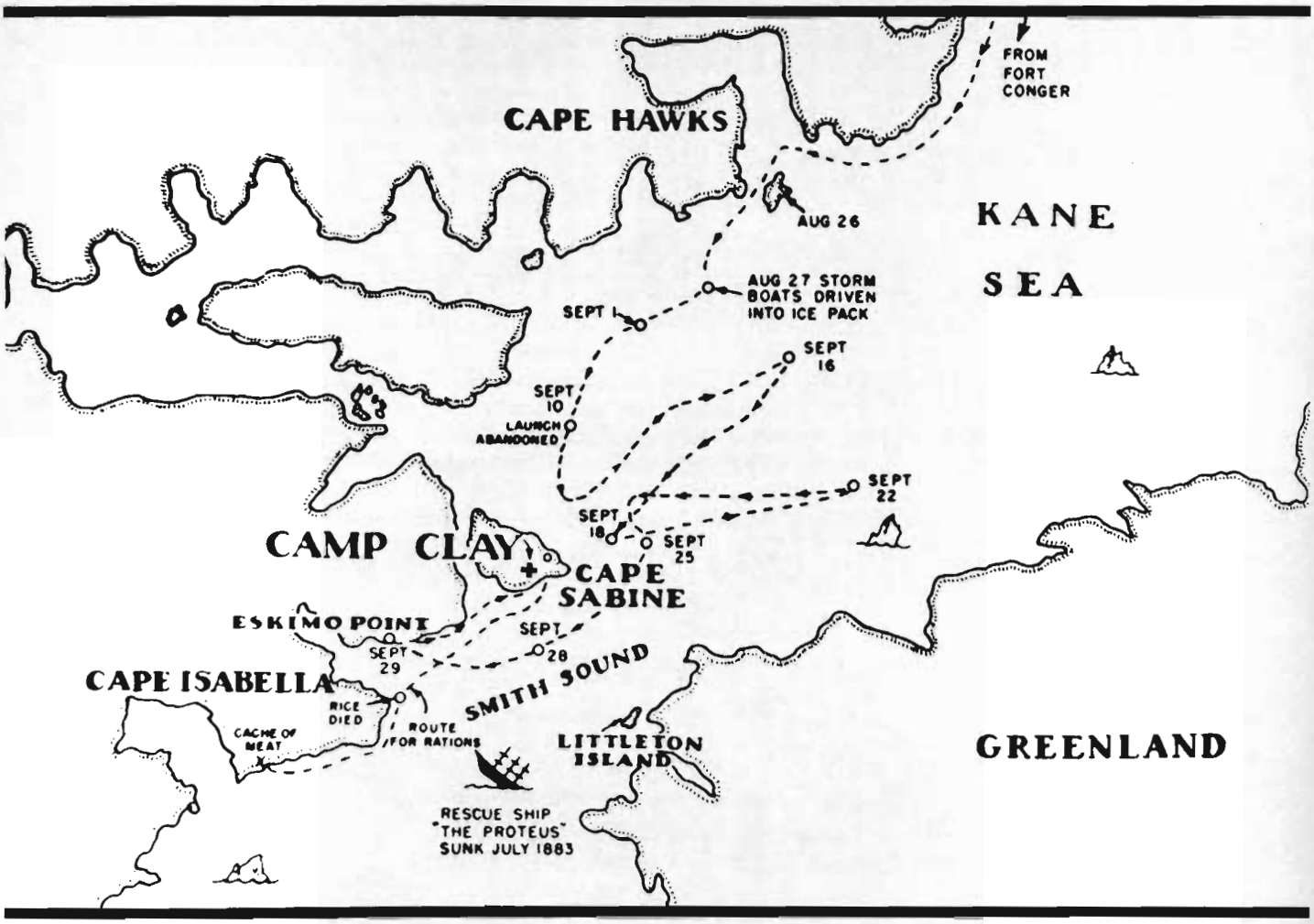
Greely

Part II - by Lt. Col. Charles R. Shrader

EDITOR'S NOTE: In part I of "Greely," the author traced the career of Signal Corps pioneer Adolphus W. Greely from his boyhood in new England, through his service in the Civil War and on the western frontier, to his command of one of the first Signal Corps weather expeditions to the Arctic in 1881. Greely and his party of 24 men established Ft. Conger, Alaska, and reeled off a string of important scientific observations and historical explorations before abandoning the station in 1883 because supply ships failed to reach them with vital supplies two years in succession. With only meager rations and supplies left, the men survived a hazardous 51 day, 500 mile trek southward to Cape Sabine, Bedford Pym Island, where they hoped to rendezvous with another relief supply ship. Part II picks up with the Greely party at Cape Sabine.

At Cape Sabine they established Camp Clay to await the hoped-for arrival of relief. The ship dispatched for that purpose under command of Lt. Garlington, USA, was crushed in the ice without reaching the Greely party and failed to land its supplies as expected. Years later Greely criticized the inept conduct of Garlington (who later rose to become Inspector General of the Army):

Garlington's action in taking away every ounce of food he could



not carry cannot be justified . . . Within thirty miles of twenty days' rations for his crew, he loaded his boats to the danger line, even carrying food in tow, to insure the safety of his own men. Others may justify this extreme prudence for himself and party, but I can hardly be expected to do so. It is to America's honor that *safety first* has never been the watchword of our Army.[6]

The subsequent winter of 1883-1884 became a nightmare of starvation and dispair. Supplementing their scanty stores with lichens, a few small shrimp and, finally, their sealskin clothing and the sinews used to bind together the sledges, the party was steadily reduced by accident, exposure, starvation and one official execution, ordered by Greely for a soldier guilty of the theft of food and perhaps suspected of cannibalism. Between January and June of 1884, 18 of the 25 members of the expedition perished. This period was characterized by both heroic self-sacrifice and the darker aspects of human behavior. Despite his own failing health, Greely maintained control of the dwindling survivors with the help of a few dedicated subordinates, notably Brainard, and thus managed to avoid a final, catastrophic disintegration of the group.

