

A Biographical Sketch of Gen. David L. Brainard, US Army

Last Survivor of the United States' Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, 1881-84

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Early Years

David Legg Brainard (1856-1946), the fifth son of Alanson and Maria Brainard, was born on his parents' farm in Norway, New York, on Dec. 21, 1856. When David was ten years old, the family moved to Freetown, New York.

On Sept. 13, 1876, 19-year-old David Brainard left home to travel to Philadelphia and view America's first successful world's fair, the Centennial Exposition. After taking in many marvels of the Machine Age, Brainard boarded a train for home. At New York City, he changed trains and reached into his pocket for money to buy a ticket, but there was none. Too proud to write his family for funds, Brainard took the free ferry to the US Army Post at Governor's Island and joined the Regular Army. He didn't know it, but David Brainard was on his way to becoming one of those rare individuals in military history who rose from Private to General by pulling himself up by his bootstraps.

Indian Wars

When Brainard joined the Army, it had been only three months since Custer's command was mauled at the Little Big Horn, and in no time, Brainard was sent to Montana Territory, to serve with the Second Cavalry against the Northern Cheyenne and Sioux Indians. The square-jawed Brainard was a keen soldier, who firmly believed orders clearly issued should be obeyed.

On May 7, 1877, Brainard participated in the Battle of Little Muddy Creek against the Sioux under Chief Lame Deer, and suffered wounds to his right hand and a gunshot wound to his right cheek, affecting his eye. Over half a century later, in 1933, he received the Purple Heart for his injuries.

The Army next fought several battles and skirmishes with the Nez Perce Indians, and the Second Cavalry had a full share in the campaign. Afterward, Brainard served in one further Indian campaign, this time against the Bannock tribe from southeastern Idaho. By 1878, Brainard's soldierly conduct resulted in his promotion to Corporal, and then Sergeant.

Lady Franklin Bay Expedition to the Arctic

As part of the first International Polar Year 1882-83, the US government established a scientific station at Lady Franklin Bay in 1881, representing America's first participation in an international scientific effort. The 25-man Army party was commanded by First Lieut. Adolphus W. Greely. For Brainard, the lure of the Arctic was strong and after volunteering, he was chosen First Sergeant (Chief of Enlisted Men) and Commissary Sergeant.

The expedition left St. John's, Newfoundland, on July 7, 1881, and Brainard began his daily journal, which he maintained continuously for nearly three years. After arriving at Lady Franklin Bay, Fort Conger was built and the expedition members settled in. By the time the first winter began, there were reasons for satisfaction: four depots had been established northward along the coast of Grinnell Land, in preparation for spring sledge journeys.

"Farthest North"

On April 4, 1882, the North Greenland Sledge Party departed with Lieut. Lockwood, Sgt. Brainard and Greenland Dog Sledge Driver and Hunter Frederick Christiansen. The sun was with them constantly, day and night, and there was much suffering from snow blindness. Temperatures sometimes struck 50° below zero, and the men were exposed to chilling blasts that swept down from the north as they hugged the Greenland coastline.

On May 13, a new "farthest north" record was set at latitude 83° 24' N. and longitude 40° 46' W.--surpassing 300 years of British Arctic record-breaking. Brainard recorded the moment:

From observations taken along route, we believe we are in a higher latitude than ever before reached by man, and on land farther north than any was thought to exist. Once again we ran up the Stars and Stripes, this time with a feeling that warmed our spirits despite the northern breeze which swirled around us.

The three explorers headed home and reached Fort Conger on June 1, having been absent 59 days and traversing nearly 1,100 miles, mostly in temperatures well below zero. Lieut. Greely came out specially to greet the party.

No Relief and Retreat

The relief ship did not reach Fort Conger that summer, but there was no immediate cause for alarm, as the expedition was well supplied.

By the spring of 1883, Lockwood, Brainard and Greenlander Frederick had completed all three "farthest" during the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition--north, east and west. They had journeyed on foot and by sledge one-eighth of the distance around the world above the 80th parallel.

