

The Florida Quagmire

When the U.S. Army attempted to force the Seminole Indians from their land, it quickly became bogged down in an unwinnable war.

by Floyd B. Largent, Jr.

In the history of the United States, few conflicts have proven as frustrating as the one that erupted in 1835. It lasted for years, was enormously costly in both monetary and human terms, and was fought in a near-jungle setting where the environment itself was hostile. The opponent was a determined native population that used guerrilla tactics to bring a better-equipped American army to a standstill. The locale was the marshes and swamps of Florida. The enemy was the region's Seminole Indians.

The Second Seminole War began in late 1835, when the U.S. Army launched a presidentially mandated campaign to remove the Seminoles to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. The army expected little trouble, since other local tribes had already gone with minimal difficulty. It came as something of a shock when the Seminoles rose in a series of preemptive first strikes in late December, smashing military detachments and destroying settlements throughout Florida. The Seminoles then took the war to the Everglades, where they settled in for a drawn-out guerrilla conflict.

President Andrew Jackson, who had sparked the campaign with the Indian Removal Act in 1830, made no secret of his displeasure at the army's inability to contain and remove a few thousand aborigines. Even with 50 women under his command, the president said, he could "whip every Indian that had ever crossed the Suwannee." Those who

failed to show immediate results were swiftly removed. In April 1836, Major General Winfield Scott, the third commander since December, was relieved and eventually appeared before a military court of inquiry. His replacement was Florida territorial governor Richard Call, a civilian and friend of the president. Call fared no better than Scott, and his failure to end the Seminole problem also ended his friendship with Jackson.

Call's replacement was Brevet Major General Thomas Sidney Jesup, who took command on December 9. Born in Virginia and raised in Ohio, Jesup had joined the army as a second lieutenant in 1808, at age 20. Although he had served with distinction in the War of 1812, much of his subsequent career was spent managing supplies and logistics; he'd been the army's quartermaster general since 1818, when he received his brigadier's star. Still, he was an experienced Indian-fighter, having suppressed a Creek uprising in Alabama the previous May.

A physically imposing man with white hair and piercing eyes, Jesup was well-regarded by his troops, who felt he made a sincere effort to take good care of them. Indeed, one of his first acts as commander was to insist that the president supply him with sufficient men and matériel to complete his task, which Jackson agreed to do. Jesup then proceeded to construct a string of fortifications, including Forts Pierce, Lauderdale, Dallas, Jupiter, Meade, and Myers. In addition, he surrounded him-

self with competent subordinates, such as future notables William Harney and Zachary Taylor. Ultimately, Jesup proved the most effective of all the commanders who waged the war against the Seminoles, mainly because of his decision to reject the traditional rules of warfare.

Jesup inherited a royal mess and a stubborn enemy. The Seminoles were a nation of survivors. Their society had been midwifed by war, and fighting was second nature to them. They were a vigorous hybrid of remnant cultures who, decimated by European diseases, constant warfare, and encroaching settlement, had united for survival around 1700.

The Seminoles flourished unmolested for nearly a century. By 1800, they had adopted elements of Euro-American life and were accepted as one of the Five Civilized Tribes, a label they shared with their cousins the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek. Eventually, however, their willingness to harbor runaway slaves—some kept as slaves, others not—led to conflict with the United States. Southern law held that even the descendants of runaway slaves belonged to the original owners, and slave traders' raids on the "Negro Seminole" became common after 1800. The Seminoles retaliated with a series of attacks against white settlements north of the U.S.-Spanish border, and were answered by punitive U.S. Army expeditions in 1816 and 1818, led by future president Andrew Jackson. Hun-

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dreds of Indians were killed, and many of their darker brethren were sold into slavery during this First Seminole War.

In February 1819, Spain ceded the Florida peninsula to the United States. Over the next decade the U.S. government used military force and legal chicanery to maneuver the Seminoles off their land and onto a marginal reservation in central Florida. In 1830 President Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which directed the army and other appropriate agencies to begin transferring the Five Tribes to Indian Territory, using force if necessary. "It seems now to be an established fact that [Indians] can not live in contact with a civilized community and prosper," Jackson told Congress.

