



This year, 2017, is an important year of anniversaries for the Seminole Tribe of Florida. It marks the 200th anniversary of the beginning of the Seminole Wars, in 1817. It is the 60th anniversary of federal recognition of the Seminole Tribe of Florida as a government and a business enterprise. Over this year, this column will alternately explore key events of the Seminole Wars and highlight the great advances of the Tribe during the last 60 years. This month we will feature a battle that took place on Christmas Day, 180 years ago along the shores of Lake Okeechobee.



Guy LaBree's depiction of the Battle of Okeechobee. A print of this painting is in the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum's collection. (Courtesy photo)

Many history books say the December 25, 1837 Battle of Okeechobee was won by the U. S. Colonel Zachary Taylor. They certainly spun it to the press that way. This battle is often credited with giving him the fame to rise in the ranks of the military and ultimately become president.

Seminole historians see the story very differently. Colonel Taylor's reason for claiming victory rests solely on the Seminoles leaving the battlefield first. However, this ignores several aspects of the U.S. government's war with the Seminoles and the battle itself.

The Seminole warriors' battles against the U.S. are some of the finest examples of guerilla warfare tactics. The warriors recognized they were vastly outnumbered. However, they knew the landscape, had better training, and had better guns. There was no reason to stand in formation and fight like Europeans. A surprise attack and melting back into the scenery produced far more devastating effects and preserved more Seminole lives.

There is good reason to believe the Seminoles led Colonel Taylor's men to their chosen battlefield by Lake Okeechobee. Taylor's men conveniently "captured" a Seminole warrior the day before, a man who uncharacteristically gave no fight and pointed the troops to the spot. The landscape the troops traversed to reach the Seminoles was 5' tall sawgrass, muddy, uneven, and full of dying vegetation. But, the area directly in front of a stand of trees was mown and clear of saplings. After the battle, Taylor's men found notches in the tree branches where Seminole warriors had rested their guns.

That stand of trees also provided two convenient escape routes to the west and east. When two

companies of U.S. troops attacked from the east, some warriors gave cover while the rest of the Seminoles escaped west.

The most telling proof of Seminole victory lay in the numbers. Having left a few men at Camp Bassinger, Taylor arrived to the battle with just over 800 men. The totals for Seminole warriors have ranged from 380-480 men. At a 2:1 ratio, Taylor's men should have overwhelmed the Seminoles. Instead, they lost 26 men with 114 wounded. The dead were primarily officers, a wise tactical move that made it hard to regroup or give a hard chase. There were only 11 dead and 14 wounded on the Seminole side.

So how could the U.S. claim a victory?

Fake news and bias have long been an issue in the media. The truth was the U.S. government was spending a lot of money and getting nowhere with Seminoles. Commander of the war and Taylor's boss, Colonel Thomas Jesup's reputation was already in tatters for capturing warriors, most famously Osceola, under a flag of truce. Finally, Florida was an isolated frontier few knew anything about. The newspapers were not going to ask the Seminoles for their version of the story. So what the officers said was taken for truth. Given how poorly the war was going (and would continue to go), Colonel Taylor made the case for victory.

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