The Swamp Fox - A Taoist Warfighter

by

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THE SWAMP FOX – A TAOIST WARFIGHTER

The steam-powered gunboat, *USS Columbine*, chugged down the increasingly narrow Saint John's River, penetrating ever-deeper south into the parts of Florida not friendly to the bluecoats that manned the vessel. The men were on edge and properly so. Almost every expedition this far up the river had resulted in, at the very least, harassing sniper fire from those "sesh" boys that seemed to be a part of the damnable jungle that was inland Florida. Indeed, H Company, 2nd Florida Cavalry had been stalking the Yankees for some time, watching from shore with cannon and musket, waiting for their Captain to give the signal to open fire. When the Captain's saber flashed, the boys in grey and homespun butternut belched fire from their rifles and cannon, sending the union sailors into a frenzy of reaction amidst the impact of hot iron and lead and the spilling blood.¹

Colonel John Jackson Dickison ("Dixie" to some and "The Swamp Fox" to others) was born in Virginia in 1816. He found a home in the South Carolina Militia as a young man, earning a commission as a cavalry officer and finally moved to Florida in 1856.² At his plantation, *Sunnyside* near Ocala, his wealth and stature in the community grew, making him well known and liked. Leading by example and displaying some of the best traits of a successful guerilla

¹ J. J. Dickison, *Confederate Military History - Florida* (Gulf Breeze, Florida: eBooksOnDisk.com, 2002), 50-60.

² Joseph E. Miller, "General J. J. Dickison," *The Jacksonville Observer*, April 14, 2010, http://www.jaxobserver.com/headstones/2010/04/14/general-j-j-dickison-1816-%E2%80%93-1902// (accessed October 29, 2011).

warrior, Colonel Dickison built an unbeaten record of partisan politics against a vastly superior force, helping keep the interior of Florida out of Union hands for the duration of the Civil War. His tactics and leadership were seemingly taken straight from the writings of Sun Tzu and led to one of the highest kill/capture ratios in the war.³ It is unknown whether Dickison's martial education included the study of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, but there is little doubt that the Taoist master would have approved of the exploits and leadership of the Swamp Fox.

His predilection to attack when unexpected at the point of the enemy's weakness, as well as

eluding the pursuit of the enemy through guile and cunning, earned his reputation and confirmed the maxims of Tzu.

³ Joseph E. Miller, "General J. J. Dickison," *The Jacksonville Observer*, April 14, 2010, http://www.jaxobserver.com/headstones/2010/04/14/general-j-j-dickison-1816-%E2%80%93-1902// (accessed October 29, 2011).

FLORIDA IN THE CIVIL WAR

When Florida seceded from the Union on the 10th of January 1861, the state was one of the least populated but most strategically important for both the Union and the Confederacy. However, the leadership in Washington or Richmond would not realize the importance of the state, with both governments only committing piecemeal forces to secure or defend the state respectively. Robert Lee pulled the majority of confederate forces from the coastal emplacements from Fernandina to Saint Augustine early in the war as the government in Richmond levied the vast majority of Florida regiments to fight in the Armies of Virginia and Tennessee. With the Fort Clinch in Fernandina, the various forts on the Saint John's and Fort Marion (Castillo de San Marcos) in Saint Augustine abandoned without much of a fight, the east coast of Florida was effectively in Union control for the bulk of the war.

Nonetheless, Florida maintained its status as a primary provider of foodstuffs such as beef, fish and salt for the Confederacy throughout the war. In spite of the Union control of the major harbors on the east coast, as well as Pensacola, the state provided numerous ingress and

⁴ Stewart Sifkas, *Compendium of the Confederate Armies - Florida and Arkansas* (New York: Facts on File, 1991), 3.

⁵ Dr. William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York: Columbia University, 1913), 47-95.

⁶ Daniel L Schafer, *Thunder on the River* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2010), 50-105.

⁷ Ibid.

egress points for blockade-runners up and down the hundreds of miles of coast that the Union did not control. Important to these lifelines for the confederacy was control of the interior of the state, and the associated waterways and railroads that fed these supplies north to the more populated states that were fighting in conventional, large-scale battles.⁸

⁸ Davis, 175-215.

