



*bust of Adolphus W. Greely,
Greely Hall, Ft. Huachuca, Ariz.*

Greely

by Lt. Col. Charles R. Shrader

Every soldier has a personal hero or heroes — men or women whose character and actions he admires and seeks to copy in his own life. As a Civil War soldier, Arctic explorer, scientist and Chief Signal Officer of the Army for 19 years, Adolphus W. Greely always displayed those qualities of courage, initiative, perseverance and intelligence which are usually associated with good men and great military leaders. Inasmuch as he served as a private, a sergeant, a company grade officer and finally as a major general, Greely's long and illustrious military career provides innumerable examples of conduct and character which any soldier might wish to emulate today.

The ancestors of Adolphus W. Greely first came to America in the 1620s and for nine generations they

lived and worked in coastal New England. Greely himself was born in the seaport town of Newburyport, Massachusetts on 27 March 1844. His father, John Balch Greely, was a shoemaker and after his father's death, Adolphus' mother, Frances D. Cobb Greely, supported the family by working in a textile mill.

Raised in the pious, hardworking and often taciturn atmosphere of nineteenth century New England, young Adolphus absorbed the qualities of determination, resourcefulness and respect for knowledge which were to mark his long and active adult life. Nevertheless, he did have a normal boyhood attending school (and occasionally playing hooky), earning pocket money by weeding onions for a penny a row, celebrating the holidays,

breaking an arm playing football and sometimes feeling the rod for minor transgressions. In his memoir Greely later confessed that:

When about ten years of age I ran much with street boys, began to smoke, was given to fighting and doubtless acquired low tastes. River and sea sports naturally carried me among a rough set.¹

These transgressions resulted in a year's "isolation" with his strict grandparents in the White Mountain region of New Hampshire where the young Greely "cultivated (his) love of nature and powers of observation" and built up "a spirit of helpfulness and confidence in self which was useful in later life." He returned home with, as he said, "a full appreciation of the

opportunities of school life, while the disadvantages of bad associations were firmly fixed in (his) mind."

The Civil War

In 1860 Greely was graduated from Brown High School in Newburyport and he passed the winter of 1860-1861 tutoring cousins in the mountains of New Hampshire. Fort Sumter was fired on and the Civil War began in April 1861, only three weeks after Greely reached his seventeenth birthday. Inspired like the other youth of his time to enlist in the Union cause, Greely overcame parental objections and three rejections for being underage to enlist on 3 July 1861 in a battalion of Massachusetts militia. His unit was soon mustered into federal service as Company B, 19th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. Greely and the other boys of his unit had to undertake devious measures to remain with their unit on federal service. He tells the tale best:

My entry into the national service was made with some difficulty, for the mustering officer was rigorous, both as to apparent physical fitness and as to age. We knew that he had thrown out many recruits for an adjacent regiment on the ground of underage and I was only four months over seventeen. Others were similarly disqualified, but with New England consciences we cast about as to a way of avoiding the spirit of the law, while adhering to the letter, in answering inquiries. The problem was solved by chalking the figure 18 on the soles of our shoes. When the officer came to me he asked sharply: "What is your age?" I promptly answered, "I am over eighteen." Not given to lying even indirectly, I colored to the tips of my ears. He said, "You do not look it." "But I really am over eighteen," I replied. Fortunately I was tall for my age — 5 feet 8 inches — and so was passed.²

The 19th Massachusetts was destined to serve in some of the bloodiest fighting of the Civil War and Greely served as a private and later sergeant in most of them. After a very short period of training, the regiment was assigned to the Corps of Observation outside Washington along the Potomac River. Through the winter of 1861-1862, Private Greely and his

comrades endured the dangers of bivouac and picket duty and participated in October 1861 in the disastrous battle of Ball's Bluff where he received his initiation into the nature of war as a member of a burial detail.