The Seminoles were the last to go. The Payne's Landing and Fort Gibson treaties, signed by some chiefs under questionable circumstances in 1832 and 1833, required them to vacate their lands within three years and merge with the Creeks in Indian Territory. The Seminoles refused to abide by the treaty terms. In 1835, when their initial non-violent protests against the treaty failed to have an effect, 5,000-plus Seminoles began to fade quietly into the dank green refuge of the Everglades.

One of the Indians most opposed to removal was an ex-Creek named Osceola. Indian Agent Wiley Thompson described him as "a bold, manly and determined young chief," an opinion shared by others who encountered him. Born around 1804 in Alabama of a Creek mother and a white father, he was known by whites as Billy Powell. Osceola was noted for his fierce temper, and his attitude towards the United States was not improved when

Thompson, provoked by some unspecified insulting behavior, had him thrown into irons in June 1835. Osceola regained his freedom only after promising to support removal, but, enraged by Thompson's action, he was merely biding his time until he could seek revenge.

Tension mounted throughout the remainder of the year. In October, 1,500 Seminoles gathered and formally elected to resist removal. They further declared that any Seminole accepting the American removal plan would be killed. One of the first to die was Charley Emathla, the most influential of the chiefs supporting removal. Osceola himself carried out the execution on November 26 as Charley Emathla was returning home after selling cattle in preparation for the move. Osceola shot him dead, then scattered the proceeds from the cattle sale on the ground.

The Seminoles struck hard in late December. On the 28th, Osceola's band ambushed and killed agent Thompson and a friend as they strolled outside Fort King. They also killed the fort's sutler and two others. The Indians then dashed 40 miles south to join the force that had obliterated Major Francis Dade's 108-man detachment on the Withlacoochee River near present-day St. Petersburg. Osceola and his men arrived, to their chagrin, after the battle was over and Dade's force had been wiped out almost to the man. On New Year's Eve, Osceola's 250 warriors defeated a force of more than 700 soldiers under the command of General Duncan Clinch on the banks of the Withlacoochee River. Though Clinch's casualties were light, Osceola forced the general into a confused retreat.

Throughout 1836 the army reeled from a series of Seminole onslaughts. The course of the war began to change, however, after Jesup assumed command. During the first few months of 1837, his forces won several skirmishes and persuaded several bands to emigrate with minimal bloodshed. Captured Indians were also sent west, although the darker-skinned among them were enslaved.

Jesup found a worthy enemy in the Seminoles. He admired them; they were remarkably courageous and fierce, and even their women and children fought

when necessary. He was quite aware of the origins of the conflict; as he noted early on, "This . . . is a Negro, not an Indian, war." By mid-1837, he had returned approximately 100 Black Seminoles "to their rightful owners." Simultaneously, he respected the black warriors he encountered and insisted that they be treated honorably.

Jesup made no attempt to hide his mixed feelings about the war. It was his opinion that Indians had been unfairly persecuted since colonial times. He believed that the Seminole War was "an unholy cause." But Jesup's first loyalty lay with the army he had so faithfully served for nearly three decades. He prided himself on being, first and foremost, a soldier.

Jesup understood the realities of the campaign. "If I have at any time said aught in disparagement of the operations of others in Florida," he wrote, ". . . I consider myself bound, as a man of honor, solemnly to retract it." The public and his superiors, however, demanded quick results. Seeing no way to defeat the Indians fairly, Jesup began to consider other tactics.

General Thomas Sidney Jesup believed that the conflict was "a negro, not an Indian war."

To Jesup's credit, he first attempted to negotiate an honorable end to the conflict. The Seminoles were hungry and weary of being hunted. The war held no real future for them, and they believed their enemy was as eager as they to see it end. By 1837, most were willing to consider emigration. That spring, Jesup invited Seminole tribe members to a council at Fort Mellon, east of Tampa, in anticipation of a forthcoming settlement. The natives proved amenable to a discussion of removal, and Jesup agreed that "their negroes, their bona fide property, shall accompany them West. . . ." In March Jesup was so confident of a settlement that he reported to his superiors, "The war is over."