THE BIRTH OF A FOX

At the outset of the War, Dickison began to raise a company of cavalry in Marion County Florida for service in the Confederate forces. However, he was offered a lieutenancy in the Marion Light Artillery under Captain John M. Martin, who had graduated from the Military Academy at Charlestown, South Carolina. The company was dispatched to Fort Clinch in late 1861, before Lee fatefully ordered many of the Confederate troops north. The Marion Light Artillery participated in removing a number of the cannon from Fort Clinch and placing them in the earthworks on Saint John's Bluff, overlooking the river in Jacksonville. When the Union began to land in force on Amelia Island five months later, threatening Fort Clinch and Fernandina, the Marion Light Artillery began to evacuate the city and only offered limited resistance against the invaders, exchanging fire with Federal gunboats as the last train fled the scene packed with civilians and soldiers alike. The scene packed with civilians and soldiers alike.

The Marion boys were ordered to maintain blocking positions in and around present day Yulee, Florida, protecting the railways running in all directions from the area. Soon, they were ordered to fall back to Sanderson, between Lake City and Jacksonville and then ordered forward again to the outskirts of occupied Jacksonville. ¹¹ In May of 1862, the company was reorganized

⁹ Dickison, 25-34.

¹⁰ Schafer, 50-63.

¹¹ William H. Nulty, *Confederate Florida - The Road to Olustee* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 1-41.

on order and anticipated movement north in support of the major combat raging there. However, Lieutenant Dickison was still a cavalryman at heart, withdrawing from that command and was soon ordered to raise a cavalry company for three years service in the Confederate Army as part of the 2nd Florida Cavalry Regiment. Over eighty cavaliers from Northeast Florida riding personal mounts mustered into service under the command of now Captain Dickison and were soon put to work picketing the Federal lines around Jacksonville. 13

¹² Dickison, 25-34.

¹³ Ibid.

THE GUERILLA WAR BEGINS IN EARNEST

H Company was soon involved in raids and reconnaissance throughout their area of operations as the Federals pushed their lines outward from Jacksonville. The Federals started a campaign to entice the local slaves to quit their plantations and cross the lines to freedom as well as soldiers taking retribution on the local plantation owners for any attacks against Federal forces. This hardened the locals, who were largely Unionist before the war, against the Federal troopers and provided a ripe locale for the insurgency that would support the guerilla war that Dickison would wage against the Federals.¹⁴

From mid-1862, H Company participated in numerous raids and skirmishes against the Federals, always attacking at the enemy's weakest points with surprise and quickly fading back into the wilderness. This is exactly the type of tactic of which Sun Tzu was a proponent:

"Now an army may be likened to water, for just as flowing water avoids heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strength and strikes weakness" During this period, Captain Dickison more often than not led his troops in battle, honing his skills, and theirs, almost as if following the words of Sun Tzu like an instruction manual to victory. The fruits of his fledgling campaign yielded over 100 enemies killed, wounded and

¹⁴ Dickison, 25-34.

¹⁵ Mark McNeilly, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33.

captured for no loss from H Company. ¹⁶ By February of 1864, the Union high command began to realize the import of Florida to the Southern cause and moved to take the railroads from Jacksonville to Tallahassee, effectively shutting off the tap for the Confederates. ¹⁷

The Union sent a force of approximately fifty mounted infantry troopers to capture trains in Gainesville on February 14th of 1864. The city was captured and held, but soon Captain Dickison's H Company, would lay into the small Union force. ¹⁸ Knowing full well that the Rebels would be on his small force soon, the Union Commander, Captain Marshall, rallied his troops and about 100 local slaves to build breastworks from cotton bales and placed an ambush for the Confederates. ¹⁹ As Dickison's cavalry poured into the streets of Gainesville, they found themselves funneled into a killing field with enfilading fire, leaving over forty of his command dead or captured before they could disengage the hellish fire of the Union's Spencer repeating rifles. ²⁰ This would be a painful trouncing for the previously undefeated rebels. The Union would suffer only slight loss in this engagement and Dickison hasten back toward Olustee to report to Brigadier General Joseph Finegan and prepare to meet the massive Union army headed that way. ²¹

¹⁶ Dickison, 25-34.

¹⁷ Nulty, 53-76.

¹⁸ Dickison, 25-34.

¹⁹ Paul Taylor, *Discovering the Civil War in Florida* (Sarasota, Florida: Pineapple Press, 2001), 85-89.

²⁰ Dickison, 25-34.

²¹ Ibid.

OLUSTEE AND THE AFTERMATH

The Union Army, under the command of Brigadier General Truman Seymour sported about 5,000 effectives, equaling the Confederate force under General Finegan.²² The battle would be the only large, conventional battle fought in Florida, and although the numbers engaged are small compared to some of the more famous engagements of the Civil War, the carnage is statistically staggering. The confederates carried the day with a 20% loss to their forces, but the Federals suffered their third worst defeat of the War in the percentage of attrition with over 40% lost on the field.²³ It is possible that the events of the 14th and 20th of February led Dickison to employ even more cautious tactics, avoiding pitched battles and hitting the enemy where he would hurt most for the remainder of the war.²⁴ Thus, maintaining the aforementioned maxim of Sun Tzu.

