

# Appalachia

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Volume 67  
Number 2 Summer/Fall 2016: *Living with the  
Consequences*

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Article 3

2016

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Laura Waterman

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### Recommended Citation

Waterman, Laura (2016) "'All a Question of Luck': Hope Deteriorated into a Survival Game in the A. W. Greely Expedition," *Appalachia*: Vol. 67: No. 2, Article 3.

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# “All a Question of Luck”

*Hope deteriorated into a survival game  
in the A. W. Greely expedition*

**Laura Waterman**



Ah! It is all a question of luck. If I had not thought that I was lucky  
I should never have come up here. —A. W. Greely

THIS IS A STORY THAT STARTED AS A BOLD ADVENTURE OF SCIENCE and discovery in the Arctic but deteriorated into a survival game. This is a story of desperate men driven to desperate acts as they fought to stay alive. My involvement in this grim tale has been as meticulous researcher for a novel in which I've tried to imagine how, exactly, events turned so badly. I wanted to break through to an essence of our natures that could emerge only under the extremity of physical and mental distress. Here, I'm going to tell the story based only on available facts.

The U.S. government-funded Lady Franklin Bay Expedition of 1881 to 1884 was an original and daring plan, the equivalent of the early days of space travel. Its leader, Lt. Adolphus Washington Greely, was a Massachusetts native who had built his credentials stringing telegraph lines across America's deserts and mountains for the U.S. Army Signal Corps. With his gift for administrative detail and ability to handle men to get the job done, Greely appeared ideally suited to lead this trip of science and exploration that would have his party living within 500 miles of the North Pole. What went wrong at their last camp can never be entirely known. That the men cannibalized their dead colleagues is undisputed, but when and how is not recorded.

The expedition, a party of 25 men, most in their 20s, the oldest 40, steamed out of St. John's, Newfoundland, on the SS *Proteus* on July 8, 1881, just after the news broke that President James Garfield had been shot. They were not to learn whether the newly elected president lived or died for many months. The personnel included Dr. Octave Pavy, whom they picked up in Godhavn, Greenland; Lt. Frederick Kislingbury, a man Greely knew from the Army Signal Corps and who seemed to long for the Arctic as much as Greely did; and an Army private who signed on as Charles B. Henry, an alias that hid his true identity of thief and murderer. From the standpoint of this expedition, Henry was no ordinary thief, but a thief who stole food.

The ship headed north, through Baffin Bay and Smith Sound into the swirling currents of the Kane Basin and on up the narrow, ice-choked

*The six survivors propped themselves up for this photo aboard the rescue ship in July 1884.* U.S. ARMY COMMUNICATIONS-ELECTRONIC COMMAND HISTORICAL OFFICE

Kennedy Channel to Discovery Harbor above the 82nd parallel. Capt. Richard Pike landed them at Lady Franklin Bay, on Ellesmere Land (as it was known then) in early August 1881, an isolated, bleak, lonesome, uninhabited, treeless, unforgiving spot, a rugged landscape of dark cliff faces, ice, and snow. Greely's men were the farthest north of any of the stations participating in this groundbreaking scientific effort called the International Polar Year. They built an army barracks with the precut lumber they'd brought and settled in, calling their station Fort Conger.

### **Two Years In: A Retreat Down the Ellesmere Coast**

Let us pick up the story two years later, after Lt. Greely and company were forced to leave Fort Conger by open boat and retreat down the Ellesmere coastline. He had hoped to encounter the ship coming up to reprovision them but did not, and so was compelled to land his men at the last possible point on the Ellesmere coast before they would be swept away to certain death in Baffin Bay. He called their landing place Eskimo Point for its ancient stone foundations and set his men to building stone hovels, chinked with snow and ice. Greely hoped a ship had left supplies for them up the coast at Cape Sabine, and sent their photographer Sgt. George Rice on a scouting trip. When Rice returned to report cairns with tinned food, Greely abandoned their half-built stone structures and marched his men the 30 miles north to that available food supply.

Rice had brought back messages, too, and the men learned that the relief ship, the SS *Neptune*, sent in 1882, had been stopped by pack ice. The man in charge, an Army private named William Beebe, had not dared to leave more than 250 individual rations, a mere ten days of food for these 25 men. They learned as well that the next summer, 1883, the ship that had originally taken them north, the SS *Proteus*, under the command of an Army officer, Lt. Ernest Garlington, had been crushed by the pack and sunk in these very waters. Garlington had left them no more than 240 rations, and a message promising that "everything within the power of man will be done to rescue the brave men of Lady Franklin Bay from their perilous position."

When this second relief had not appeared, Greely made the decision to leave the station at Lady Franklin Bay. Garlington might have sunk his ship, but his orders were to wait for Greely on the Greenland side, on Littleton Island, telescopes trained for their arrival. His message was dated only ten

## Lady Franklin Bay Expedition Members

Name	Description	Age*	Fate
Jacob Bender	Private	29	Died
Henry Biederbick	Private	22	Survived
David Brainard	Sergeant	24	Survived
Frederik Christiansen	Eskimo	34	Died
Maurice Connell	Private	29	Survived
William Cross	Sergeant	37	Died
Jens Edwards	Eskimo	37	Died
Joe Elison	Corporal	31	Died
William Ellis	Private	40	Died
Julius "Shorty" Frederick	Private	28	Survived
Hampden Gardiner	Sergeant, Meteorologist	24	Died
Adolphus Washington Greely	Lieutenant	37	Survived
Charles B. Henry**	Private	25	Executed
Ned Israel	Sergeant, Astronomer	21	Died
Winfield Jewell	Sergeant, Meteorologist	30	Died
Frederick Kislingbury	Lieutenant	33	Died
David Linn	Sergeant	c.30	Died
James Lockwood	Lieutenant	28	Died
Francis Long	Private	28	Survived
Octave Pavy	Physician	37	Died
George Rice	Sergeant, photographer	26	Died
David Ralston	Sergeant, Meteorologist	32	Died
Nicholas Salor	Corporal	30	Died
Roderick Schneider	Private	c.30	Died
William Whisler	Private	24	Died

\* Age at the start of the expedition in 1881

\*\*Alias



*The expedition leader, A. W. Greely.* FROM THREE YEARS OF ARCTIC SERVICE (LONDON: RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON, 1886)

weeks previous. Now, from the exposed knuckle of Cape Sabine, the men could see the Greenland coast, not more than 30 miles across Smith Sound.