By 22 June 1884 the handful of survivors were, with one exception, confined to their sleeping bags and were within hours of death from malnutrition and disease when the relief expedition under the command of Capt. Winfield Scott Schley, USN, later the hero of Santiago in the Spanish American War of 1898, finally located the survivors and returned six of them to their homes. In his report to the Secretary of the Navy, Schley detailed the pitiful scene at Camp Clay:

Lieutenant Greely was in his sleeping bag, with his body slightly inclined and resting his head upon his hand. Notwithstanding he had been told who we were he appeared dazed and asked if we were not Englishmen. Physically he seemed weakest, except Connell; mentally, he appeared more vigorous than the others of his party. His mind wandered somewhat. His answers to questions appeared disconnected and at times incoherent; occasionally he would collect himself, apparently with some effort, but would soon indicate that his memory was indistinct . . .

He had lain for weeks in his sleeping bag on account of gradually failing strength; was unable to stand alone and was almost helpless, except in a sitting posture; all pain of hunger had ceased; his appearance was wild; his hair was long and matted; his face and hands were covered with sooty, thick dirt; his form had wasted almost to a skeleton; his feet and joints were swollen; his eyes were sunken and his body scantily covered with dirt and almost worn out garments, which had not been changed for six or eight months . . . The conditions of the surroundings of this wretched camp were in keeping with the scenes inside and

(OPPOSITE PAGE) The Greely party's cruel journey from Fort Conger began August 8, 1883. They landed at Eskimo Point September 29 after having been adrift for a month in an ice pack. Greely then established Camp Clay at Cape Sabine where they awaited rescue — which did not come until June 22, 1884. By that time only seven men were left and one died shortly after rescue. The six survivors (LEFT) sat for a photograph aboard the rescue ship on the route home. They were: (seated) Sgt. David Brainard (LEFT) and Greely. Standing left to right are Sgt. Francis Long, Pvt. Julius Fredericks, Pvt. Maurice Connell and Pvt. Henry Biederbick. (US Army photo)

about the tent — desperate, desolate and abandoned.[7]