In the tradition of most local units and militias, Dickison knew his terrain and his troops, as he fought alongside neighbors and family, with his two most trusted subordinate leaders being his sons. This gave him a natural advantage in a conventional fight and an overwhelming one in the insurgency that he continued to wage against the further encroachments of the Federals into the Floridian interior. Per Sun Tzu:

²² Thomas R. Fasulo, "Battle Of Olustee," *BattleofOlustee.org*, October 21, 2011, http://battleofolustee.org/index.html. (accessed October 29, 2011).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Dickison, 25-34.

"He whose ranks are united in a purpose will be victorious" 25 and

"Therefore in the enemy's country, the mountains, rivers highlands, lowlands, and hills which he can defend as strategic points..."

This was apparent as H Company led the van against the retreating but stubborn Federals in the immediate aftermath of Olustee.²⁷ The 2nd Florida Cavalry harried the federals to a point within six miles of Jacksonville and allowed the Confederate infantry time to reorganize and prepare for the expected Union counterattack.²⁸ This direct attack never came and the Union chose to dig in on the outskirts of Jacksonville to retain it in Union hands²⁹.

However, the Union did not remain idle long and soon began amassing forces again.

They continued to press down the Saint John's basin, but were stymied by "torpedoes" (aquatic mines). They began to reconnoiter a path following the railroad system between

Jacksonville/Fernandina and Cedar Key through Waldo, Starke and Gainesville. The daring and appropriately reinforced Dickison employed his stealthy pickets to find the enemy without detection and then repeatedly massed his forces at critical points of Rebel defenses as well as

²⁵ McNeilly, 118.

²⁶ Ibid, 80.

²⁷ Dickison, 34-50.

²⁸ Nulty, 170-203.

²⁹ Dickison, 34-50.

³⁰ Schafer, 198-221.

³¹ Nulty, 203-219.

weak points in the enemy line.³² These actions frustrated Union attempts to break through the Confederate lines and maintained the security of the vital networks in the interior.

³² Dickison, 50-68.

PALATKA AND THE USS COLUMBINE

Dickison further bolstered his credibility with his troops by leading a three-man reconnaissance that confirmed Yankee positions near Welaka and Palatka. He then led about a third of his command in a stealthy sunrise raid that took the Union forces completely by surprise. He and his men infiltrated the enemy's lines and demanded surrender of the enemy commander. Having achieved this without firing a single shot and capturing a force about same the size as his own, he and his men again faded into the Florida wilderness before Federal reinforcements could arrive. Nonetheless, the Federal company of infantry foolishly pursued Dickison and his men 34. This hearkens back to the Tzu maxim concerning winning without fighting:

"Thus those skilled in war subdue the enemy's army without battle" "35

Dickison used the familiar terrain to his advantage, demonstrating his small command of less than thirty cavaliers in such a way as to make the Union command believe that they were outnumbered and out-flanked. Sending a message to the Union Commander demanding surrender and eventually sent his trusted son to discuss terms, the baffled Federal Commander capitulated. Realizing that the full company could easily overpower his small contingent, Dickison immediately disarmed the Yankees as they reported to surrender and soon another 88

³³ Dickison, 50-68.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ McNeilly, 66.

men were added to the take for the day. The small detachment of H Company then dispersed into the swamps to avoid Federal cavalry and reunited the next day. ³⁶ This action proved Sun Tzu's instance that sheer numbers mean nothing:

"Although the troops of Yueh are many, what benefit is this superiority in respect to the outcome?" 37

Soon the war in the Middle Atlantic States was such that the garrison in Jacksonville was depleted in order to bolster the Union forces engaged in the bloody combat there.³⁸ However, the Union still had designs on controlling the Saint John's River basin and again pushed south for Palatka with two heavy gunboats and four transports ferrying two regiments of infantry. Dickison and his contemporary, Captain Gray, were still picketing the area, and saw an opportunity to strike at the Union advance. They hurried the bulk of their forces to occupy Palatka and man the entrenchments previously dug there by Federal forces. As they were terribly outnumbered, the Rebels let the gunboats pass by upriver to the south and allowed the strong Union infantry to land unopposed. Dickison took 50 of his men and the available cannon and headed south with a mind to intercept at least one of the gunboats.³⁹

In hot pursuit, Dickison and his men were only minutes behind the gunboats as they passed into safety at Brown's Landing. He wheeled his men back north toward Palatka, but was intercepted by a courier stating that the gunboat *Ottawa* was landing her troops near Brown's

³⁶ Dickison, 50-68.