Greely selected a low-lying campsite situated behind a ridge of jagged rock that ran parallel to the shoreline. He hoped this ridge would act as a windbreak.

The wind was incessant. He paced off a 25-by-18-foot space and had the men construct stone walls two feet thick. They overturned the whaleboat on rafters of oars for the roof. They built an outer wall of snow blocks to insulate and shut out the wind. Sgt. David Brainard, in charge of their food supplies, erected his snow-block commissary to the left of the crawlway entrance. Inside, the men dug rocks out of the floor and lined up facing each other, two or even three to a sleeping bag. Greely stationed himself in the middle of a row, the seal blubber lamp hanging above his head. He lit this only at meals because their fuel was minimal. Pvt. Jacob Bender rigged up a small sheet-iron stove, but with no proper chimney, smoke filled the hut, sending the



*Charles B. Henry as he looked a few years before the expedition.*

PROPERTY OF DR. GEOFFREY E. CLARK

men into their bags in fits of coughing. Bender also made a scale for Brainard, who weighed all they ate. They weren't eating much: less than a pound a day, one-fifth the ration for Arctic work. Greely called their settlement Camp Clay, after the great orator Henry Clay's grandson, who, unable to get along with their surgeon, Dr. Pavy, had given up his place on the expedition.

Most trying were the minor discomforts. They could not lean back with any ease. The walls sloped and they brushed against hoarfrost that collected from their respiration and melted into their clothing and bags. Each man's shoulders grazed his neighbor's. Nor could they easily stand straight, though being so denned up gave them some degree of warmth. Greely was well aware these petty annoyances could break them down. They complained of cold feet awaking them at night. They were always thirsty, and they ate their food with the ice crystals barely thawed. There was not the fuel for it. The temperature in the hut could reach into the twenties when the stove was lit, then drop back into the teens. They seemed unable to defend against drafts, no matter



how much they chinked the walls with snow or their rotting clothing. Mid-October and only five hours of gray light now, every day a little less. But hardest to bear was their gnawing hunger. Pvt. Henry, however, had worked out a way to slide a snow block from the commissary wall, and by reaching in could grab a tin of tomatoes or peas or some sort of soup. He was not particular as long as he ate.

