A Biography of Admiral Peary

Radm. Robert E Peary, CEC, USN 1856 TO 1920

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 Isthmian Canal Surveyor, Arctic Explorer, and early Air Advocate

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A Biography by Dr. Vincent Transano, USN Historian,

 On the 90th anniversary of the Admiral’s discovery of the North Pole

Celebrated at Arlington National Cemetery, April 6, 1996

 The most famous Civil Engineer Corps officer to date remains Robert Edwin Peary. However, Peary an extremely talented man of tremendous drive achieved his greatest renown not as a civil engineer but as an arctic explorer. Nevertheless, Peary was not just an Arctic explorer whose goal was to reach the North Pole. He was a first-rate civil engineer who performed his Navy assignments in a meticulous manner. Like many of his fellow Civil Engineer Corps officers, he was involved in the inter-oceanic canal project, and late in life he became deeply involved in aviation and worked to promote the future of this new means of transportation. Peary was a man of many talents and wide interests, a veritable “renaissance man” who succeeded at whatever he tried.

Peary graduating from Bowdoin College, 1877

EARLY DAYS. Robert Edwin Peary was born the only son of Charles and Mary Peary on 6 May 1856 in Cresson, Pennsylvania. His parents had moved there from Maine where the family originated; and after his father’s death, when Peary was only three, he and his mother moved back to Maine and settled at Cape Elizabeth. After receiving an education in the local public schools, Peary entered Bowdoin College and graduated in 1877 with a degree in civil engineering. Peary was driven by a need to excel, to achieve more than the average man. At the age of 24, he wrote his mother that, “I don’t want to live and die without accomplishing anything or without being known beyond a narrow circle of friends”. It would take years of dedicated effort, physical suffering, and danger, before this desire for recognition was satisfied.

SURVEYOR, TAXIDERMIST, DRAFSTMAN. The young engineer became a country surveyor in Fryeburg, Maine; the townspeople, however, needed his services so little that he became a justice of the peace and turned to taxidermy to augment his income. He did rather better at mounting birds than he did at civil engineering (Robins, $1.50; Ducks and Hawks, $1.75-$2.25). In 1879, Peary responded to a notice on the bulletin board of the local post office and was appointed a cartographic draftsman with the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in Washington, DC. at a salary of $10 a week.

 Although qualifying for a permanent position, Peary did not think that a draftsman’s stool was a good place from which to achieve great success. Another government announcement informed him that the Navy Civil Engineer Corps was offering commissions to a “select few”. At the time, a stringent (for the day) physical examination was required followed by the successful completion of a ten-day competitive written examination. Although lacking in practical engineering experience, Peary threw himself into the examination with a will, even supplementing the tests with voluntary material of his own creation.

 After hearing nothing for two months, Peary read one day in the Washington Star that Robert Edwin Peary had been selected as one of six new civil engineers by the Navy. The year was 1881, the same year that a U. S. Attorney General opinion, clearly defined Navy civil engineers as commissioned naval officers.

Washington. DC in 1880

CIVIL ENGINEER. Robert E Peary, USN (holding the relative rank of lieutenant) was assigned to the Bureau of Yards and Docks in Washington, DC. From this first posting, he wrote his mother:

“It’s different from the Coast Survey. I am “boss” instead of “bossed”, have a room of my own, messenger, clerk, and draftsman. Have over a hundred men under my control”.

For his first field assignment, Peary was sent to Key West, Florida, as inspector for a new iron pier being built by a civilian contractor. He threw himself into the project with a will. Not liking the contractor’s methods, Peary devised his own and implemented them. He personally dived to inspect the seabed and developed his own blasting techniques to clear the bottom of debris. A bout with yellow fever prevented his inspection of the work for a time and when he did return he was so appalled at the lack of progress that he took it upon himself to suspend the project. The bureau subsequently backed up his decision to cancel the project.