An unfortunate series of events proved his statement premature. Some Seminoles still lurked in the swamps, and Jesup offended those assembled at Fort Mellon by threatening to import bloodhounds from Cuba to roust out their defiant kin. Then measles broke out in the Seminole camps, further slowing the influx of refugees. Finally, any lasting hope of peace was shattered after Jesup made a secret arrangement with the more willing chiefs to have runaway slaves returned to their owners.

The situation deteriorated even further with the arrival of the slave catchers, who began raiding the Seminole camp in May, capturing any Black Seminoles they could locate and infuriating the Indians. Osceola in particular opposed returning the runaways. Negotiations became increasingly fragile. On the night of June 2, under the influence of Osceola and others, the Seminoles faded back into the forest. The war was on again.

Jesup had lost credibility, and nothing he promised would convince the Seminoles to emigrate willingly. Both Congress and Jackson wasted no time in heaping abuse upon him. Embittered by the criticism, disheartened by the stubbornness and sheer ruthlessness of the enemy, Jesup decided that total war was necessary. "If the war be carried it must necessarily be one of extermination," he declared. "We have, at no former period in our history, had to contend with so formidable an enemy."

Immediately thereafter, Jesup asked to be relieved of his command, as he wanted no part in a war of extermination. The army initially refused his request, although on June 22 Alexander Macomb, the army's commanding general, offered to allow him to withdraw from Florida if he still cared to do so. By then, Jesup had changed his mind. The criticism had so wounded his pride that he was determined to stay on and redeem itself.

What Jesup couldn't achieve by negotiation he elected to accomplish by guile and he began the practice of seizing Seminole leaders under a truce flag, capturing a chief named Wildcat that way in September. He also began threatening captives with death if they didn't

lead him to Seminole hideouts. Weary and desperate, the Seminoles continued to negotiate despite Jesup's dishonorable tactics.

Jesup now set his sites on Osceola. In October the chief and a number of his followers arrived under a flag of truce to parley in a camp near Fort Peyton. Jesup sent General Joseph M. Hernandez to talk with them. According to a report he later submitted to President Jackson, Jesup said he told Hernandez. "You have force sufficient to compel obedience, and they must move instantly."

Hernandez ordered Lieutenant James A. Ashby and his men to surround the encampment during the talks. At a pre-arranged secret signal from Hernandez, Ashby was to send in his troops to make the capture. Perhaps Osceola, who was ill, suspected something. At the start of the conference he said he was too choked up to speak and asked a chief named Coa Hadjo to talk for him. Shortly afterwards Ashby's soldiers moved in and captured the Indians without firing a shot. Osceola was sent to Fort Moultrie in South Carolina, where he died of a throat infection in January 1838. The chief was buried there with full military honors—but minus his head. According to John K. Mahon's *The Second Seminole War*, the doctor who treated Osceola cut off the chief's head, embalmed it, and kept it at home. "If one of his three small sons was disobedient," Mahon wrote, "the doctor would hang the head on the child's bedstead for the night."

The war chief was lionized as a hero by both the press and the public, while Jesup suffered ridicule and derision as the "personification of treachery throughout most of the civilized world." Nevertheless, when a delegation of Cherokee persuaded Seminole chief Micanopy and others to travel to Fort Mellon to parley, Jesup ordered the Seminoles arrested, even though the Cherokee had promised them safe conduct.

By the end of 1837, Jesup had achieved a series of major victories against the Seminoles and had collected and removed some 2,000 individuals. In mid-January he personally led his troops into combat for the first time at the Bat-

tle of Lockahatchee. Like most of the fighting, it was a confused skirmish in a region of swamps and marshes. Forced to dismount and move forward on foot, Jesup led volunteers from Tennessee into battle, only to have a Seminole bullet strike him in the face, knocking off his glasses and leaving him with a minor wound. "Waving the Tennesseans on, the general carefully picked up the pieces of his glasses, and then moved to the rear," wrote Mahon.