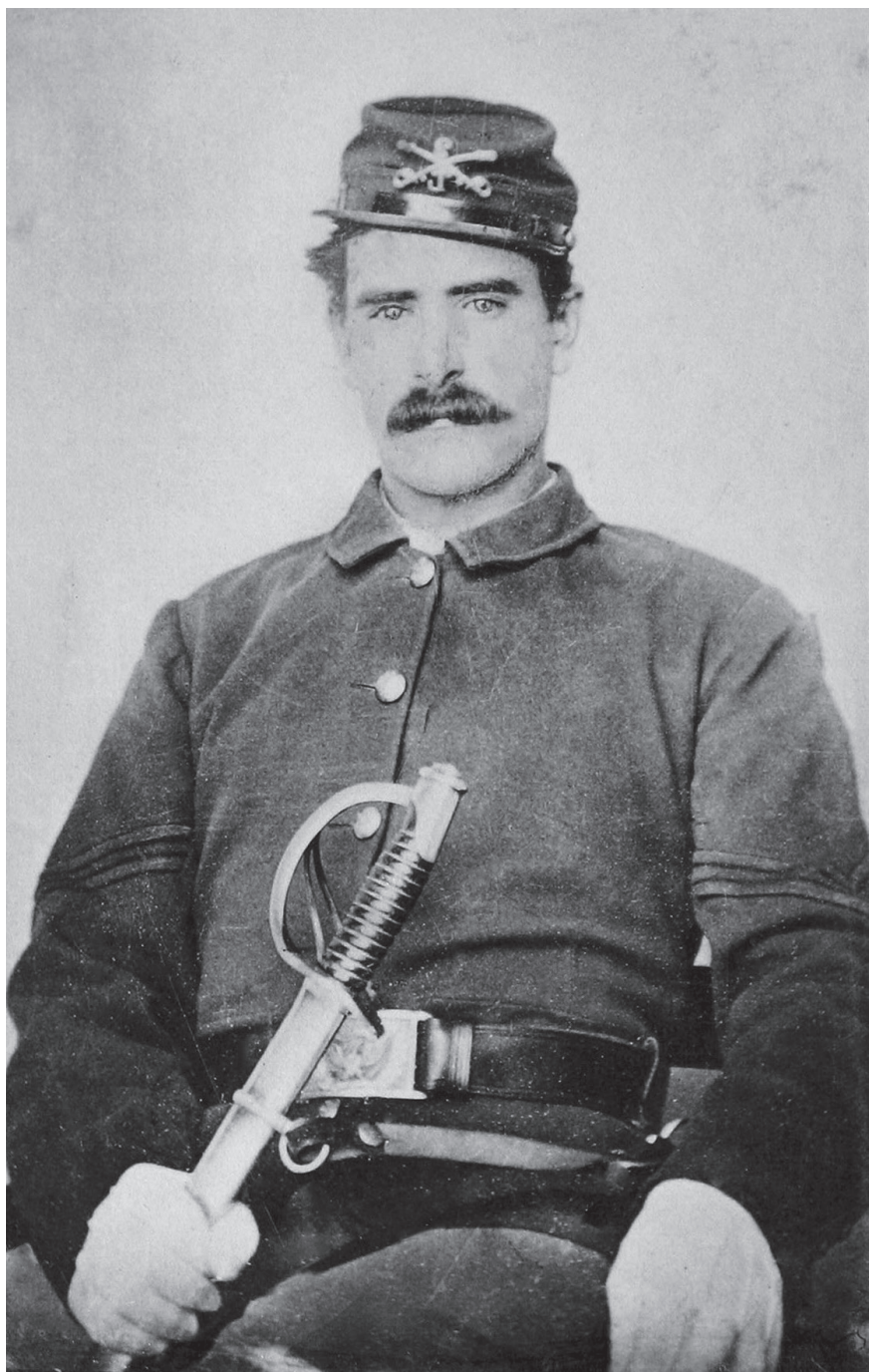
### **Some Background**

Lt. Greely had left a family at home. His wife, Henrietta, had sent him off with a bed-sized afghan decorated with their initials: HNG and AWG. He was concerned his two young daughters would forget him. He was disappointed in Dr. Pavy, despite his obvious Arctic skills. Pavy, also, had left a wife waiting for him. He was from a wealthy Creole family, schooled in Paris. He spoke with a French accent. Greely, the high school-educated son of a shoemaker, felt the doctor's arrogance when Pavy handed in his medical reports late—to annoy, Greely feared—and he could not discipline the doctor who was a civilian contracted to the army. Greely could issue him an order, but the doctor was not obligated to carry it out. Greely was certain Pavy was using the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition to further his goal of reaching the North Pole, though Greely's orders were to keep away from the pole.

Their photographer, Sgt. Rice, a Canadian from Cape Breton, exhibited a loner's temperament. But the men respected Rice, and Greely sensed the photographer's commitment to the expedition. Rice was determined to take home superior glass plates that showed the Arctic as frigid, lonely, vast—yet possessed of a haunting beauty.

Greely's second officer, Lt. Kislingbury, had worked with Greely laying out the telegraph lines, and Greely had issued him a personal invitation to join the expedition. Kislingbury had accepted with enthusiasm but from the early days at Fort Conger, he had exhibited an insubordinate streak by informing his commanding officer that he preferred to sleep through breakfast. A trivial offense, but as the lieutenant would not back down, Greely was forced to break him. He expected a willing compliance. An officer risked court-martial otherwise. Everyone knew that Kislingbury had buried two wives. He was a father of four sons and had left these boys in the care of his brothers. If he regretted coming, the ship was still in the harbor held fast by ice. But as Kislingbury, carrying the official papers he needed to leave the expedition, trekked the two miles over the rocks and broken ice chunks, Capt. Pike had





*Sgt. David L. Brainard in Montana in 1879.* U.S. MILITARIA FORUM

worked the ship free. Kislingbury watched the *Proteus* pull away and broke into a run. But no one on the ship spotted him; Kislingbury was forced to return to the fort. He was now a nonentity with no duties. He was no longer a part of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, yet he must go through the Arctic winter with these men.

The other officer, Lt. James Lockwood, came from an Army family, his father a general. Lockwood had a strong attachment to his family. Some of the men never spoke of home, but Lockwood often talked of his. He could go on in mouthwatering detail about his mother's cooking: the Christmas roasts, ham at one end of the table, turkey at the other, her rice puddings, thick and creamy, the cheeses she made at their farm. The men got the impression his family expected great things of him. Indeed, he proved himself in their first summer, 1882, by setting a Farthest North record, a main goal of the expedition, especially triumphant as it broke that set by the British only six years before. Lockwood had been accompanied by Sgt. Brainard and one of the Eskimos, Frederik Christiansen. They only exceeded the British by four miles, but there was no need to do more. Lockwood was delighted to have made this contribution to the expedition. He was not a risk taker like Rice, but he thrived in the field, and by besting the British, he had made himself worthy in his family's eyes.

Despite Greely's difficulties with Pavy and Kislingbury, the men were excited to be in the Arctic during that first year. Aside from the exploring trips, they collected data, 500 readings a day of temperature, wind, cloud formations, tides, aurora sightings, false moons, and more. But it was also clear that Greely ran the fort as if they were under Indian attack. They weren't allowed to nap during the day after frigid outdoor labor. He curtailed their walks to a monotonous route around the fort, and the men saw that not only were Greely and Pavy at odds, but that Kislingbury was in league with the doctor.

WHEN THE RELIEF SHIP FAILED TO APPEAR IN AUGUST 1882, AT THE end of their first year, they were disappointed but buckled down for a second year. The data collection continued, and exploring parties were sent out. Lockwood tried to best his own Farthest North but was unsuccessful. The dark skies of the long Arctic night seemed darker and the cold more intense. When daylight returned, they scanned the horizon for a smokestack. Pavy disturbed them by saying no ship had been sent. Indeed, as the time ran out and no ship appeared, the men were ready to agree that the government had abandoned them.

The doctor argued that they should remain a third winter—they had the food for it—and march down the Ellesmere coast in the spring. Greely disagreed. In early August 1883, he ordered Fort Conger boarded up and the men into the boats. Army men, cast adrift in an ice-choked turbulence for which they were completely unprepared, began their sea voyage down the Ellesmere coast.

If Greely had remained at Fort Conger for a third winter and begun losing men, he risked a court-martial for abandoning orders. Orders he'd been a party to and could have ignored, but he was not made that way.