 Especially impressed by the young Peary’s performance was Civil Engineer Aniceto Menocal, USN, to whom Peary had briefly been an assistant at the Washington Navy Yard, before going to Key West. As mentioned in an early vignette, Menocal was deeply involved in inter-oceanic canal projects and favored a route across Nicaragua. In 1884, Menocal was named the chief engineer of a formal survey of the projected canal route. Menocal named Peary chief of the field party. Peary was the workhorse of the survey. As pioneer and transitman, Peary and his native crew hacked their way through the tropical jungle, climbed mountains, and crossed canyons, to bring the survey to a successful conclusion.

 Next came an interlude that would shape several decades of Peary’s life. Having concluded the canal survey, Peary turned north. In 1886, he read a paper on the inland ice of Greenland which so fired his interest that he read everything available on Greenland. He then obtained six months leave and sailed as supercargo aboard a steam whaler bound for Greenland. Accompanied by a young Danish official, Peary carried out a three-week long reconnaissance of the Greenland icecap, which brought him 100 miles from the foot of the cap at an elevation of 7500 feet. As a result of this trip, Arctic exploration would dominate Peary’s interest for much of the rest of his life.

CANAL PROJECT. Following his trip to Greenland, Peary once again became involved in the isthmian canal project. As chief engineer of the private Maritime Canal Company, Aniceto Menocal carried out a second survey of the Nicaraguan route in 1887. He chose Peary as his assistant on this venture. Because of the great interest in the project, both civil engineers were granted leave to carry out the undertaking.

Nicaragua Canal project 1887. Robert E. Peary Surveying the Canal, Nicaragua

 On this second expedition, Peary was accompanied by a young black man, Matthew Henson, whom he hired away from a hat shop in Washington, DC. Henson, over the next three decades became Peary’s close companion as well as his assistant, and the field manager of Peary’s later Arctic expeditions. He also has the distinction of being Peary’s sole American companion on the last lap to the North Pole in 1909. Henson was no ordinary stock clerk in 1887; he had already traveled widely as an able seaman with 6 years sailing experience.

 The second Nicaragua survey was a well-funded expedition comprising almost 200 men. Well aware of the dangers of the tropical trail, Peary took every precaution to protect his men. He involved himself in the most minute details of the survey which he brought to a speedy conclusion. Although he thought the Nicaraguan route better than the Panamanian, he was not bitter or surprised when Congress finally chose the latter route because he felt there was a need for two canals and that both routes would eventually be used.

Robert Peary and Josephine Diebitsch wedding 1888

MARRIAGE AND GREENLAND. Peary’s life seemingly took a more conventional turn in 1888 when he married Josephine Diebitsch of Washington, DC, and was assigned as civil engineer for the New York Navy Shipyard. Nevertheless, while engaged in civil engineering projects for the Navy, Peary was also planning another trip to Greenland. Receiving encouragement from the American Geographical Society of which he was a member, he attempted to obtain special orders from the Navy in the way of an official endorsement of the proposed expedition. However, his request for orders, which he made directly to Secretary of the Navy W. C. Whitney, elicited the following response,” the service in which you are about to engage can in no sense be considered Naval duty”

In 1890 the Navy transferred Peary from New York to the League Island Navy Yard in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was soon after this move, that the American Geographical Society, Brooklyn Institute, and Philadelphia Academy of Sciences voted to support and fund his expedition to reach the northern end of Greenland by way of the inland ice. Peary secured 18 months leave from the Navy in early 1891; and he, his wife, and a party of six departed for Greenland in June. Peary had the misfortune to break his leg early on; however the expedition’s doctor, Frederick A Cook, set the leg and Peary hobbled about on crutches till it healed. The following year he carried out the proposed sledging trip to the northern tip of Greenland--a round trip of 1300 miles-- which clearly demonstrated that Greenland was indeed an island.

