The Greely Expedition

[Note: This article is included as part of the history of Seneca County because William Ellis of Seneca Falls was a member of the Greely Expedition.]

Among the expeditions that have been sponsored by the United States Government, the Greely Expedition ranks with the Lewis and Clark Expedition in importance. Both opened new frontiers and added to man's knowledge of the unknown. Whereas Lewis and Clark suffered one fatality, Greely lost nineteen out of twenty-five men.[1]

What we call the Greely Expedition (1881-1884) was properly known as the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, which was one of two groups sent by the U.S. Government to the Arctic as part of the International Polar Year.[2] The Greely Expedition, so named for its commander, Lieutenant Adolphus Greely, was to have been a glorious triumph for America. On paper, it was. A three hundred year old record (held by British polar expeditions) was broken for achieving the farthest point north toward the North Pole. But the cost in human suffering, as with so many early polar expeditions, was a terrible one.[3]

Lieutenant Greely, of the Fifth Cavalry, had instructions to establish a permanent station at the most suitable point north of the eighty-first parallel of north latitude, near the coal seam discovered on Lady Franklin Bay by the English expedition of 1875. The only stops authorized before reaching this point, except where the ice conditions force stops, were to be calls at Disco or Uppernavik to secure Esquimaux hunters, dogs and clothing, and those on the east coast of Grinnell Land, to see that the stores cached by the expedition of 1875 are in good condition for the use by any party retreating southward in distress. In other words, the expedition was organized to establish a polar colony for general scientific observation, substantially like an unsuccessful undertaking by a Captain Howgate the previous year.[4]

After long personal anticipation, Greely and his party set sail from St. John's Newfoundland on July 7, 1881.[5] There were five boats with 40 days of rations. Before them lay hundres of miles of water and icy Arctic lands that had to be crossed to survive.[6] They arrived at Fort Conger, Lady Franklin Bay on August 26, 1881, where they remained (as planned) for two years. The supply ship scheduled to visit Fort Conger in 1882 was unable to penetrate the ice. The master of the ship did not deposit supplies at obvious points that might have benefited the Greely party.[7]

The Greely party had ample supplies for the second year at Fort Conger, during period the men lived comfortably but not entirely happily. There were three malcontents, one of whom, a lieutenant, resigned from the service and did not perform any duties for more than two years.

In any event, the party carried out the purposes of the expeditions. Many trips were made to Grinnell Island, Greenland, etc, ranging over 2,500 miles. One member of the group, a Lieutenant Lockwood, went farther north than man had ever gone before—to 83 degrees 24 minutes north latitude. (This surpassed the record held by Great Britain for more than three hundred years. All the while, records were kept of the weather, tides, etc.[8]

The *Proteus*, a ship that was to pick up the Greely party sank on July 23, 1883 due to the actions of a stubborn Army Lieutenant, Garlington, who refused to follow suggestions of the civilian crew of Newfoundlanders who were experiences in Arctic sailing. When this ship didn't arrive in August to pick up the Greely party, Greely put into operation the preconceived plan for moving his men and equipment south.[9] A few days before the sinking of the ship, the lieutenant had cached about ten days of food supplies at a prominent point. As the ship was sinking, the

lieutenant could have put ashore a large supply of food for Greely, but he didn't think it was necessary. It was not until mid-September that the survivors of the ship sinking reached St. John's and sent a message to Washington, D.C. Inaccurate reports were submitted, so few in Washington, including President Arthur and Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln, had any concern for the well-being of the Greely party.[10]

The Greely party was meanwhile working its way south, starting August 9, 1883. On September 29th they reached Baird Inlet. Then the party was adrift for thirty days on ice floe in Smith South.[11] In the process, the party suffered the loss of several boats, food supplies and personal equipment. An entire month on an ice floe took them nowhere. Eventually, they reached land with all of their scientific equipment and two year's accumulation of raw data which they had diligently insisted be saved. A winter camp was established but soon moved to where there should have been a cache of supplies (the cache that the ship had left a few days before the boat sunk). Greely found this cache. A supply of lemons wrapped in pages of the Louisville *Courier Journal* told of the inability of the 1882 supply ship to reach Greely.[12]

They became trapped on Cape Sabine, unable to travel farther south. They established a permanent camp on October 21.[13] The men awaited rescue for eight months. An August 12, 1884, *New York Times* article reported that they were "shivering and starving in their little tent on the bleak shore of Smith's Sound."[14] How even some of them managed to survive is amazing. Sabine Point, where they camped, is one of the most desolate places in the Arctic. No big game and few small animals go there. They had the food cached at Payer Harbor and Cape Isabella by Sir George Nares in 1875, but much of that had been damaged by lapse of time. The had the cache by Beebe at Cape Sabine in 1882 and the small amount saved from the wreck of the Proteus in 1883 and landed by Lieutenants Garlington and Colwell on the beach where Greely's party was found camped. When these provisions were consumed, the party was forced to live upon boiled sealskin strips from their sealskin clothing, lichens, and small shrimps procured in good weather when they were strong enough to make the exertion.[15] Another story stated they also consumed ptarmigan droppings.[16] The inevitable food stealing and cannibalism took place. One by one, the men began to die.[17]

In the Fall of 1883, public opinion in Washington demanded that plans be made for a rescue party. Because it was too late for such an expedition to leave in the fall, the plans were made for an early spring departure of a search party. Greely's wife wrote letters to newspaper editors and members of Congress, demanding action. Acrimonious debates raged in Congress but finally a bill was passed. Unlimited funds would be provided for a rescue, plus a bounty of $25,000 for any sealer or other civilian who might locate Greely. Because Army Secretary was uninterested in any Greely rescue (Lincoln as Secretary of War apparently had never forgiven Greely for his brash methods by which he forced Lincoln to authorize the expedition in the first place), the Secretary of the Navy decided to make the relief party a Navy affair.[18]