They hadn't been in the boats a week—roped in a string to the motor launch, terrified, spray-soaked, and retching in the heaving ice-clogged swells—when the doctor made his mutinous move. He had drawn in Kislingbury and Rice, but to gain control of the men he needed Brainard. Pavy's plan was to declare Greely mentally unstable and put Kislingbury in charge. Pavy himself, not being Army, could not be. He could be the power behind Kislingbury, though. But Brainard would not buy in. A mutiny would lead to a splintering of the party and likely bloodshed. They were best off with Greely, Brainard told them, promising himself that his commanding officer would never learn of this mutinous attempt.

By September 12, they were only a day or two off the Cape Sabine coast, where Greely, when planning the voyage back in Washington, had ordered supplies to be left in case the relief ships were blocked by pack ice. But he had also specified Littleton Island, off the Greenland coast, directly across Smith Sound from Cape Sabine. Greely preferred the Greenland side because Eskimos there had previously helped lost explorers, and he hoped they might lend aid. That night a punishing gale blew them back up into the Kane Basin, the boats so battered by the crushing, pounding ice that Greely had the men haul boats and supplies—many hundreds of pounds—up onto an ice floe. They waited it out there, eating down their supplies, while Greely pondered what to do next.

During his Army career, Greely had asked for no man's opinion. But this last month while they'd managed to keep the boats from swamping and themselves fed, slept from utter exhaustion, and dried their wet clothing with their own body heat, a change had come over their leader. He called together his officers, including the defrocked Kislingbury, the doctor, and Brainard—not an officer, but the man whose judgment Greely trusted most. Together, they reached the decision to remain on the floe.



*The Greely expedition explored harsh Arctic waters between Greenland and Ellesmere Island, the eastern boundary of Canada. The men spent their first two years based at Fort Conger, a camp on an inlet called Lady Franklin Bay. James B. Lockwood, Sgt. David L. Brainard, and Eskimo Frederik Christiansen reached the “Farthest North” point on May 13, 1882. Expedition members retreated to Camp Clay at Fort Sabine for the last eight months. There, most of the men died of starvation.*

LARRY GARLAND/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

By September 18, they'd drifted back toward the Sabine coast, when a repeat of the storm that had swept them into the Kane Basin did so again. Again, Greely called his officers together. Which coast should they try for? But the decision was taken out of their hands when the currents and winds sent them, on the night of the 22nd, toward Sabine. Yet they dared not commit the boats to this sea of ice that was in constant motion. But on September 29, seeing they were about to shoot past the cape and into the immensity of Baffin Bay and certain death, they were forced to make a dangerous lunge for the shore, heaving boats, gear, and all their records to land on a barren, desolate, windswept outcrop of stony beach. What was in store for them they could only dread, for during their seven weeks at sea, they had moved into the iron grip of winter.

### **Desperate Measures**

At Camp Clay on Cape Sabine, Dr. Pavy was ensuring his own survival by stealing food from his patient, Joe Elison. Cpl. Elison had frostbitten his hands and feet on a mission with Sgt. Rice to pick up 144 pounds of meat left by the British in a cairn some 40 miles south, at Cape Isabella. Elison had lost the use of his hands, and the doctor had taken on the job of feeding the man himself. To keep Elison healthy, the men had all voted to give him extra ounces—an impressive show of generosity—but Lt. Greely was quite sure this was being consumed by the doctor. He could hear Pavy rooting around in Elison's food can at night. He felt powerless to stop this. If he tried, the doctor could refuse to treat them. They all ate at night. A nibble on a bit of chocolate saved from their daily ration could send them back into a doze when they awoke with freezing feet. But the sounds the doctor made were different, the varmint-like scrabbling for Elison's bread.

By early February, Rice persuaded Greely to let him attempt the crossing of Smith Sound. Lt. Garlington must be there. If Garlington would not come to them, they would go to him. The men would not allow themselves to doubt that he was there. Rice set out with Eskimo Jens Edwards, but they got caught in a horrific gale. Jens froze his fingers in the sleeping bag. They stuck it out for four nights, searching for a stable passage through the open water and finding none. To keep hopes up, Greely promised they'd make an attempt with the whole party by March 6. But how could hungry men manage to haul Elison?

By early March, Sgt. Brainard served out the last of their pemmican, the last of their tins of corn and tomatoes, various soups, and the rice bag

was shaken into the morning's glop. They were growing weaker and scurvy had taken hold, loosening their teeth, swelling their joints, and causing old wounds to suppurate. But the sun was back, and Rice had found a way to glean food from the sea with a burlap sack for a net. They called them shrimp, these tiny crustaceans that were two-thirds shell. The doctor insisted their nutritional value was minimal, to which Greely countered that at least they were plentiful, and Brainard assured them all he was willing to stand in the wind for hours dipping the net. But not all of the men could digest them.

On the morning of March 24, after Ned Israel had crawled back in to report a temperature of  $-23$  degrees, Pvt. Henry Biederbick lit the stove and keeled over. He'd forgotten to unplug their ventilation hole and the alcohol fumes were poisoning them. Pvt. Julius Frederick (called Shorty by the men) pulled out the rags, and as others collapsed, those able hauled them out. Pvt. Charles Henry, unaffected by the fumes, hung around inside until he could snatch the bacon, placed on the boat thwart and meant for their breakfast. He bolted it down and when he emerged found men on the ground, others helping them up, shoving mittens on their unprotected hands. He stood at a distance, licking the wonderful salt off his lips, then crawled back in, expressing his surprise with the others that their breakfast bacon was missing. Brainard kept his eye on Henry, who shortly, complaining of a sick stomach, moved toward the entrance, but before he could crawl outside upheaved into a pan. Shorty, inspecting this mess, reported that here was their bacon: raw, half-chewed, and no good to anyone. Henry denied his theft, the men shouting him down: he was a monster, the very devil, to rob them of their breakfast when some of them had nearly died.

