orders during the action of the 25th ultimo.

Captain Taylor, commissary of subsistence, was ordered to join General Jesup, at Tampa Bay, as chief of the subsistence department, and was ordered by him to remain with this column until he, General Jesup, joined it. Although no command was assigned Captain Taylor, he greatly exerted himself in trying to rally and bring back the volunteers into action, as well as discharging other important duties which were assigned him during the action.

Myself, as well as all who witnessed the attention and ability displayed by Surgeon Satterlee, medical director on this side the peninsula, assisted by Assistant Surgeons McLaren and Simpson, of the medical staff of the army, and Drs. Hannah and Cooke, of the Missouri volunteers, in ministering to the wounded, as well as their uniform kindness to them on all occasions, can never cease to be referred to by me but with the most pleasing and grateful recollections.

The quartermaster’s department, under the direction of that efficient officer Major Brant, and his assistant, Lieutenant Babbitt, have done everything that could be accomplished to throw forward from Tampa Bay, and keep up, supplies of provisions, forage, &c., with the limited means at their disposal; Assistant Commissaries Lieutenants Harrison, stationed at Fort Gardner, and McClure, at Fort Fraser, have fully met my expectations in discharge of the various duties connected with their department, as well as those assigned them in the quartermaster’s department.

This column in six weeks penetrated 150 miles into the enemy’s country, opened roads, and constructed bridges and causeways, when necessary, on the greater portion of the route, established two depots, and the necessary defences for the same, and finally overtook and beat the enemy in his strongest position. The results of which movement and battle have been the capture of thirty of the hostiles; the coming in and surrendering of more than 150 Indians and

negroes, mostly the former, including the chiefs Ou-la-too-che, Tus-ta-nug-gee, and other principal men; the capturing and driving out of the country 600 head of cattle, upwards of 100 head of horses; besides obtaining a thorough knowledge of the country through which we operated, a greater portion of which was entirely unknown, except to the enemy. Colonel Gentry died a few hours after the battle, much regretted by the army, and will be, doubtless, by all who knew him, as his State did not contain a braver man or better citizen.

It is due to his rank and talents, as well as to his long and important services, that I particularly mention Lieutenant Colonel A. R. Thompson, of the 6th infantry, who fell in the discharge of his duty, at the head of his regiment. He was in feeble health, brought on by exposure to this climate during the past summer, refusing to leave the country while his regiment continued in it. Although he received two balls from the fire of the enemy early in the action, which wounded him severely, yet he appeared to disregard them, and continued to give his orders with the same coolness that he would have done had his regiment been under review, or any other parade duty. Advancing, he received a third ball, which at once deprived him of life. His last words were, "keep steady, men, charge the hammock—remember the regiment to which you belong." I had known Colonel Thompson personally only for a short time, and the more I knew of him the more I wished to know, and had his life been spared, our acquaintance, no doubt, would have ripened into the closest friendship. Under such circumstances, there are but few, if any, other than his bereaved wife, mother, and sisters, who more deeply and sincerely lament his loss, or who will longer cherish his memory, than myself.

Captain VanSwearengen, Lieutenant Brooke, and Lieutenant and Adjutant Centre, of the same regiment, who fell on that day, had no superiors of their years in the service and in point of chivalry, and ranked among the first in the army or nation. Besides their pure and disinterested courage, they possessed other qualifications, which fitted them to fill the higher grades of their profession, which, no doubt, they would have attained and adorned had their lives been spared. The two former served with me on another arduous and trying campaign, and on every occasion, whether in the camp, on the march, or in the field of battle, discharged their various duties to my entire satisfaction.

I have the honor to be, sir, with great respect, your most obedient servant,

American State Papers, Military Affairs (25th Congress, 2nd Session), VII:986–989.