The scientific achievements of the expedition and the hardships endured by the survivors as well as the stirring rescue were soon forgotten amid titillating accusations of murder and cannibalism during the sojourn at Camp Clay. Greely was blamed for the tragic outcome of the affair, but he was eventually absolved when it became apparent that most of the tragedy was made in Washington and that the startling practice of cannibalism was confined to members of the party who had died before the arrival of relief, partly in consequence of their own reprehensible activity. One of the unsung victims of the story was the Chief Signal Officer, Brig. Gen. William B. Hazen. His aggressive efforts to insure the relief of Greely's party over the objections of the Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln led to his conviction by a courtmartial for insubordination — a clear case in which a senior officer placed principle before career advantage and suffered the legal, but perhaps unjust, consequences.

The scientific data salvaged along with the wracked bodies of the survivors proved of great value to our knowledge of the earth's climate and tidal patterns. In due time, the soundness of Greely's judgement and the skill of his leadership became clearly established and he received credit for his magnificent accomplishments. He was widely acclaimed as a hero in Europe and in 1886 he received the Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society of London and the Roquette Medal of the Societe de Geographie of Paris. In 1923 the American Geographical Society belatedly awarded him its Charles P. Daly Medal.

Chief Signal officer

Official recognition was somewhat delayed but came in a spectacular manner. From May 1873, while detailed to the Signal Corps, Greely had held the rank of first lieutenant in the 5th United States Cavlary. While abandoned in the Arctic, his normal promotion to captain was awarded by congress to a civilian instead, but in June 1886 he finally became a captain at the age of 42 after six years active volunteer service and 19 years as a Regular Army lieutenant. After Greely had served several months as Acting Chief Signal Officer during the terminal illness of Hazen, President Grover Cleveland in March 1887 appointed him Chief Signal Officer of the Army with the rank of brigadier general in which position and grade he served for the next 19 years. He was the first volunteer private soldier of the Civil War to reach Regular Army general officer rank.

During his long tenure as Chief Signal Officer, Greely proved both an astute politician and an innovative administrator. He fought successfully to keep the Signal Corps in existence and insured it was staffed with capable officers of proven scientific expertise. He also reformed and supervised the operations of the weather bureau until it was transferred to the Department of Agriculture in 1891 on his recommendation.

The loss of the weather bureau nearly spelled the end of the Signal Corps in that many senior officers of the Army did not think electrical communications were necessary for the military. An ex-secretary of war even introduced a bill in Congress to abolish the Signal Corps altogether and the War Department officially declared as late as February 1885 that electric communications were "not a proper object for the existence of a Bureau in the War Department" and that only one officer could do all necessary signal duty. Greely vigorously opposed such attitudes and noted in his first annual report:

> . . .In these days of rapid military movements the great value of sure, speedy and secret methods of communication between cooperating forces cannot be questioned and it should be equally obvious that the personnel of an efficient military signalling establishment should be possessed of a high degree of technical skill, which is essentially necessary to insure that extended use of electrical communication so essential between the various commanders of columns and lines of campaigning troops . . . There can be no proper substitute for a small but thoroughly efficient signal corps.[8]

Despite Greely's stirring defense, the War Department nevertheless attempted to kill the Corps in subsequent years by continually reducing appropriations.

The duties of the Chief Signal Officer with respect to the weather bureau up to 1891 were largely political and bureaucratic and Greely handled such matters firmly and honorably. Appointments to civilian positions in the bureau were often subject to political pressure and Greely handled them with aplomb and good sense. He later wrote:

> Political protests were listened to patiently and answered courteously. For instance, an observer had been guilty of photographing girls, when nude, in his public office. Both senators (my friends) of the state wherein the offence was committed, came to my office and insisted that the man be restored. When other comments were unavailing to move them I said: "You are a power in the Senate. If I accede to your request, which you must make in writing, I shall furnish the Associated Press with a copy of your request, adding to it the name of the offender and also of the young girls, who, being of respectable parents, had not been named so far to the public." Both senators said that they did not wish the affair made public and expressed their surprise when I showed them the evidence of the man's guilt. I permitted the man to ask for his discharge, which satisfied the senators, who were my friends to the day of their death.[9]