The last significant American victory occurred at the Battle of Okeechobee on Christmas Day, 1837, when troops under Zachary Taylor overwhelmed a force of 400 warriors led by chiefs Alligator, Arpeika, and Wildcat, who had managed to escape from prison in St. Augustine. By this time Jesup was tired of the whole war, and following a parley with Seminole chief Tuskegee and other warriors, he wrote to Secretary of War Joel Poinsett to propose that the Seminoles be allowed to remain in southern Florida. "We have committed the error of attempting to remove them when the lands were not required for agricultural purposes; when they were not in the way of white immigrants; and when the greater portion of their country was an unexplored wilderness, of the interior of which we were as ignorant as of the interior of China," Jesup reasoned. Poinsett refused. When Jesup received word from Washington, he acted in a characteristic manner by arresting Tuskegee and others under a flag of truce.

Despite the losses of their chiefs, the Seminoles in the swamps of southern Florida continued to skirmish with the army. Finally, to Jesup's palpable relief, he was relieved of command at his own request in April 1838 and replaced by Zachary Taylor. Officially, the Seminole War dragged on for nearly five more years. The last of the Seminoles were never flushed out of their hiding places, and in early 1843 the U.S. Army simply gave up and called off the war. Hostilities continued to flare up occasionally between whites and the remaining Seminoles, most significantly in December 1855. This conflict continued until 1858, when a group of western Seminoles was able to persuade the hostile bands to emigrate. Yet the last of the

Florida Seminoles never stopped resisting white encroachment, and peace wasn't officially negotiated until 1934, nearly one hundred years after the war began.

During the course of the Second Seminole War, the United States removed 3,800 Seminoles to Indian Territory, but at a terrible price. The war lasted for an interminable seven years, 1,500 American soldiers died, and the cost has been estimated at between \$20,000,000 and \$60,000,000—significantly more than the United States paid for the entire Louisiana Purchase only 52 years earlier. Worst, perhaps, was the national embarrassment caused by the war. The U.S. Army, in its first real showing since the War of 1812, was shocked at the ferocity of the Seminole assault and never recovered from its initial surprise. The result was an immense loss of face, internationally and domestically, which could have been avoided or at last postponed.

While he was certainly no angel, neither was Thomas Jesup the demon he was painted as in his day. An unpretentious and politically unastute soldier, Jesup knew that by following the

“civilized rules of war” he would accomplish little and earn the wrath and disdain of his superiors. If he used the natives' tactics against them or invented his own, he would be seen as a monster. Nothing he could do, moral or immoral, was right.

Jesup's failure in the Seminole War haunted him for the rest of his life. In the 22 years after his participation, he received no further promotions. His brevet as major general, awarded in 1828 for long and meritorious service, was never confirmed. After relinquishing the Florida command, Jesup returned to his post as quartermaster general, where he remained until his death in 1860. The Ohioan had served in the army for 52 years, all but 10 of those years in the same post—a record in the U.S. Armed Services. He was instrumental in the subsequent advancement of the western frontier by supervising the construction of a variety of new outposts, including Kansas' Fort Riley, and the refurbishment of existing posts, such as Fort Gibson in Oklahoma. He also oversaw the logistics in the Mexican War of 1845–47, another unpopular war of the era. His high level of competence as quar-

termaster is unimpeachable, and in 1986 he became one of the first four individuals to be inducted into the U.S. Army's Quartermaster Hall of Fame.

Despite his tactical and moral failings, Thomas Jesup was clearly an intelligent, thoughtful man who well understood his enemy and the venue in which they fought. When he counseled the nation's leaders that theirs was an ill-advised war, they ignored him. When he warned his superiors of what it would take to win a war against the Seminoles, they too ignored him. President Jackson and his successors would have been better served if they had listened to their quartermaster, for, in the end, history has vindicated his viewpoint. Sufficient proof of this can be found in the fact that there are still Seminoles in Florida, and their culture is stronger and more vibrant than ever.

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