**Voices of the Past**

**Army Heritage Center Foundation**

**Part of the Army Heritage Center Foundation’s Educational Series**

**Surrounded by Ice: The Lady Franklin Bay Expedition**

*Arctic, 1881-1884*  The idea for the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition arose in 1875 when a member of the Austrian navy proposed a joint international effort to gather scientific data from the Arctic, then thought to be the key to understanding global weather. The plan eventually grew to include 14 weather stations that would ring the Arctic, gathering data that would allow the world’s meteorological agencies to build new theories to predict the weather.

In 1881, Congress agreed to fund two weather stations in the north: one at Point Barrow, Alaska and another on the shores of Lady Franklin Bay in Northern Canada, about 500 miles from the North Pole. Later that year the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, led by Lieutenant Adolphus W. Greely, set off from St. John’s, Newfoundland, aboard the ship *Proteus*. On August 11th the ship and crew reached Ellesmere Island at the entrance to the bay. Here the expedition established Fort Conger as their base. The *Proteus* departed Lady Franklin Bay on August 26th. Nearly three-and-a-half years would pass before anyone saw Greely or any of his 24 men again.

Greely’s mission was to record the weather, collect specimens, and attempt to set a record for the closest approach to the North Pole. The men expected to stay in the Arctic for several years, and relied on the return of their supply ships in 1882 and 1883.

On May 12, 1882, three members of the expedition, Lt. James Lockwood, Sgt. David Brainard, and an Inuit dogsled driver Frederick Christiansen; broke the previously held British record for closest approach to the pole, reaching a spot approximately 400 nautical miles from the pole (83°24′N 40°46′W83).

On July 8, 1882, the resupply ship...
Neptune left St. John’s and headed toward Greely and his men. Unfortunately, the summer of 1881 had been unusually warm, and the ice unusually thin when Greely and his men were dropped off, giving the members of the expedition a false sense of the difficulties involved in the resupply mission. This time the ice was heavier, and blocked the Neptune’s progress. The resupply crew had to leave their supplies at Cape Sabine, over a hundred miles south of Greely’s location.

By August, as the short Arctic summer came to an end, Greely and his men realized that the resupply ship was not coming. They would have to wait out another winter with nothing more than the supplies at hand and what they could hunt for locally.

The 1883 attempt at resupply faired even worse. On June 28, 1883, the Proteus, left St. John’s under the command of Lt. Ernest Garlington. The Proteus also failed to reach Greely, and on July 22nd was caught and crushed by the ice. She sank with most of the provisions still on board. Garlington and his crew abandoned ship and survived in small boats for forty days until they were rescued.

Without resupply Greely needed to make a decision. The contingency plan for the expedition called for the relief vessels to deposit supplies at Cape Sabine if they could not reach Greely. Greely could head south in search of supplies that might not be there, or remain at Fort Conger where there were seals to hunt for food. He had to weigh the fact that any subsequent relief expeditions would look for him at Cape Sabine, and that no relief vessels might ever reach him at Fort Conger.

Greely decided to head south. The expedition set out in their small boats, but soon became trapped in the ice and had to transfer to an ice floe. At the mercy of the wind and tides, they eventually came ashore, after 51 days afloat, at Eskimo point, and made their way to Cape Sabine, arriving in early October. Expecting a grand cache, they found only a few weeks of food and a note from Lt. Garlington detailing the sinking of the Proteus. Realizing that these meager supplies would have to last 25 men until spring, Greely drastically reduced the men’s daily ration.

By October the men were desperately hungry, and by January 1884 they were suffering from scurvy. The first man died on January 18th. In the following months the men would resort to eating candle wax, shoe leather, bird droppings, and the tiny shrimp they managed to net, but they never had enough, and men continued to die. After Private Charles Henry was caught stealing food three times, Greely issued a written order that the next man caught stealing would be shot. Henry ignored the warning and was shot the next day.

Meanwhile, Henrietta Greely continued to press the government to mount another rescue attempt, lobbying government officials and taking her story to the press. The government finally authorized another attempt in April 1884. On June 22nd the ships of the relief expedition found the seven survivors, one of whom died shortly after the ships arrived, leaving only six.
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Greely was dogged by sensational reports of murder and cannibalism. He was criticized for the decision to leave Fort Conger, his management of the expedition during the movement south, and for the decision to execute Henry when other members of the expedition had also stolen food. In time, however, Greely won praise for his leadership and discipline during the months of starvation at Cape Sabine. Moreover the data gathered by the expedition continue to be of considerable scientific value to scientists studying global warming. Greely’s subsequent career and the honors he received later in life are a testament to his abilities and accomplishments.

Sources


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The *Proteus* trapped in ice. Photo Courtesy of the USAHEC, Greely Relief Expedition Collection.