Voices of the Past

Part of the Army Heritage Center Foundation’s Educational Series

Fire & Ice: Adolphus W. Greely

United States, 1861-1908) Adolphus Washington Greely was born on March 27, 1844, in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Greely spent most of his life in the Army, serving in the Signal Corps.

Enlisting in 1861 in the 19th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, he saw action in some of the Civil War’s bloodiest battles such as Ball’s Bluff, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. He was wounded three times. After rising from private to sergeant, Greely accepted a commission in 1863 with the 81st Colored Troops. By the end of the Civil War, Greely was a brevet major of volunteers, and from 1856 to 1867 commanded black troops in the occupation of New Orleans.

In 1867, Greely was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Regular Army and assigned to the 36th Infantry. In his spare time, he studied telegraphy and electricity. While in the Signal Corps, Greely served under General Eugene Carr in the 1869 Nebraska campaign against the Cheyenne Indians. By 1870, he was assigned to Washington, D.C. His new duty was to help Brigadier General Albert Myer, the Signal Corps’ founder, organize the U.S. Weather Bureau. Greely became an adept meteorologist while collecting data and designing methods for the River and Flood Service during 1872 and 1873.

In June of 1878, Greely married Henrietta Nesmith. Henrietta, an extraordinarily devoted wife, would eventually save Greely’s life. In the early years of their marriage Greely served as a “troubleshooter” for the Army, which was busy constructing telegraph lines throughout the frontier territories. In 1881, however, Greely volunteered to lead a weather expedition to the Arctic. Henrietta Read more at www.armyheritage.org

Questions or comments please contact: info@armyheritage.org

The Proteus trapped in ice. Photo Courtesy of the USAHEC, Greely Relief Expedition Collection.
opposed the idea. Arctic exploration in the 19th century was extremely dangerous, and losses of 50% or more of the expedition members was common. Greely, however, was determined to go.

Ultimately, Henrietta’s fears were realized. Greely’s party did amass a great deal of data on Arctic weather and tidal conditions, and set a record for traveling further north than any human beings on record to that time. Unfortunately, bad weather and heavy sea-ice blocked the relief ships two years in a row. Stranded on Ellesmere Island near the North Pole, the 25 men of the expedition ran out of food and began to starve.

After several failed attempts to rescue the stranded men, and with no way of knowing if they were even still alive, the Army was reluctant to risk men and ships in further efforts. But Henrietta Greely was just as determined as her husband, and appealed to the Army to try again. In April of 1884 another attempt began, and this time the ship got through. After three winters in the Arctic, however, only seven members of the expedition, including Greely, were still alive. Sixteen men had died of cold, starvation, and disease; and one had been shot for stealing food. A seventeenth man died shortly after the relief party arrived.

Criticized at first, Greely was eventually absolved of blame and recognized for his accomplishments. 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 awarded him the Charles P. Daly Medal.

While in the Arctic, Greely missed a promotion to captain but made that rank in June 1886. Then in March 1887, President Grover Cleveland advanced Greely from captain to brigadier general, appointing him Chief Signal Officer. He served in that capacity for the next 19 years. Greely reportedly was the “first volunteer private soldier of the Civil War to reach Regular Army general officer rank.”

As Chief Signal Officer, Greely fought and won the political battle to save the Signal Corps’ very existence. He constantly reformed the Signal Corps, which included the Weather Bureau until the Department of Agriculture took it over in 1891. His innovations led to the Army’s adoption of wireless telegraphy, the airplane, the automobile and other modern devices. Greely represented the United States at the International Telegraph Congress in London and the International Wireless Telegraph Congress in Berlin in 1903, and worked on some of the first international telecommunication treaties.

After directing the Signal Corps through the Spanish-American War, he was promoted to major general in February 1906 and assigned to command the Pacific Division. In that role he coordinated the relief activities during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. As commander of the Northern Division, he negotiated an end to the Ute Rebellion of 1905-1906. Greely’s last assignment was commander of the Department of the Columbia.

Greely retired in 1908. After a trip around the world, he helped found the National Geographic Society and the first free public library in Washington, D.C. Greely was active in many fraternal and service organizations.

On March 27, 1935, his 91st birthday, Greely was presented with a special Medal of Honor “for his life of splendid public service” by special act of Congress becoming the Signal Corps’ fifth Medal of...
Fire & Ice: Adolphus W. Greely

Honor winner, and one of only four people to ever receive the medal by special act of Congress. He died the following October and was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

One biographer believed Greely was "perhaps the foremost example of the small but important group of soldier-scientist-adventurers who led the nation into the 21st century." When Greely died, acting Secretary of War Henry Woodring summarized Greely’s career: "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 Republic."

Sources


Research Interns

Chris Brown
Rachel Moats