Most of these men had also stolen food, but all of them expressed remorse when they were caught. Henry never showed remorse. He had crossed a line into something calculated and cold-blooded. The men stopped talking to him.

ESKIMO FRED, THE NATIVE GREENLANDER WHO HAD BEEN WITH Lt. Lockwood on the Farthest North, died just having eaten his pitifully inadequate breakfast on April 5.

The next day, Sgt. David Linn died.

Both Eskimo Fred and Linn were transported by sledge up to Cemetery Ridge and left in shallow graves to make a desolate line of three, with Sgt. William Cross, their first to die.



Rice was determined to get that 144 pounds of meat they'd been forced to abandon because of Elison's frostbite. Lt. Greely knew he could not refuse Rice this hazardous undertaking, and Rice left on April 6, taking Shorty with him.

Lockwood died on the 9th. The Farthest North in 1882 had been the high point for him. After that success, he probably wanted to go home. He could not stop talking about food and missing his family. He berated himself for his weakness, his difficulty in helping with camp chores, yet Brainard, who had been with him on the Farthest North, made daily trips to their shrimping grounds in his determination to feed them all.

Pavy, who had done little to help, volunteered to chop ice from the pond that lay not far below Cemetery Ridge where four corpses lay beneath a thin smear of gravel. No one questioned this; indeed, Greely was glad to have Pavy's cooperation.

On April 11, Good Friday, when Brainard was stomping back and forth to keep from freezing while waiting for his nets to fill, he looked up and saw a polar bear about 200 yards off, loping in his direction. Grabbing his shrimp bucket he ran as best he could in his weakened state, up and over Cemetery Ridge, to fall through the hut entrance, panting, "Bear!" Pvt. Francis Long and Eskimo Jens took off with rifles, followed by Lt. Kislingbury with his Remington. But the poor ex-officer was too weak to keep up and limped back. They heard shots, but they hardly dared to hope until Long and Jens burst in, their faces glowing. But the bear came too late for meteorologist Sgt. Winfield Jewell, who died as this meat that would appease their hunger and hold scurvy at bay was hauled in. Jewell, from Lisbon, New Hampshire, had been an observer at the Signal Corps's weather station on the summit of Mount Washington, preparing him as well as anyone to handle the cold and wind of the Arctic. The Jewell Trail on Mount Washington was named for him.

A SNOW BUNTING SANG FROM THEIR BOAT ROOF ON EASTER SUNDAY morning, and Long shot a seal. Greely increased their meat ration to a daily pound apiece. But their good spirits were snuffed out when Shorty stumbled into their camp, alone. Rice was dead. They could not locate the English meat. They wandered in circles, a brutal time in storm and staggering wind, Rice growing weaker. "I could only get him to stop," Shorty told the men, "by telling him I was exhausted." He'd pulled Rice into the lee of an iceberg, lit



the stove to heat a drink, wrapped Rice in his own coat and held his friend in his arms. But it did no good, and by the end of Shorty's story, the men were drawing grimy sleeves across their hairy and dirty faces. By his death, Rice had turned himself into their hero. Though it was hard not to think that Rice would be with them yet if he had spared himself.

On April 29, Eskimo Fred and Long took the kayak and the Springfield rifle down to look for seals. Fred fitted himself into the kayak and pushed off while Long, on the shore, watched in horror as the kayak upended, tipping Fred into the water. Long ran, jumping among the ice chunks to reach Fred, but his body had sunk beneath the ice, as had the rifle and the kayak, and Long knew their chance of catching seals was faint.

Four men died in May, including their youngest, the astronomer Israel. All were dragged up to Cemetery Ridge. By the end of the month, Brainard began to cut up sealskins—pants, sleeping bag covers—adding the leather to the shrimp stews. Kislingbury died on June 1, the last body to be hauled up to the ridge. When Cpl. Nicholas Salor died the next day, the weakened men could only drag his body down to the tidal crack and slip it into the sea.

Twelve alive now, but only three or four able to work.

Pvt. Henry continued to steal food, plundering sealskins, and defying Greely, who had stipulated that the edible leather was expedition stores, to be shared by all. When Henry, the only man strong enough to cook when Long and Shorty were out hunting, helped himself from the pot in front of everyone, Greely saw he needed to act. He had warned Henry that his thievery was tantamount to mutiny. He could be executed. But the private did not curb his appetite. Greely wrote out the order for Henry's execution on June 6: "This order is *imperative* and *absolutely necessary* for *any* chance of life." Henry was shot to death that afternoon with the camp's only serviceable rifle.

Toward their supper hour on that fatal day of June 6, Pvt. Bender died. His death perhaps triggered by Henry's. The two had shared a bag.

Toward evening, as a gelatinous glop of sealskins and lichens they had scraped off the rocks was dished out, it was discovered that Pavy was dead. His action of lately dosing himself from his medicines had disturbed everyone. Pavy had a wife to return to, but in the effort to keep himself alive, he might have poisoned himself.

The meteorologist Sgt. Hampden Gardiner died six days later, and joined Bender and Pavy in the tidal crack.

When Pvt. Roderick Schneider died on June 18, his body was hauled only a little way from their camp, the stricken men too weak to do more.

SEVEN OF THEM LEFT. CROWDED INTO A TENT NOT FAR BELOW Cemetery Ridge. They'd moved uphill when thawing ground flooded them out.

