

## Adolphus Washington Greely (1844-1935)

Adolphus Washington Greely became a world celebrity almost overnight in 1884 when the six survivors of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition under his leadership were rescued from starvation in the Arctic. Yet he was far more than the central figure of one tragic expedition. Explorer, soldier, scientist, and author, Greely was respected as an international authority on polar science from the 1880s until his death 50 years later.

Born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1844, Greely volunteered for Civil War service in the Union Army before he was 18. He was grievously wounded at Antietam in 1862, but returned to active duty the following spring as an officer of the U.S. Colored Infantry, made up of free black soldiers. When the war ended he held the brevet rank of captain of volunteers and decided on service in the regular army as his career. By the time he retired as a major general in 1908, he had set a record as the first soldier to enter the U.S. Army as a private and achieve a general's rank.



Greely circa 1880.

What distinguished Greely from his earliest days was his serious application to everything in which he took an interest and that he saw as his duty. While fellow-officers would devote their evenings to card games and other amusements, Dolph (as his friends called him) would be deep in a book. He respected knowledge of all kinds, and lacking any more than a high-school education, he set about to teach himself. And though he appreciated all forms of literature, especially poetry, he dwelt most heavily on the physics, earth sciences, chemistry, mathematics, and other branches of learning that he considered "practical" for his professional development.

Greely's particular interest early on lay in telegraphic signaling, which had proved itself during the war, and the use of meteorological reports sent by telegraph to predict changes in weather. By 1869 he was detailed to Washington as a signal

officer. Here he fell under the spell of Captain Henry W. Howgate, a Signal Service officer who was an enthusiast for arctic exploration and who opened his extensive library of arctic literature to the younger officer. It was through this chain of events that Greely was inspired to a deep interest in leading an arctic expedition. He had several motives: to visit a strange and romantic part of the world, to study the physical conditions of the Far North, to conduct signaling experiments under severe weather conditions, and also, perhaps, to make a name for himself that would help his promotion.

In October 1879 an International Polar Conference held in Hamburg agreed on a common program of meteorological and other physical observations by expeditions supported by a dozen countries, all to be placed as far toward the top of the known world as possible. This was to be the first International Polar Year, set for 1882-1883, to last from summer to summer. Greely was chosen to head one of two United States expeditions. His observation post, named Fort Conger, was at Lady Franklin Bay on the east coast of Ellesmere Island, a few miles across Robeson Channel from the Greenland coast.

The plan was for Greely's party to spend two years at Lady Franklin Bay — from summer 1881 to summer 1883 — exploring the coasts, documenting the wildlife, and carrying out other observations going beyond the program of the Hamburg Conference. A supply ship was scheduled to bring mail and relief personnel in summer 1882 and to return in 1883 to bring the party home with its scientific findings.

By August the expedition of 25 men was comfortably installed in a large wooden building assembled from lumber brought on shipboard. A plentiful supply of fresh musk-ox meat was on hand, thanks to the expedition hunters, and there was adequate coal hacked from an outcropping a few miles to the east that had been found by the Nares Expedition in 1875. During the following 24 months, the expedition carried out the prepared program of scientific observations and measurements in relative comfort. These included hourly recordings of temperature, tidal levels, barometric pressure, precipitation (there was little), wind velocity and direction, and other phenomena.