As Chief Signal Officer, Greely acted forcefully to improve signal instruction and equipment and oversaw the construction of tens of thousands of miles of military telegraph lines and undersea cable. He was the moving force in adapting the developing technology of the late nineteenth century to military purposes. Under his direction, the Signal Corps introduced the use of photography, the telephone, the radio, the automobile and many other modern devices. By 1892, 59 of the garrisoned posts of the Army were equipped with telephone systems and in 1903 Capt. D. L. Wildman established the first operating radio link, 107 miles across Norton Sound from Nome to St. Michael, Alaska.

A good deal of the Signal Corps work in the early part of the twentieth century involved the construction of telegraph lines and undersea cable in the Philippines and in Alaska. In May 1900 Congress authorized an extensive system in Alaska. Among the Signal Corps officers who braved -70°F, temperatures in winter and hordes of mosquitoes in summer was Greely's protege, Lt. Billy Mitchell, later famous in another Signal Corps activity, military aviation.

In the early 1890s, the use of military ballooning was revived and interest grew in the military possibilities of the heavier-than-air flying machine. In his memoirs Greely later commented that his most important official act in peacetime was the expenditure of $50,000 in 1898 to convince Samuel P. Langley to produce a flying machine for war purposes. Although Langley's experiments were unsuccessful, they encouraged the Wright Brothers and led to the perfection of manned, powered flight five years later and the Signal Corps continued to direct Army aviation until after World War I.

Greely's work carried him outside the United States as well. As the United States delegate to the International Telegraph Congress in London and the International Wireless Telegraph Congress in Berlin in 1903, he also worked successfully to involve the United States in international agreements on communications. In addition, from 1894 to 1904 the Chief Signal Officer was charged with maintaining the War Department Library, "the most extensive research and technical reference library on military history and science in America." The bulk of that library, greatly added to, is now preserved at the United States Army Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

Despite reduced appropriations for the Signal Corps in the years before 1898 Greely, through his own forcefulness and preparation, insured the enormous expansion and significant contribution of the Corps in the war with Spain in 1898. Greely's subordinates provided efficient and flexible military communications in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines as well as the United States and indeed the greatest intelligence coup of the war, the location of the Spanish fleet under Admiral Cervera at Santiago, Cuba, was the work of Signal Corps personnel, not the Navy.

Having refused promotion in the line of the Army to direct the Signal Corps' activities in the Spanish-American War, Greely was finally promoted to major general in February 1906 and was assigned to command the Pacific Division. There, he was responsible for the coordination of all official relief activities in San Francisco following the great earthquake and fire of 1906. This task was the largest peacetime coordination effort of the Army up to that time. He subsequently commanded the Northern Division and ended the Ute Rebellion of 1905-1906 without bloodshed. His final assignment was as commander of the Department of the Columbia.

In March 1908 Adolphus W. Greely at the age of 64 was retired for age, a retirement which in no way reduced his active contribution to national life. Following an around-the-world trip in 1909, he occupied himself with writing and various public service

(BELOW) Greely wears the two stars of major general in what was probably the last official photograph of the Chief Signal Officer, who retired March 27, 1908. (RIGHT) Greely makes use of a brand new invention. (US Army photos)

endeavors. He had been one of the founders of the National Geographic Society in 1888 and remained one of its trustees until his death. It was to the society's collection that he donated the majority of his personal library including many volumes on arctic exploration and several hundred scrapbooks of his own compilation. He was active in a wide range of fraternal and service organizations. He helped to establish the first free public library in the District of Columbia, was the first president of the Explorer's Club in New York and was one of the six original founders of the Cosmos Club in Washington. His wife, Henrietta H. C. Nesmith Greely, whom he married in 1878 and by whom he fathered six children (one of whom himself became an Army general), was a founder of the Daughters of the American Revolution. In 1911 Greely was recalled to active duty to represent the United States and President Taft at the coronation of George V of England where he displayed his customary Yankee independence by wearing the regulation long uniform trousers rather than the prescribed court kneepants.