A storm from the south sprang up on June 21. They could not keep the stove lit to feed themselves. No one was strong enough to fetch drinking water from the melting pools. They lay in their bags, knowing the end was near, but knowing also they would not die in pain. They had seen how easily each man had drifted into unconsciousness. It was hard to tell when life left. The gale worsened and tore at the tent, knocking a pole across Greely and Brainard, pinning them down.

On June 22, as evening came on they heard a half-familiar sound. A steam whistle? A ship could not have reached here so early in the season. But there was that sound again, and a swell of hope propelled Greely to ask if Brainard and Long could manage to climb the hill to look out over the sea. They struggled through the wind to find only the ever-present view of waves crashing on the rocks. Brainard, exhausted, shouted in Long's ear he would return. Long indicated he'd walk along the ridge to their signal flag, sure to be blown over. As he picked up the broken oar with its tattered cloth flag, a boat, with men rowing toward the shore, hove into Long's view. He waved his flag, dropped it, and staggered down over the rocks, his legs shaking. He reached the beach as these men, landing, ran toward him with outstretched hands.

### **Rescuers Exhume Bodies from Shallow Graves**

That the USS *Thetis*, under the leadership of Commander Winfield Scott Schley was standing off Cape Sabine was largely because of Henrietta Greely. She was aware of War Secretary Robert Todd Lincoln's lack of interest in her husband's expedition. The first relief, in 1882, had left too late and, as a consequence, had run into ice-clogged waters as the short Arctic summer turned to winter. In 1883, the Army lieutenant in charge, Lt. Garlington, was out of his depth with a sea voyage. He sank his ship, but the government had misjudged to have put him in this position. When Henrietta had learned that Garlington had not waited for Lt. Greely's party on the Greenland side, she

realized that if she were to see her husband again, she must take matters into her own hands. She had moved back into her father's house in San Diego with her two young daughters after Greely had left. From there, with the help of General H.H. Lockwood in Washington, the young lieutenant's father, she had acted to persuade newspaper editors across the country to stir public interest in Greely's situation. Then Henrietta had the idea of offering a \$25,000 bounty to the fishing fleets patrolling those Arctic waters, maximizing the search. This had to be voted on by Congress, but with public support on Henrietta's side, Congress was pressured to move quickly. When the bill passed two weeks before Commander Schley pulled out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, her husband's rescue was under the secure command of the Navy.

Schley had managed to get the ship through the spring ice, making a record early arrival. And when Schley and his men reached Greely's camp, they realized that if they had arrived one or two days later, they might have found everyone dead.

Around the half-collapsed tent were discarded tins, rotten clothing, metal hoops from the wooden barrels they had cut for their fires, even sleeping bags that must have belonged to the dead men. As Schley knelt down by the entrance, he was nearly knocked over by the fetid smell coming from within. These men, starving, hollow-eyed, and nearly buried in their own overgrown hair, their clothing sloughing off their emaciated forms like bark off a dying tree, appeared barely human. Which one was Greely? Schley spotted a man wearing a filthy red cap trying to raise himself, with the help of another man, to an erect position. He clasped a pair of spectacles in his bony fingers. When Schley informed Greely that he was to bring back the men who had died, Greely balked. "My men," the lieutenant said in a raspy voice, "must lie where they died." He slumped back, his eyes staring.

But Schley, sorry to distress this man who had been through so much, had his orders, and when he joined his men who were exhuming the shallow graves, he saw, not entirely to his surprise, that some of these corpses had been cut. The Greely party had turned into cannibals.

The facts are sketchy, but it's possible to piece together what might have gone on. The cuts had been made with a sharp instrument and by someone who had the understanding of how to excise the fleshy parts. This seemed to point to Dr. Pavy. Around the time of Lt. Lockwood's death on April 9, Pavy had elected to get them water from the pond near the cemetery. The cutting likely began in secret. Perhaps Pavy had worked with Pvt. Henry. Sgt.

Brainard, who crossed the ridge daily for the shrimp, may have caught on to such disturbance. He was an observant man. He had already noted their belt buckles and brass uniform buttons were kept burnished by the continually blowing gravel. It seems likely he also noticed that the bodies were disturbed.

Brainard may have alerted Greely to what he had seen. Greely, himself, was too weak to make the climb to the burial ground.

Here is another clue. In his journal on June 4, Brainard had written, "An arrangement made between the Commanding Officer and four others and myself by which our condition will be ameliorated." Meaning, possibly, that Greely had consulted with these five men and decided to add human flesh to their diet, making the cannibalism official. Who were these five? Greely would have picked the men who had been working hardest for the good of the whole party. These could have been Brainard, their hunter Pvt. Long, their hospital steward Pvt. Biederbick, Shorty, and Pavy, because as their doctor, Greely could not have left him out.

The bodies of the first four who had died—this included Lockwood—were not cut. Possibly this was because this flesh would not have been fresh enough to have fought the scurvy, which responded best to fresh meat. Five of the ten bodies buried on Cemetery Ridge were cut, starting with Pvt. Jewell buried on April 12, except for Ned Israel. Why was Israel's body not cut? Possibly Greely had intervened. He had invited the young astronomer, a student at the University of Michigan, and the two had formed a close friendship. At the end, Greely had taken Israel into his own sleeping bag, and unbeknownst to Israel, who would not have accepted it, gave him extra ounces. But Israel died, and Greely was devastated that he would not be returning this young man to his parents. Four bodies were dragged downhill to the tidal crack. These had probably not been cut. And Pvt. Schneider's body, left not far from their tent, was found intact. But Henry's body, abandoned to lie where he was shot, was sliced up. Brainard, as their stores sergeant, could have taken on this gruesome task, using the flesh for shrimp bait as well.

There is no direct mention of man-eating in the men's diaries. Greely claimed later that he was not aware of it. But how could he not have been? The other survivors—Brainard, Long, Biederbick, Shorty, and Pvt. Maurice Connell—shut their doors to reporters.