³⁷ McNeilly, 40.

³⁸ Schafer, 198-221.

³⁹ Dickison, 50-68.

Landing. ⁴⁰ Dickison again turned south and moved through the night to get into position on the high ground above the landing. Surprising the enemy in the night the men of H Company hammered the gunboat with 28 rounds of cannon fire and attendant musketry before there was any response from the Yankees. ⁴¹ The *Ottawa* finally tried to respond with her massive complement of artillery, but could not maneuver, as she was crippled by the Confederate guns. As the Ottawa blazed away at the flashes in the night, H Company began an orderly withdrawal of men and guns, again rushing south with hopes of taking the *Columbine* at Horse Landing. He was early this time and took the time to emplace his small contingent of cavalry sharpshooters and cannon in a manner that would devastate the gunboat when she arrived. ⁴²

At 3:00 p.m. on the 24th of April 1864, the *Columbine* steamed around the bend near Horse Landing. ⁴³ The Confederates were ordered to hold their fire, and Dickison waited until the gunboat was within sixty yards of the main force of the Confederates before waving his sword as the pre-determined signal. The resulting cannonade and musketry almost instantly disabled the boat and she began to drift. As she passed the positions, the confederates fired again with deadly effect. The gunboat grounded itself on a sandbar, although her crew continued to fight. She was soon pumped full of steel and lead until she struck her colors. ⁴⁴ The engagement only took a few minutes and the Federals lost well over half of their command killed or wounded, while the

⁴⁰ Dickison, 50-68

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Roger Bull, "Waiting For The Truth To Surface," *Jacksonville Times Union*, December 18, 2005, http://jacksonville.com/tu-online/stories/121805/lif_20589038.shtml/ (accessed October 29, 2011).

⁴³ Dickison, 50-68.

⁴⁴ Bull.

Rebels did not lose a man. 45 This engagement is witness to the practices of concentration of force as well as speed on the battlefield, also illustrated by Sun Tzu thus:

"Strike the enemy swiftly as a falcon strikes its target",46 and

"Anciently, the skillful warriors first made themselves invincible and awaited the moment of the enemy's vulnerability.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Schafer, 198-221.

⁴⁶ McNeilly, 100.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 63.

KEEPING THE YANKEES AT BAY

H Company continued to picket the area between Lake City and Gainesville and harried the enemy in the best traditions of guerilla warfare and the precepts of combat as outlined by Sun Tzu. The cavalry would strike and harass the enemy keeping them on edge, without sleep or rest and on the defensive. However, the Union commanders would not be easily silenced. They soon had another plan to cut off the state from the confederacy, thus severing the invaluable supply lines to the north. About three to four thousand troops from Jacksonville landed near Palatka with a mind to cut the state in half and march to Cedar Key.⁴⁸

Dickison's pickets reported back to his headquarters and he rode out with a small force to reconnoiter the situation. He was met by enemy pickets and fell back, summoning the local militia as well as H Company. On the morning of 16 July 1864, he and his men approached the enemy positions about six miles short of Palatka. Although vastly outnumbered, Dickison and his men charged against the enemy pickets who were nearly 300 strong. Engaging the enemy with less than forty effectives, (again disregarding numerical inferiority), Dickison bravely waded into the enemy in man-to-man melee. ⁴⁹ The Union commander called a cease-fire, indicating to Dickison a wish to surrender. Elated, Dickison called his own men to quit. As he ordered a detachment of his men, led by his son Charlie, to cross some open ground and prevent

⁴⁸ Schafer, 198-221.

⁴⁹ Dickison, 50-68.

the Union soldiers from escaping, the Yankees opened fire again, killing Charlie.⁵⁰ H Company continued to fight and soon the Federals fell back to Palatka and ultimately evacuated the city in the night, apparently believing that the small confederate force was simply the van for a huge force bearing down on the city.⁵¹ This confirms another example of Tzu-esque cunning in the daring employment of forces by Dickison. Dickison and his men attacked so fiercely and with great surprise that the enemy was convinced that they were outnumbered and maneuvered, although they held every advantage, caused the Union forces to quit the battlefield. Sun Tzu wrote:

If your troops do no equal his, temporarily avoid his initial rush. Probably later you can take advantage of a soft spot. Then rouse yourself and seek victory with determined spirit",52

By mid-August, Dickison was in command of all of the Florida forces in his area. His beloved H Company would continue its picket duty, and would be key in alerting the Swamp Fox to around 5,000 Union troops again moving on Gainesville, following the railroad south. Again, vastly outnumbered and only bolstered by a handful of militia, Dickison chose to make a stand about a mile outside of the city, intercepting the Union and the wagon train of plunder that it had accumulated while sacking plantations between Jacksonville and Gainesville. With little more than a pair of reinforced companies, Dickison again attacked with such fervor that the

⁵⁰ Taylor, 138-141.