In the spring of 1862, the 19th Massachusetts marched through the Shenandoah Valley en route to embarkation at Washington for Fort Monroe and the Peninsula Campaign. Greely subsequently took part in the siege of Yorktown and the battles of West Point, Fair Oak Swamp, Oak Grove, Peach Orchard, Savage Station, Glendale (where he was wounded for the first time — in the leg) and Malvern Hill. The rain, mud, malaria and exhausting marches, coupled with the obvious dangers of active operations, were notable facts of this service. A typical incident is recited by Greely in his memoir and should be familiar to any soldier who has served in the field. Placed on picket duty at night within hearing of the enemy, Greely recalled that:

It proved to be one of the worst nights of my Army life. In command of two men and knowing that on our vigilance might depend the safety of the Army in our rear, yet I felt the physical impossibility of keeping awake. The horrors of sleeping on post were a torment to me and I found both my comrades asleep from exhaustion. During my two hours of duty I sat first on one sharp stump and then on another, yet from time to time I found myself falling over, evidently dozing. Pinching myself, rubbing my eyes, wetting my eyelids, I tried every possible way of keeping awake. Never did the coming of dawn seem so attractive to me, as it came with our withdrawal. There is a limit to one's physical powers, as this experience proved to me conclusively.³

Withdrawn from the Peninsula, Sumner's Corps, of which the 19th Massachusetts was a part, returned north to participate in Second Manassas and then the great battle of Antietam. On 17 September 1862, Greely's regiment, as part of Dana's Brigade of Sedgwick's Division of Sumner's Corps, crossed Antietam Creek and attacked across the infamous Cornfield toward Confederate positions in the West Wood just north of the Dunker Church. Reaching the stone



Sgt. Adolphus W. Greely, 19th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (Civil War).

wall just inside the West Wood, Greely's regiment attempted to hold against a Confederate counterattack which turned the flanks of the Union line and forced a precipitate withdrawal. Greely later wrote:

My knowledge of affairs practically ended here. As we fell back I was shot in the face, the bullet cracking my jawbone and knocking out several of my teeth. I fell to the ground under the shock but soon got up, the regiment meanwhile having retreated. A rebel soldier within about thirty yards of me called in profane language for my surrender . . . I took the chance of death, rather than surrender. So I ran and a minute later was struck by another bullet on my left thigh, being again knocked down. Finding that I could walk, I started up a ravine down which a Union battery (Rickett's, I think) was firing. Though the shells seemed barely to skim my head I kept in the line of fire until sure of my escape.

With some difficulty I reached a field hospital station, in the open. There were already gathered many

wounded, principally Union but some Confederates. The surgeon was then binding up the wounds of a Georgian, a boy of about sixteen, wounded three times. I was struck by the dignity, composure and bearing of this prisoner. I said to myself, how are we ever going to win against a people so brave and persistent as these Southerners? It was amusing that I, a boy of eighteen, should find it remarkable that another American boy of sixteen should fight and not weep when fate went against him.⁴

Antietam was the bloodiest day of the Civil War: Union losses alone exceed 12,000 and Greely's corps, division and brigade suffered over 50% casualties; 136 out of the 384 men in the 19th Massachusetts alone were killed or wounded.

Hospitalized at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Greely left the hospital after a month and rejoined his company on 31 October 1862 in time for the battle of Fredericksburg on 11 December and the famous "Forlorn Hope." Greely's Company B, 19th Massachusetts, was the first complete unit across the Rappahannock on boats and then lost 10 of its 30 men within 5 minutes in the ensuing street fighting. Greely himself was slightly wounded in the hand. As a result of his part in "the Forlorn Hope," Greely was promoted to sergeant and in February 1863 was furloughed home, thus ending his service as an enlisted man in the 19th Massachusetts.

While home on leave, Greely was tendered a commission as lieutenant in the 54th Massachusetts, the famous regiment of black soldiers raised by Col. Robert Gould Shaw. Through a clerical error he ended up as a second lieutenant in the 81st US Colored Troops and proceeded to New Orleans. His regiment fought bravely at Port Hudson and other battles along the Mississippi.

After the war, Greely and the soldiers he commanded were assigned as the provost guard for the city of New Orleans. The duty was especially delicate for black soldiers who had to control a southern community just emerging from war and life was always exciting and sometimes hazardous on account of cholera, unreconstructed rebels and Southern women who often went out of their way to harass Union officers. Nevertheless, Greely and his troops performed their duty in an outstanding manner and earned the

grudging respect of the lately rebellious citizens.