But the cut bodies were all the proof needed.

Cannibalism happened on prolonged sea voyages. It happened in the Arctic, famously on the mid-nineteenth-century Franklin expedition seeking the Northwest Passage. It happened when trappers or mountain men were

caught in winter in the mountains of the American West, as on John Frémont's expedition. Greely's men would have known about some of this. They also would have known that if they had admitted to their act, they would have rendered themselves unemployable.

### **The Aftermath**

Lt. Greely went on to a full career applying his gifts for administration, organization, and inventive leadership, proving those three Arctic years of ill-considered leadership at Fort Conger an aberration.

Sgt. Brainard had expressed his frustration with Greely's leadership during their open boat retreat, confiding to his diary on August 19 and 20, 1883, "All the ignorance, stupidity, and an egotistical mind without judgment can do in the injury of our cause is being done. Why will the United States government persist in sending a fool in command of Arctic expeditions?"

Yet Brainard believed that Greely could hold the men together and had resisted Dr. Pavy's mutinous attempt. On the boat voyage, Greely began to learn how to listen to his men, and that made all the difference in their struggle for survival in the remaining nine months. No mutiny materialized. The "official" cannibalism occurred after they had exhausted every food source and were living on the crustaceans, lichens, and leather from their sleeping bags and sealskin pants. Greely and most likely Brainard made sure the body cutting was conducted in an orderly manner. No one died through aggression or brutality. Sadly, their frostbitten man, Cpl. Elison, died on the *Thetis* from blood poisoning. He was stable in the below-freezing temperatures of Camp Clay. But when moved to the warmth of the ship, the doctors could not protect him from infection.

Of the six who survived, five had given all they could to work for the benefit of all. This says volumes about the nature of survivors. But there is always an exception and here it was Pvt. Connell. He was a strong man but chose to husband his energy and acted the malingerer at Camp Clay. A crony of Pvt. Henry's, he could have participated in the body cutting before it became official. Connell was on the verge of death, his eyes glazed, his legs numb to his thighs when the rescue arrived.

Greely's homecoming was marred by headlines that shot across the nation: "HORRORS OF CAPE SABINE," shrieked the *New York Times* on August 12, 1884. "Brave men, crazed by Starvation and Bitter Cold, Feeding on the

Dead Bodies of their Comrades.” In the effort to dramatize the horrors, the *Times* omitted the acts of heroism and sacrifice: Pvt. Long and Eskimo Jens bringing in the Good Friday Bear, Brainard shrimping for them in the bitter cold, Sgt. Rice pushing himself over the brink to get them food, everyone sharing his own rations to keep Elison alive.

Their Farthest North record, their proudest effort, was belittled as exceeding the English by only four miles. President Chester A. Arthur questioned: was all that suffering and death worth it? Years later, noted whaling captain Bob Bartlett turned down invitations to join the Cosmo Club because Greely was a member. The cannibalism, in particular, was to plague Greely for the rest of his life. Yet it was Greely’s decision, so enigmatically phrased in Brainard’s June 4 entry, that ensured the lives of six. In Jan Marcin Weslawski and Joanna Legezynska’s 2002 article, “Chances for Arctic Survival: Greely’s Expedition Revisited,” the authors write, “Without cannibalism, it seems unlikely that anyone, having attained an individual energy deficit of over 86,000 kcal [kilocalories] before the rescue of June 1884, could have survived.”

It was acknowledged, though, that the scientific work was well carried out, making an important contribution to the International Polar Year. The tidal-gauge figures Greely brought back, together with Lt. Lockwood’s observations on his Farthest North, produced convincing evidence that Greenland was an island, not a landmass that carried to the Pole, a disputed point. Greely’s own work, *Three Years of Arctic Service* (Scribner’s, 1886), along with the sheets of closely observed data, provided material that informed how scientists and explorers would view the Arctic for decades to come.

A QUESTION THAT HAS LONG BEEN DEBATED, BECAUSE THERE WAS ONLY one working rifle in camp, was, “Who shot Pvt. Henry?” Henry was put before a firing squad of three on that afternoon of June 6. The three involved went to their graves with that secret. But, reasoning it out, how could it not have been Sgt. Brainard? He was senior to privates Shorty Frederick and Long. Brainard carried a profound sense of responsibility. He was unsparing of himself throughout their time in the Arctic, and he probably knew he could handle the burden of killing this man who showed no repentance, no remorse at stealing their food, because Brainard very likely knew about Henry’s past: his thievery while in the 7th Cavalry that earned him a dishonorable discharge and prison sentence. His escape and murder of a man in a barroom brawl and subsequent reenlistment under an alias. Henry had stood tall in the back

row of the group photograph taken in Rice's brother's studio in Washington before they left. This picture, appearing in *Harper's Weekly*, had made its way out to the western forts where he could have been identified. Brainard wrote in his diary on April 27, 1884, "Henry brewed the issue of alcohol without authority & stole enough of the precious fluid to get thoroughly and disgustingly drunk. He is a born thief as his 7th Cavalry name will show—a perfect fiend." Brainard, it appears, knew of Henry's crimes. But perhaps found out too late. Brainard would not have wanted to say anything to Greely that challenged the commanding officer's selection of men. Besides, Henry could be sent back with the relief. But the ship never arrived at Fort Conger, and Brainard ended up carrying the weight of knowing what kind of man Henry was for the rest of the expedition, suggesting that this most conscientious and responsible of men would have willingly taken upon himself the burden of executing Henry.