Through the summer months, hopeful eyes scanned the empty horizon south of Fort Conger for the relief ship. Before leaving the United States, Greely worked out a detailed plan whereby the party would retreat south if the relief ship did not arrive. A string of depots planted along the Ellesmere coast by the ship that brought the party north in 1881 would keep it supplied with food and enable the boats to carry minimum loads. A relief ship would be waiting for Greely at the most northern point allowed by the pack ice, but if not, a relief party would camp at Littleton Island (Greenland side) with food and clothing, to keep contact between the two parties throughout the winter.

But the relief ship again failed to arrive and on Aug. 8, 1883, the 300-mile retreat began. It was a torturous journey and a miracle everyone made it through alive. The party eventually settled at Cape Sabine, where the men constructed winter quarters in the form of a stone house christened Camp Clay.

Constant hunger was now their companion. Throughout the coming months, the men's spirits and energy dwindled. Brainard noted that, 'No one ever thinks of wasting what energy he has in cleaning his person, or fussing with his ragged garments.'

Dark Future

The first death in the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition occurred on Jan. 17, 1884, when a man died from starvation. A six-man detail pulled the body on a sledge to what would become Cemetery Ridge, some 50 yards from camp. In spite of their privations, only one man died that winter, but scurvy was also among them.

By the spring of 1884, Brainard wrote:

Our own condition is so wretched, so palpably miserable, that death would be welcomed rather than feared...

On April 14, Greely wrote in his journal that Brainard was to succeed him in command of the expedition should anything happen to him. On April 22, Greely added, 'I gave Sgt. Brainard instructions about my effects &c. if anything should happen to me. I want Brainard commissioned.' The stalwart Sergeant was making two and three trips a day to the tidal crack to net small crustaceans referred to as "shrimps"; he often returned to camp dizzy and staggering. Brainard earned an officer's commission many times over during the expedition.

Not everyone in camp was concerned with the party's general welfare. Pte. Henry was warned more than once about repeatedly stealing food and on the evening of June 5, Greely quietly ordered that Henry be shot if he was again caught stealing food. Henry was caught yet again, and Greely wrote a new order to Sergeants Brainard, Long and Frederick--execute Pte. Henry. The three executioners drew lots as to who would fire the shots, as there was only one suitable rifle in camp, and swore never to reveal the man's name. Henry then paid the ultimate price for his crime.

In spite of the dire circumstances, Brainard still took an interest in his surroundings. On June 8, Greely penned that Brainard '...found yesterday a few Eskimo relics. We told him it was a ruling passion strong in death, as he has always been gathering up articles of that kind.'

Rescue

By June 22, just seven men remained from the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition. Greely thought he heard a ship's whistle and asked Brainard and Long to investigate. Having crawled up the ridge, the men saw nothing and Brainard returned to the tent to report to Greely. Long went up to the knoll to raise the fallen signal flag Brainard had planted there some weeks before, and as he gazed out into the water, he could just make out the form of a ship--they were saved!

At the time of rescue, the men were within 48 of death, and it was largely due to Sgt. Brainard's scrupulous handling of food supplies and his shrimp fishing that anyone was still alive. During the dreadful winter months, 'no ounce of unauthorized food passed his lips.', wrote Greely about his valiant First Sergeant.

Bodies of the dead were exhumed by the rescuers from shallow graves on Cemetery Ridge and it was discovered that six had been cannibalized. This discovery and the failed relief missions caused a public sensation in the United States, but to their dying days, all of the survivors denied any knowledge of cannibalism.

In the end, only six remained of the 25-man Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, with one man having died on one of the homeward bound rescue ships.

Interestingly, Brainard first received recognition for his Arctic achievements, not from his own countrymen, but from the Royal Geographical Society in June 1886, which presented him with the Back Grant. The award included a gold testimonial watch and diploma. Greely received the RGS Founder's Gold Medal.

Sgt. Brainard was finally rewarded with a commission in his old unit, the Second Cavalry, that October, **"As recognition of the gallant and meritorious services rendered by him in the Arctic expedition of 1881-1884." At that time, and for many years thereafter, he was the only living officer of the Army, active or retired, holding a commission awarded for specific distinguished services.**

Far West, Alaska and Foreign Service

What followed was a posting to forts in the Far West, and Brainard was married at Fort Walla Walla, Washington, in February 1888, but the union was short-lived. Afterward came postings to forts in California, Arizona and New Mexico. By the early 1890s, Brainard was promoted First Lieutenant, and during this period, several troops of the Second Cavalry were in the field searching for the Apache Kid, a former U.S. Army Indian Scout who had been a renegade for many years. Other detachments were in constant search of hostile Indians who were guilty of isolated plunderings. What eventually happened to the Kid is a mystery, but he likely made it to Mexico and died there.