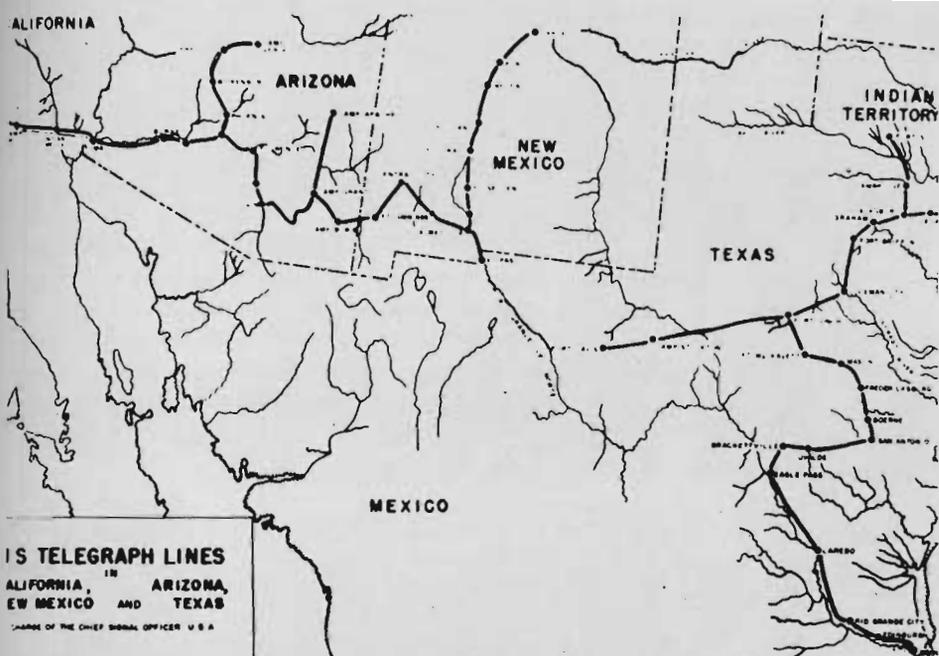
Frontier Service

After his regiment was mustered out, Greely helped to organize two of the new Regular Army black regiments, the 39th Infantry and the justly famous 9th Cavalry. In 1867 he accepted appointment as a Regular Army second lieutenant in the 36th Infantry and served at Fort Sanders, Wyoming, protecting travelers on the overland mail route from Denver to Salt Lake City. Subsequent assignments took him

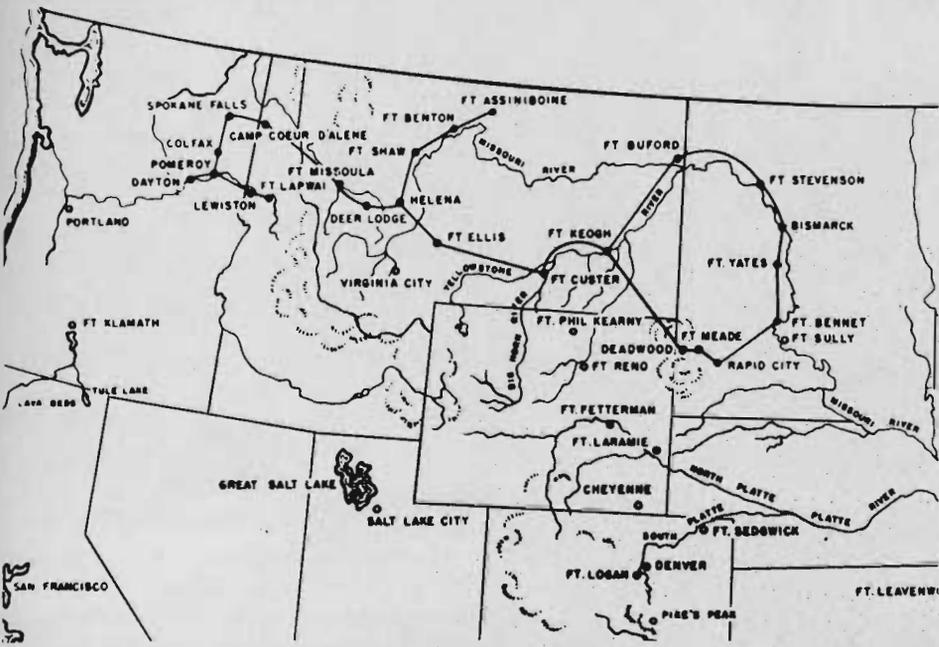
to Fort Bridger and Fort Douglas, Utah and to Salt Lake City, still tightly governed by Brigham Young and the Mormons.