 The expedition was a brilliant success and led to a second Greenland expedition and three more years of leave from the Navy. Peary personally helped underwrite the new expedition by going on a grueling lecture tour, which raised a total of $13,000 in 103 days. In 1893, Peary, his wife who was pregnant with their first child, and the men of the expedition again went north, this time to explore land north of Greenland and reach the North Pole if possible. His wife had her child in Greenland, Marie Ahnighto Peary, the

Marie Anghito Peary, the Snow Baby

 Marie, the Snow Baby

Snow Baby, born Sept. 12, 1893, the first Caucasian child born that far north. Josephine and baby soon departed for home. The winter of 1893-1894 was extremely harsh and the party had to turn back after making only 120 miles across the ice cap. The main body of the expedition departed by ship in August; however, Peary and two companions remained behind to make one more attempt at exploration. A year later, after much hardship and little success, they too departed. In 1896 and 1897 Peary again made trips to Greenland. During this period Peary began to set his eye on the North Pole; he decided that the only way to reach the pole was from the north coast of Greenland.

TO THE POLE. The Navy Department, however, ended further exploration by Peary in the Arctic. In April 1897 Peary was ordered to report to the Mare Island Navy Yard in California. In response Peary requested a five-year leave of absence so that he could continue his explorations, which included the goal of reaching the North Pole. The Navy refused the request; never the less, Peary through an influential acquaintance got President McKinley to personally intercede. Peary’s orders were canceled and his leave granted.

 The fact that the Spanish-American War broke out as Peary’s departure neared did not deter him. He continued his preparations and departed New York Harbor for the Arctic in July 1898. By August, his ship was icebound after crossing Smith Sound, nearly 700 miles from the pole. While establishing and supplying a base on the edge of the Polar Sea, Peary had both feet badly frozen and suffered the amputation of eight toes. He stayed in the Arctic until the fall of 1902 carrying out an extensive exploration of the region and in the spring of 1902 made the nearest approach yet to the pole in the American Arctic, 84” 17 north.

 Upon his return, Peary underwent extensive surgery on his feet to permit their fullest use. Through sheer will power he learned to walk without a noticeable limp. Peary, now a commander, was involved in regular naval duties with the Bureau of Yards and Docks for the next few months. Nevertheless, his mind was still on the Arctic, and particularly on reaching the North Pole.

 One individual who greatly approved of Peary’s devotion to Arctic exploration was Vice President Theodore Roosevelt; and when Roosevelt became President following McKinley’s assassination in 1901, Peary’s future was assured. No longer would Peary have problems getting leave and acquiring support for his expeditions. The new President had a keen interest in such matters and fully supported Peary’s efforts. In September 1903, Peary was given three years leave to pursue another attempt on the pole. A problem in the previous attempt was the lack of a ship capable of forcing a passage through the ice to a high enough latitude for a cross-polar dash. Peary’s Arctic Club raised $100,000 for the expedition and built such a ship, the Roosevelt, from the keel up. This time the explorers would use Eskimo methods and clothing, and travel in individual dog sledges.

 In July 1905 the Roosevelt sailed north from New York and reached the north coast of Grant Land by September. Peary struck out for the pole from Cape Hecla in March 1906; however, after two weeks of travel across broken ice fields, and open leads, the conditions of his dogs and his declining food supply forced him and his associates to turn back. Nevertheless, he reached latitude 87” 6’ north, 176 miles from the pole and the farthest north anyone had ever reached.

In July 1908 Peary left on his last attempt to conquer the pole. The Roosevelt made it to latitude 82” 30’ north, the farthest north for a ship under its own power and on 1 March 1909 Peary set off from Cape Columbia with his close associate, Matthew Henson, seven other companions, seventeen Eskimos, 133 dogs, and 19 sledges. By the end of March, the expedition had reached the 88th parallel and the last supporting party turned back, leaving Peary, Henson, four Eskimos, and forty dogs to make the final dash for the pole. On 6 April 1909 Peary made observations which indicated that he had reached 90” latitude north, the North Pole. He raised the Stars and Stripes, made scientific observations, remaining at the pole for some 30 hours. Due to excellent weather conditions, the return to Cape Columbia was accomplished at breakneck speed in only 16 days. On 5 September 1909 the Roosevelt arrived at Indian Harbor, Labrador, and Peary cabled the news to the world that he had reached the North Pole.