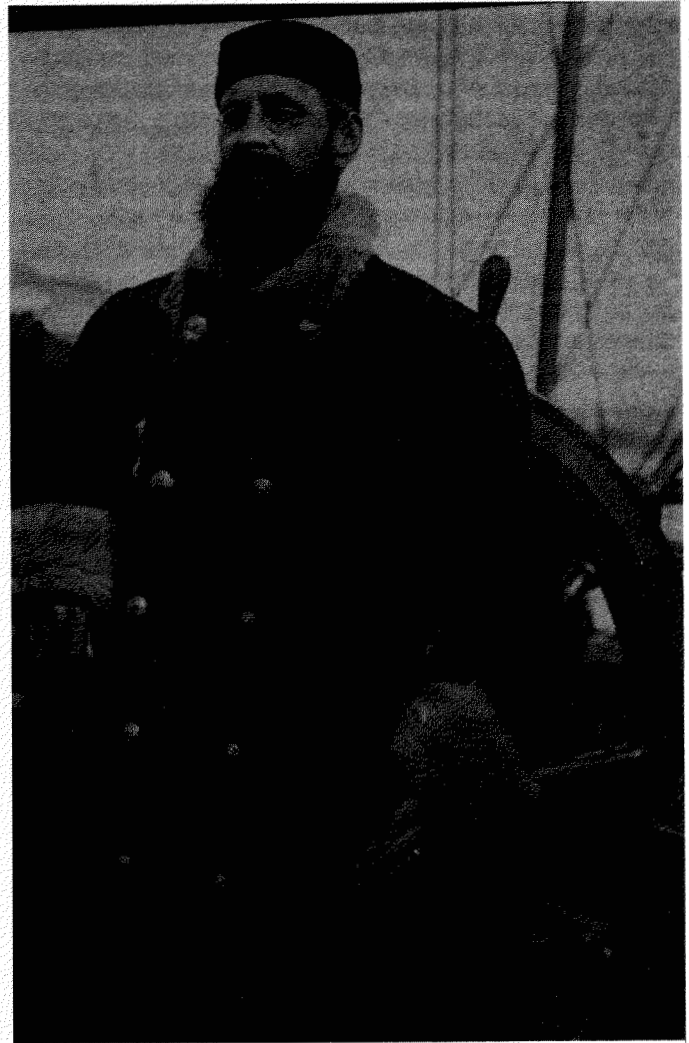
In addition, several exploration trips by dog sledge and on foot led to detailed mapping of much of Ellesmere Island and the nearby Greenland coast and the naming of newly found mountains, lakes, streams, fiords, and capes. One three-man party led by Lieutenant James B. Lockwood set a record for the farthest north yet attained, exceeding the previous record set by a British expedition by some four miles. Contrary to some later uninformed reports, however, there was no attempt "to reach the North Pole." Greely, armed with his high-school Latin and several reference books, documented many of the Ellesmere Island plants, lichens, and grasses and observed several species of birds. All these findings and observations were meticulously recorded in the official logs of the party. Greely had insisted as a condition of joining the expedition that every man keep a diary, and in these many of the personal observations from different viewpoints added human detail to the scientific record.

In summer 1882 the supply ship was forced to turn back without reaching Lady Franklin Bay because of heavy ice. Again, in summer 1883, the supply ship *Proteus* ran into heavy ice in the Kane Basin, was crushed, and sank. Not aware of this, the Greely party, as previously arranged, moved south in August in three small boats (one of them steam-powered) through Kennedy Channel and Kane Basin toward an agreed-on rendezvous point at the entry of Smith Sound. After weeks of struggle they came ashore September 29 to find a meagre cache of supplies from the *Proteus* wreck, along with a message telling of the disaster to the ship and hope that the survivors could send help soon. At this point Greely knew they were doomed to spend a winter in the Arctic with no prepared shelter, inadequate food, and virtually no fuel.

From October until the following June, Greely's command withstood the ravages of hunger and cold as best they could on Cape Sabine in a shelter built of small stones piled into a low wall to break the wind and covered by the overturned boat and a few tarpaulins. Rations were about one-fifth the normal military ration, until even that was exhausted. Then the men lived on stew made from lichen scraped from the rocks and tiny shrimp netted at the shore. When an occasional bird was shot, it provided about an ounce per man, eaten raw. A U.S. Navy relief ship finally reached the Greely camp on 22 June 1884 to find that Greely and only six others were still alive. Most of the others had died of starvation or exposure. One man died aboard ship on the return journey.

Greely's story as it unfolded was an epic of heroism and self-sacrifice. Although there were individual incidents of some men behaving selfishly, the common characteristic throughout the ordeal was a concern for all. In the years that followed, Greely always spoke in the most respectful terms of the behaviour of his command throughout their long winter of trial. His official report, published in 1888 in two massive volumes, combined both the scientific findings of the two years at Fort Conger on Lady Franklin Bay and the struggle for survival of the third year at Cape Sabine. The report became a standard reference work for arctic studies over the next several decades.

Greely was named Chief Signal Officer of the U.S. Army in 1887, being promoted in one jump from captain to brigadier general. Under his leadership over the next 19 years, the Signal Service acquired the first motorized vehicles for the Army, promoted the development of the "flying machine," and assisted Marconi in development of the radio. Always a pragmatist, Greely encouraged every innovation that would bring the military service into the mechanized, electrified twentieth century. He visited Alaska and described its potential in prophetic terms in his *Handbook of Alaska*. He was active in patriotic societies, in historical and biographical research, and in the Literary Society of Washington. He was a founder of the National Geographic Society, a prolific writer for its magazine, and also served as the first president of the Explorers Club in New York. In 1935, on his 91st birthday, he was awarded the Medal of Honor by the United States government for his lifetime of service to his country.



Greely after being rescued, 1884. Photographs courtesy of John C. Greely, grandson of General A.W. Greely.

#### FURTHER READINGS

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