On his ninety-first birthday, 27 March 1935, Adolphus W. Greely was presented with a special Congressional Medal of Honor, the second American so honored for peacetime service. Charles Lindbergh was the first. He died on 20 October 1935 at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington attended by Brig. Gen. (retired) David L. Brainard, who had shared with him an earlier approach to death in the frozen hut at Cape Sabine. He was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

Conclusion

Adolphus W. Greely's long and active life spanned the central half of the history of the nation which he so faithfully served. As a small child, he saw a veteran of the Revolution on parade and in later life he associated with men who were to become veterans of a second world war. He not only witnessed the development of the United States from a rural, predominantly agricultural land rent by civil war at home and despised abroad into an urban, industrial and united world power, he played an active role in bringing about the transformation.

Early in his life, Greely proved himself a man of action and a soldier in some of the hardest fighting of the Civil War. He combatted both the elements and the hostile Indians as he opened the West and tied the nation together with military telegraph lines. His greatest personal challenge came as leader of the ill-fated Lady Franklin Bay Expedition and provided a story of unparalleled human courage and endurance.

Greely achieved lasting international fame as a result of his feats of personal fortitude in the Arctic, but he always claimed that his detailed scientific work was far more important. Indeed, when the data collected by the 1881-1884 Arctic Expedition are added to Greely's earlier studies of the floods and climate of the Mississippi Valley, his claim to have significantly improved man's knowledge of the earth's geography, climate and tidal conditions

Secretary of War George Dern pins the Medal of Honor on Greely's lapel during a ceremony in 1935 at the Chief Signal Officer's home in Georgetown. Greely, the only Chief Signal Officer to receive the coveted award, died later that year. He was 91. (US Army photo)

is fully justified. Much of the data which he collected is still useful. His accomplishments in the scientific field are all the more striking in that his scientific knowledge was entirely self-taught

Unhampered by the conservatism and lack of vision which seized so many of his contemporaries, Greely skillfully and enthusiastically led the Signal Corps and the Army into the modern era of advanced technology. Under his guidance as Chief Signal Officer, the Army added to its means of defending the nation such instruments of modern science as the radio, the automobile and the airplane. Greely's ability to foresee the usefulness of such inventions and his willingness to patiently and persistently promote their inclusion in the national arsenal, often against great opposition, contributed to the emergence of the United States Army as one of the world's most technologically advanced military forces.

Although known as a demanding taskmaster of his subordinates, Greely never failed in his attentiveness to the human needs of those who shared his long march through life. It is perhaps indicative of his basic humility and concern for others that in each of his annual reports as Chief Signal Officer he took care to attribute the achievements of his bureau to the responsible officers and men by name, a practice not continued by his successors. He bore modestly his great fame as an explorer, scientist and military leader and skillfully used his friendships and acquaintances with political and scientific leaders of many nations to the advantage of his own.

Adolphus W. Greely is perhaps the foremost example of the small, but important, group of soldier-scientist-adventurers who led the nation into the twentieth century. He was favored by fortune in that his long military career was dedicated to the building-up rather than the tearing-down of nations. Greely's career was succinctly summarized at his death by Acting Secretary of War Harry H. Woodring who noted that, "The career of General Greely is a striking example of the contributions a soldier may make to civilization. The Army salutes a brave comrade, a great leader, a distinguished scientist, a devoted servant of the Republic."

ENDNOTES

[6]Adolphus W. Greely, *Reminiscences of Adventure and Service* (New York, 1927), 135.

[7]"Report of Winfield S. Schley, Commander, US Navy, Commanding Greely Relief Expedition of 1884," (Washington, 1887), 45-48.

[8]*Historical Sketch of the Signal Corps (1860-1928).* (Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, 1929), 38-39.

[9]Greely, *Reminiscences of Adventure and Service,* 170.

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