Greely soon transferred to the 5th Cavalry and in late 1867 was unexpectedly detailed to the Signal Corps with which he would serve for the next 37 years. As an infantry and cavalry lieutenant, Greely had occupied his spare time in the study of electricity and the telegraph and so was not unprepared for the detail. As a detailed Signal Corps officer, he served in General Eugene C. Carr's campaign in





By 1870, cavalry officer Lt. Greely (opposite page) would be detailed to the Signal Corps, an association which was to last for the next 37 years. One of his first major tasks (1875) was to build telegraph lines to connect military posts in the West (left). 1100 miles of lines were built and operational within a year. By 1878, he was at it again: he constructed a military telegraph line from Bismarck, North Dakota, to Washington state — across the Bad Lands, where two years earlier Custer had met his fate at a place called Little Big Horn (left, below).



and Greely was consequently entrusted with important duties in building telegraph lines to connect the military posts in the West — a hazardous and onerous duty requiring great resourcefulness and drive. His first construction duty in 1875 was the lines in northern Texas and Indian Territory. The stretch from Fort Concho to Fort Bliss across the barren Staked Plains proved especially challenging in that the area was entirely without timber for poles. Ingeniously, Greely imported juniper poles from the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and constructed 200 miles of line along the Rio Grande with poles from 1000 miles away. In all, 1100 miles of line were built and in operation within a year.

After 6 months leave in Europe to recuperate, Greely returned home to rebuild 137 miles of hurricane-damaged line along the Atlantic seaboard from Norfolk, Virginia to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. In 1878 he was called on to reorganize and rebuild the line from Santa Fe, New Mexico to San Diego, California in six months.

Nebraska against the Cheyennes under Tall Bull culminating in the Battle of Summit Springs in 1869.

In 1870 Greely was assigned to Washington, D.C. to assist General Albert Myer, the Signal Corps' founder, in the organization of the United States Weather Bureau authorized by Congress in February 1870. During 1872-1873 Greely gathered data and formulated methods for the River and Flood Service and he was soon recognized as an expert meteorologist. In the course of his duties with the Signal Corps' Weather Bureau, Greely

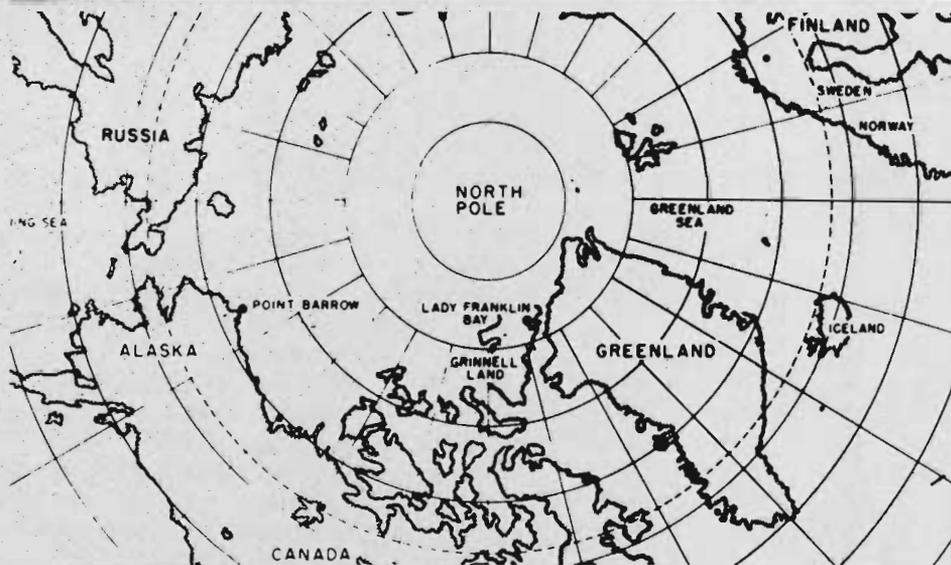
became interested in climatology and other aspects of scientific geography. He also became an intimate of Capt. Henry Howgate and a supporter of Howgate's Arctic expeditionary schemes. In fact, Greely lived for a time with the Howgate family, a sojourn he may later have regretted when Howgate, the Signal Corps' disbursing officer, was accused of embezzling government funds and disappeared never to be seen again. Greely would later put his interest in Arctic affairs to a practical test.