⁵¹ Dickison, 50-68.

⁵² McNeilly, 66.

⁵³Dickison, 50-68.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

enemy soon fled. Capturing over 300 Yankees, a like number of horses and arms, and much of the loot stolen from their neighbors, the success ratio of the Swamp Fox took another leap forward.⁵⁵

On the 24th of October, Dickison and his men again engaged a union force of superior number, but obviously inferior leadership. The Union cavalry had been raiding the area around Green Cove Springs, capturing the invaluable beef cattle in the area and were driving them back toward union lines. With less than 100 men, Dickison engaged the Federal cavalry battalion.⁵⁶ His troops quickly dismounted and the Yankees immediately charged the rebels who held firm. Dickison's men hammered the charging horsemen with cannon and rifle again and again to great effect. The Confederates broke the spirit of the Union cavalry who retreated into the swamp and, in all the Confederates killed, wounded or captured as many troops as they fielded themselves, without any loss.⁵⁷ It seems that the Union commander in both of the preceding engagements acted in the exact opposite of Tzu's advice:

"Troops thrown against as a grindstone against eggs is an example of a solid against a void" 58

⁵⁵ Dickison, 50-68.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 68-85.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ McNeilly, 49.

THE FINAL DAYS

Dickison and his men continued to harass and attack the Union in and around

Jacksonville at every opportunity, and when they were least expected. They ambushed and
sniped, raided and reconnoitered the entirety of the battle space between Jacksonville and Saint

Augustine, across to Gainesville and Cedar Key and up through Saint Marks to Tallahassee.⁵⁹ He
and his men were again instrumental in the defense of Tallahassee at the lead up to and finally
the desperate battle of Natural Bridge, in which they screened the main Confederate force and
helped preserve the capitol for the Confederates.⁶⁰

The leadership, tactics and principles of Sun Tzu, whether by design or default were apparent in the actions of the little command in North Central Florida led by the Swamp Fox. As testament to his effectiveness, many assassins were sent to dispatch the rebel commander on orders of the Union high command. Further evidence of his effectiveness as a guerilla leader is the fact that many of the plots were foiled by the very loyal local populace. Nonetheless, he was finally captured near Waldo, although he was soon paroled.⁶¹ In the meantime, he was promoted en absentia to Colonel and at the close of the war was tapped to assist President Davis and

⁵⁹ Dickison, 68-85.

⁶⁰ Taylor, 76-78.

⁶¹ Miller.

Secretary of War Breckenridge to escape the closing Federal forces. ⁶² Of course, Davis was captured, but Breckenridge escaped to Cuba on a boat provided by Dickison that was captured during the fight for *Columbine*. ⁶³

⁶² Unknown, "Horse Landing Project," *The Florida Confederation For The Preservation Of Historic Sites, Inc*, 2011, http://www.fcphs.com/Horse_Landing_Project.htm. (accessed October 29, 2011).

⁶³ Bull.

CONCLUSION

This hero of the Confederate Cavalier spirit is little known outside the confines of the Sunshine State, and even then only among Civil War buffs and historians. There is no evidence that he studied the opus of Sun Tzu, but the case is strong that his methods of deception, stealth, attacking the weaknesses of the enemy, defense in depth and fading from the battlefield at the most opportune moments smack of the Taoist Master's philosophy. Additionally, his use of local forces, terrain and ultimately his leadership style led to one of the most successful and lopsided series of victories in the annals of the Civil War.

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OUTLINE

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Early Life
 - a. Born and raised (VA/SC)
 - b. Moved to Florida
 - c. Making of a leader
- 3) Start of the War
 - a. Secession
 - b. Troop disposition
 - c. General Lee's directives
 - d. Abandoning the East Coast
- 4) Insurgency
 - a. Raids against the Federals
 - b. Protecting the interior
 - c. Raids by the Federals
- 5) Major Battles
 - a. Olustee
 - b. Gainesville
 - c. Palatka
- 6) St Johns River Basin
 - a. Torpedoes and snipers
 - b. Action at Horse Landing
 - c. USS Columbine
- 7) End of the War
 - a. Natural Bridge
 - b. More guerilla warfare
 - c. Capture and release
 - d. Helping Breckinridge escape
- 8) Conclusion