Brainard eventually transferred to a branch for which he was well-suited--commissary and subsistence, where he became a Captain in 1896. In February 1898, Captain Brainard was appointed Purchasing and Disbursing Officer of the Alaska Relief Expedition and was based in Dyea. Brainard's relief expedition was intended to address the "sufferings" of the Dawson miners during the Alaskan Gold Rush, but found the miners well supplied and needed no relief. The coming war with Spain drew Brainard away from colder climes and to Manila, in the Philippine Islands, during the Spanish-American War.

During the Spanish-American War and Philippine Insurrection, the now Major Brainard was appointed Chief Commissary of Department of the Pacific and Eighth Army Corps, supervising about a dozen division and brigade officers commissary field officers. He was highly praised for his work by his superiors and in a congressional report.

The Explorers Club

Back in the States, in May 1904, a group of men active in exploration met to form an organization uniting explorers in good fellowship and to promote the work of exploration by every means in its power. Among these men were Adolphus Greely and soon-to-be Lieut. Colonel David Brainard (later the Club's fourth president). The dinner in New York City was attended by fifty men well known in exploration and the Explorers Club was organized.

Brainard returned to the Philippines from 1909 until 1911 as Chief Commissary, Philippine Division, Manila. From September 1911 until July 1914, he was serving in the Office of the Commissary General in Washington, D.C. and received his promotion to Colonel during this time.

In April 1914, a dinner was held at The Explorers Club to celebrate the fifth anniversary of Robert E. Peary's North Pole discovery and a special gold medal to mark the occasion was ordered from Tiffany and presented to Peary. Individually named bronze replicas were presented to Club members in attendance.

First World War

Afterward, Brainard became the US Military Attaché in Buenos Aires until the eve of America's entry into the First World War, in April 1917. He found time to get married a second time in June and wed Sara (née Hall) Guthrie, who already had a daughter named Elinor.

By the end of 1917, Brainard received his final promotion, to Brigadier General in the National Army. The following year found him in Lisbon, Portugal, acting as the Military Attaché at the US Embassy; he served at this post until August 1919 and retired in October.

Though retired from the military, Brainard did not slow down and became the Washington representative for a New York business firm, the Association of Army and Navy Stores, of which he was Vice President and a Director. However, life was not all work and the Brainards travelled the world, filling many journals and photograph albums with memories.

Overdue Recognition and Looking Back

By the 1920s, Greely had long since retired as a Major General, but he and Brainard had stayed in close contact since their Arctic days. After four decades, the American Geographical Society recognized Brainard for his 'conspicuous work in the field of Arctic exploration' and awarded him the Charles P. Daly Medal in 1925. By this date, only Greely and Brainard remained of the six Lady Franklin Bay survivors.

At the close of the decade, The Explorers Club presented its highest honor, the Explorers Medal, to the only survivor of the "farthest north" sledge party. The award is the highest honor bestowed by the Club and is awarded for extraordinary contributions directly to the field of exploration, scientific research or to the welfare of humanity. In the same year, 1929, Brainard published *The Outpost of the Lost: An Arctic Adventure*, a transcription of the last 11 months of his journal, which had lain for 45 years in an old trunk.

Brainard's final polar accolade came in 1936, the year after Greely's death, when the American Polar Society elected Brainard its first Honorary Member on his 80th birthday. And the media sought out Brainard too; in the 1930s and into the '40s, he retold the story of Arctic adventure for newspaper readers and radio audiences alike.

The last survivor of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition published a transcription of his journal for the entire expedition in 1940, under the title *Six Came Back: The Arctic Adventure of David L. Brainard*.

David L. Brainard remained active in business up until his death of a heart attack in Washington's Walter Reed General Hospital, on March 22, 1946; Sara Brainard died in 1953, and both were laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. Elinor passed away in New York City in 1982.