THE HERO OF THE GREELY EXPEDITION WAS SGT. BRAINARD. WITHOUT him, the doctor and Lt. Kislingbury would have mutinied. Brainard questioned Lt. Greely's decisions, but he understood the importance of keeping the leadership in Greely's hands as the best means of maintaining discipline and holding the party together. If the men had fractured into camps, each with his own pile of ammunition, killing was almost inevitable. That there were seven men alive when the rescue arrived can be accredited to Brainard's ability to understand that the power must remain with their chief, Greely, despite his faults.

But at Camp Clay, Greely was a different leader than he had been at Fort Conger. He was, basically, a humane man, and when they were struggling for their lives, this humanity emerged. He learned how to care for his men. As Pvt. Biederbick wrote, Greely had shown "more force of character" than Biederbick had given Greely credit for: "Better that he and our records be saved than all of us put together. I am very sorry not to have sooner found out his full worth."

Greely's wife, Henrietta, admitted to Brainard that she did not think her husband ever faced his mistakes. Greely was lucky to have such a wife, described in her lengthy obituary in the *Army and Navy Register* as "a noble woman of such unselfish character as is rarely found."

Greely was also lucky to have had Brainard. Brainard stayed in Washington after he retired because, as he said to a reporter of the *Washington Sunday Star*



on February 23, 1936, "Lt. Greely was here. I could have lived any place else, but we were the last left from the expedition, and had been friends for so many years, and had enjoyed each other so much." This from the man who said in the same article that if they'd stayed at Fort Conger, "they would have made out all right, for musk oxen and seal assured a meat supply, and conditions were better." He then added, "Lient. [sic] Greely had his orders, though, and as a good soldier, he carried them out."

Brainard understood what it meant to be loyal. He also knew how to make this loyalty work for the good of Greely's expedition. At Camp Clay, Greely learned how to be the kind of leader his party needed. Greely had valued Brainard throughout the expedition, calling him "my mainstay in many things." Years later, in a letter dated September 3, 1938, Brainard, in reply to a letter from William Hobbs of the University of Michigan, wrote, "In the last years of Gen. Greely's life he often said to me and to others that but for my efforts that last winter there would have been no survivors left." Then Brainard modestly added, "But this sounds like boasting."

This friendship would have been reason enough for the two men to dine at the Cosmos Club on the anniversary of their rescue, June 22, choosing a menu Lockwood, so intensely focused on food, had recited for them at Camp Clay.

A.W. AND HENRIETTA GREELY RAISED FOUR MORE CHILDREN. IN 1914, only four years before Henrietta died, but after his retirement from the Army, Lt. Greely and Henrietta began spending summers in Conway, New Hampshire, drawn by previous summers spent with Henrietta's cousins. The family occupied Hidden House, well named for its location at the end of a narrow and winding track that became Greeley Road, perpetuating a misspelling of the explorer's name. The Greely family put down roots: one daughter married the well-known doctor Harold Shedd; daughter Rose summered for many years in South Conway; and granddaughter Sally Shedd lived on Conway Lake until her death. Greely died in 1935 at 91, having received his country's greatest award, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The citation read, "for his life of splendid public service." Indeed, it had been. Except for those three years in the Arctic where the man seemed out of his depth. Unable to adapt his military rigidity to the circumstance, those two years at Fort Conger were marked by dissension and discord. He could

be accused of cowardice by not standing up to the doctor. By not spending a third winter at Fort Conger, he could have been accused of saving his career.

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LAURA WATERMAN is the author of articles and books about wilderness and adventure, among them “Return to the Mountain Ridge of Our Lives” (*Appalachia* Summer/Fall 2009, 60 no. 2), *Losing the Garden* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), and, with her late husband, Guy, *Forest and Crag* (Appalachian Mountain Club, 1989), *Wilderness Ethics* (Countryman Press, 1993), and *The Green Guide to Low-Impact Hiking and Camping* (Countryman Press, 2016). She lives in East Corinth, Vermont.

*Author's note: Special thanks to Glenn M. Stein, who shares with me a great respect for Sgt. David Brainard. I owe Glenn thanks for letting me read before publication his article, “An Arctic Execution: Private Charles B. Henry of the United States Lady Franklin Bay Expedition 1881–1884,” Arctic, December 2011. Thanks to Dr. Geoffrey E. Clark for his photograph of Pvt. Charles B. Henry. Thanks also to Jay Sattersfield and his helpful staff at the Dartmouth College Library, Special Collections, the Conway Historical Society, and Jan Marcin Weslawski and Joanna Legezynska, authors of the compelling article, “Chances for Arctic Survival: Greely's Expedition Revisited,” Arctic, December 2002.*

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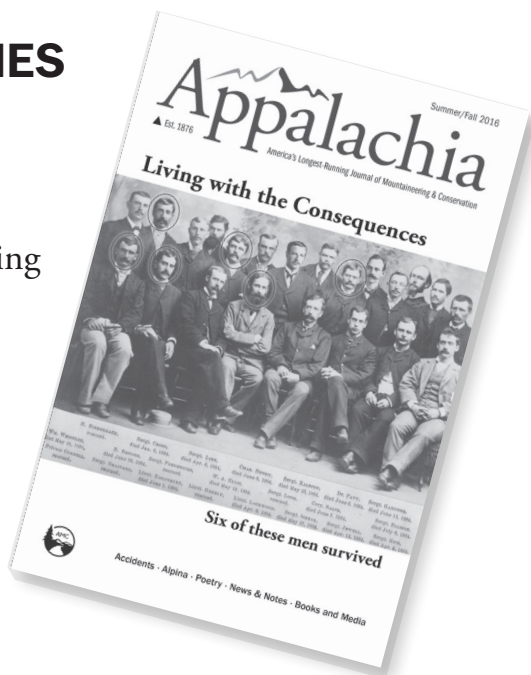
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