Gen. Myer found in Lt. Greely a dependable and skilled troubleshooter

Promised duty in the Washington headquarters, Greely married Miss Henrietta H. C. Nesmith in San Diego in 1878, but an emergency arose and he was sent north to construct a military telegraph line from Bismarck, North Dakota to Washington state across the Bad Lands and in an area where only two years before Custer had met inglorious defeat at the hands of hostile Indians. Greely overcame many



(Left) In 1881, Greely (front row, full beard) and 24 other hardy adventurers were ready to launch their Arctic expedition, which would take some of them to 83° 24' N- "Farthest North." On 11 August 1881, the party arrived at the western coast of Greenland where they established Fort Conger (below). Two years later — after relief vessels for 1882 and 1883 failed to arrive — Greely ended his scientific activities and set out with his party on what would be an incredibly arduous 51 day, 500 mile journey to Camp Sabine on Bedford Pym Island where even greater nightmares awaited them (opposite page).



establishment and operation of a number of circumpolar stations to study Arctic weather and climate. Greely volunteered and was chosen to command the station planned for the shore of Lady Franklin Bay opposite the western coast of Greenland. Greely and his party of 24 men arrived at their station on 11 August 1881 and established Fort Conger. Although hastily organized, the expedition was generously equipped and was supplied

with rations sufficient for two years. Under Greely's direction, the members of the expedition amassed an important collection of data on Arctic weather and tidal conditions, studied the plants and animals of the region and carried out a very successful program of exploration and discovery which included the attainment of the "Farthest North" (83° 24' N) on 13 May 1882 by 2nd Lt. James B. Lockwood and Sgt. (later Brig. Gen.) David L. Brainard, the

difficulties and had the 600-mile line in operation before "snow flew." Before leaving the area, Greely was ordered to inspect the entire line and was given an escort of only a sergeant and two men with a four-mule wagon. His inspection tour was extremely hazardous as Greely acknowledged:

Two days out, in the midst of the Bad Lands, a violent blizzard struck us and for thirty-six hours we lay buried in snow, suffering from high winds, no fire possible and the temperature down to zero. In a way the blizzard was a blessing, as no Indians would keep on the war-path in such weather. When I met, at Powder River, a captain with a full troop of cavalry, he asked, "Where is the rest of your escort?" When I said that this was all, he blurted out, "What d fool sent you into an Indian country with three men?" "A distinguished colonel of Civil War experience," I answered. "Well," said he, "you had nerve to come." "What else could a lieutenant do?" I queried.⁵

By 1880 nearly 5000 miles of Signal Corps telegraph line linked the military posts and frontier settlements in the American West. Greely's arduous and often dangerous construction duties provided the opportunity for him to develop the physical stamina, administrative acumen and leadership skills which characterized his later service. He soon needed every bit of stamina and leadership he could muster.

83° 24' North!

In 1880-1881 the United States government organized an expedition to participate with other nations in the

LOCKWOOD & BRAINARD'S
 FARTHEST NORTH
 LAT. 83° 24', LONG. 40° 46'



discovery of Lake Hazen and survey of its environs also in 1882 and the crossing in May 1883 of Grant and Grinnell Lands. Faced with some internal dissension from a lieutenant relieved of duty on the day of the departure of the expedition supply ship and a civilian doctor who aspired to direct the expedition himself, Greely exercised the strict discipline and firm leadership so necessary for a small party in such perilous surroundings.

His leadership was to be tested even more when the relief vessels scheduled for 1882 and 1883 failed to reach Fort Conger. Following his orders, Greely ended the scientific activities of the expedition, abandoned Fort Conger on 9 August 1883 and his party proceeded in four small boats southward in Kennedy Channel toward the prearranged rendezvous location. The party encountered extremely difficult conditions and was forced to abandon

the boats and travel over the ice but negotiated the 51-day, 500-mile passage safely, arriving at Cape Sabine on Bedford Pym Island intact, but exhausted, and with supplies already running low.

Part II of "Greely" will be published in the next issue of AC. In it, Shrader continues the tale of the Arctic expedition and the horrors awaiting the party at Camp Sabine. He then follows Greely's career through his retirement in 1908 and his death in 1935 at the age of 91.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Adolphus W. Greely, *Reminiscences of Adventure and Service* (New York, 1927), 23-24.
- ²Greely, 27.
- ³Greely, 51.
- ⁴Greely, 75-76.
- ⁵Greely, 156-157.

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Lt. Col. Shrader, who is chief of the Oral History Branch of the US Army Military History Institute, earned his BA in history from Vanderbilt. He also holds an MA, an MPhil and a PhD in history, all earned at Columbia University. Shrader's special interests include medieval history, US military history (1870-1914), and the history of logistics. He has published on each interest. Among his awards is the RVN Gallantry Cross.