Four days after the bill passed Congress, a relief ship arrived in New York from St. John's. This was mid-February 1884, giving ample time to outfit the ship, select a crew, etc. The ship commander was Captain Schley. Although he had no Artic experience, he knew how to handle a ship. The rescue effort consisted of three ships, the *Thetis*, the *Bear*, and the *Loch Garry*. After a difficult passage, the Greely party was found at Cape Sabine on June 22, 1884. At this time there were seven survivors (out of the twenty-five in the original party).[19] The eight rescued were Lieutenant A.W. Greely, Sergeant Brainard, Sergeant Fredericks, Sergeant Long, Hospital Steward Bierderbick, Sergeant Elison, and Private Connell. Most of the eighteen had starved to death. Greely and four others were so weak they had to be carried to the ship on

stretchers. Sergeant Elison had lost both hands and feet by frost-bite, and died at Godhaven on July 8th, three days after amputation. Seventeen of the twenty-five in the expedition perished by starvation at the point where found; one was drowned while sealing to procure food. Twelve bodies of the dead were recovered. Names of the dead recovered with the date of death are as follows: Sergeant Cross, January 18, 1884; Frederick, an Eskimo, April 5, 1884; Sergeant Linn, April 6, 1884; Lieutenant Lockwood, April 9, 1884; Sergeant Jewell, April 12, 1884; Private Ellis, May 19, 1884; Sergeant Ralson, May 23, 1884; Private Whistler, May 24, 1884; Sergeant Israel, May 27, 1884; Lieutenant Kislingbury, June 1, 1884; Private Henry, June 6, 1884; Private Scheider, June 18, 1884. Names of the dead buried in the ice-foot with date of death whose bodies were not recovered are as follows: Sergeant Rice, April 9; Corporal Salor, June 3; Private Bender, June 6; A.A. Surgeon Pavy, June 6: Sergeant Gardiner, June 12. Drowned by breaking through newly-formed ice while sealing was Jens Edwards, an Eskimo, on April 24.[20] Captain Schley in his report said that "forty-eight hours' delay in reaching them would have been fatal to all now living. Season north is late and closest for years; Kane Sea was not open when I left Cape Sabine. Winter about Melville Bay most severe for thirty years."[21]

Once aboard the rescue ship, the six survivors made a quick recovery. By the time they reached St. John's on July 17th, they walked ashore on their own to heroes' welcome. The ship reached Portsmouth, New Hampshire on August 2. There was a celebration of several days, but no message from Secretary of War Lincoln.[22]

Several European scientific societies considered the Greely men heroes and struck medals in their honor. President Arthur was please that any of the party had been rescued but was quick to say that he never favored the exploration, doubted its results and made other sour comments. Politicians demanded there be and end to such folly and it was said that Congress would never again support an Arctic expedition. This helps explain why Admirals Peary and Byrd depended on public subscriptions for their early explorations.

Greely was made a Captain soon after returning. In 1887, over the opposition of Lincoln's friends, he became a Brigadier General. Greely was the first soldier to reach general officer rank having started as a volunteer private. Later, Greely became a Major General. He continued as a communications expert for the Army, installing telegraphic equipment in Alaska, the Philippine Islands, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. He established the first commercial wireless station in the world in Alaska. He was a successful mediator in preventing Indian uprisings, and directed relief efforts following the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.[23] He became the first American to receive the Congressiional Medal of Honor for peacetime service.[24] Greely was an early exponent of Army aviation and mentor of Billy Mitchell. He was co-founder of the *National Geographic Magazine*.

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[1] "Adolphus Washington Greely" http://www/ekkane.org/Biographies/BioGreely.htm
[2] Ibid.
[3] "Ghosts of Cape Sabine: The Harrowing True Story of The Greely Expedition" http://www.ric.edu/rpotter/ghosts.html
[4] "The Lady Franklin Bay Expedition" article in the *New York Sun* http://www.arcticwebsite.com/GreelyLFBExpedition.html
[5] "Adolphus Washington Greely"
[6] "Ghosts of Cape Sabine"
[7] "Adolphus Washington Greely"
[8] "Adolphus Washington Greely"

[9] "Adolphus Washington Greely"
[10]"Adolphus Washington Greely"
[11] "Commander W.S. Schley's Report July 17, 1884" http://www.arcticwebsite.com/GreelySchey.html
[12] "Adolphus Washington Greely"
[13] "Commander W.S. Schley's Report July 17, 1884" http://www.arcticwebsite.com/GreelySchey.html
[14] http://www.arcticewebsite.com/GreelyNYT8.12.84Disc.html
[15] "Commander W.S. Schley's Report July 17, 1884" http://www.arcticwebsite.com/GreelySchey.html
[16] "Tale of Arctic Ordeal Features Leadership, Scandal"
http://www.juneauempire.com/stories/101401/Loc_book.shtml
[17] "Ghosts of Cape Sabine"
[18] "Adolphus Washington Greely"
[19] "Adolphus Washington Greely"
[20] "Commander W.S. Schley's Report July 17, 1884" http://www.arcticwebsite.com/GreelySchey.html
[21] "Commander W.S. Schley's Report July 17, 1884" http://www.arcticwebsite.com/GreelySchey.html
[22] "Adolphus Washington Greely"
[23] "Adolphus Washington Greely"
[24] "Tale of the Arctic Ordeal"