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Confederate, Union soldiers converge on Olustee Battlefield

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The soil shook as cannons boomed from both sides of the Olustee Battlefield, coughing out clouds of whitish-gray smoke Saturday afternoon.

One cloud seemed to end in a perfect "O" against the backdrop of a clear blue sky.

Perhaps the "O" was for Olustee.

The Olustee Battlefield came alive Saturday as reenactors from across the country engaged in a Civil War battle.

The bleachers on one side of the field were filled to capacity with spectators who sat ready to travel back in time to the Civil War.

The crowd spilled out onto the coarse grass all around the sidelines, and visitors standing in the back stood on their tiptoes to peer into the woods across the other side.

The distant sound of gunfire seemed to get louder as the crowd buzzed with anticipation for a sight of the Union and Confederate armies.

A boy in the crowd aimed his toy rifle out to the woods and licked his lips as he prepared to shoot.

Before long, the calvary, infantry and artillery demonstration was in full view of the crowd as soldiers marched and rode out of the forest.

The solders blasted out from beneath the tall pine trees, and the crowd cheered for their side as the men from both sides fought fiercely.

Those shot fell slowly to the ground, their palms outstretched on the Florida ground.

Medical attendants ran to each fallen soldier, touching hands to see if they were alive.

The Union forces pushed the Confederate forces across the field, and children shrieked with delight as massive horses carrying Union soldiers galloped near the sidelines.

The sound of shouting, gunfire, the bugle, and blast of cannons created the soundtrack of a Civil War battle.

The solemn playing of "Taps" ended the battle at 3:58 p.m., and the crowd cheered and applauded with appreciation.

"This is my first time here, but it was absolutely amazing," said Sally Wazny of Gainesville. "The whole ambiance of this festival is superb."

Unlike the Sunday battle, Saturday's battle was not an actual depiction of the Battle of Olustee.

"In today's battle, there are no winners because it is just a sample of maneuvers used in the Civil War," said Martha Nelson, park services specialist.

"Tomorrow will be the actual reenactment of the Battle of Olustee,. so we already know the Confederacy will win."

The reenactors who were enemies only a few seconds before stood laughing and joking with another as they stretched and walked off the field.

Bill Walker, from Pinellas County, thought the battle was a great success.

"It was a rough battle," he said, still in his character, a surgeon. "I serve as one of the surgeons and had to make sure all the soldiers were hydrated."

Reenactor Eddie Cockman from Georgia encountered a bigger challenge than simply playing dead in the field.

"I fell in an ant pile," he laughed. "I was squirming a little, but other than that I think I did well."

Cockman said the best thing about doing the battles is hearing a thank-you from a spectator.

"I do this because I love it, even though it is an expensive hobby," he said. "But hearing appreciation makes it all worthwhile."