DISPUTE AND VICTORY. However, Peary’s triumph was not unalloyed, for he now found himself embroiled in a controversy that would plague him for years. Five days before Peary sent his famous cable, Dr. Frederick A Cook, the surgeon from Peary’s first expedition and explorer in his own right, announced that he had reached the pole on 21 April 1908! The press and public initially sided with Cook whose claim to have reached the pole almost single-handedly with a small party of Eskimos seemed more dramatic than Peary’s carefully crafted expedition. Nevertheless, a committee of experts commissioned by the National Geographic Society found for Peary. Cook and his partisans continued the controversy for some time although his claim finally lost all credibility. Some years later, Cook achieved notoriety when he was convicted of promoting worthless oil stocks and sent to prison.

 In early 1910, a bill was introduced in Congress to recognize Peary’s achievement by promoting him to rear admiral and placing him on the retired list with the highest possible retirement pay under existing law. In October 1910, Peary was advanced to the rank of captain and in March of 1911 Congress passed the legislation giving the nations’ thanks to Peary, advancing him to the rank of rear admiral, and placing him on the retired list.

AVIATION, A NEW CAREER. Although in his mid-fifties and weakened by many years of living under the harshest conditions, Radm. Peary still had energy for a new endeavor. In 1913 Peary became interested in the airplane and its potential; and he consulted with the Wright brothers about the possible use of aircraft for exploration and military purposes. In 1916 Peary urged the creation of a Department of Aeronautics to rank equally with the War and Navy Departments. Peary argued that in addition to “...the immediate military emergency (impending U.S. involvement in World War 1), the money and effort expended on our air service will all count towards a great peace air service,...the carrying of mails, the transportation of passengers and express material, the lifesaving patrol of our coasts...” Such sentiments, especially his call for a separate aviation department, were not enthusiastically received in the higher echelons of the War and Navy Departments. Some individuals, however, including an Army aviator named Billy Mitchell and members of the prestigious Aero Club of America, did listen. In fact the latter organization named Peary Chairman of Aeronautical Maps and Landing Places.

 Receiving little official support, Peary devoted his full energy to the development of air power, capitalizing on his national stature to enlist public support. He advocated an aerial coast patrol, selecting points along the entire U.S. coastline to serve as bases. He maintained that, “An attack must come upon us by sea. Our coastline as a base gives us inestimable advantage in aerial warfare, and will enable us to send out such veritable clouds of airplanes as would completely overwhelm and destroy any number of airplanes that could be transported on the deck of a hostile fleet”.

Through a 20 city fund-raising tour, Peary raised $250,000 for the Aerial Coast Patrol Fund, which was used to establish four coastal patrols under the independent National Coastal Patrol Commission, an auxiliary of the Navy. The Navy would later build naval air stations at practically the same points advocated by Peary. Upon U.S. entry into World War 1, Peary was named Chairman of the National Committee on Coast Defense by Air; he also accepted the presidency of the Aero League of America. An ironic footnote to the story of this Civil Engineer Corps officer and prophet of air power, was the sinking of the USS PEARY, his namesake, at Darwin, Australia, by Japanese air power on 19 February 1942.

Radm. Peary’s efforts on behalf of air power further drained his physical reserves. In 1917 he was diagnosed as having pernicious anemia which was, save by transfusions, untreatable at the time. True to his engineering discipline, he carefully monitored and recorded his vital signs during the inevitable decline. He died at his Washington home on 20 February 1920 and was buried at Arlington Cemetery. (At right, Peary in 1919 at a National Geographical meeting in Washington.)

SUMMARY. Radm. Peary’s accomplishments as an Arctic explorer, go far beyond his 1909 expedition to reach the North Pole. Having been involved in Arctic exploration for almost a quarter of a century, he developed highly efficient methods of exploration, utilizing small parties and Eskimo equipment, dress, and modes of travel. His trips to Greenland resulted in a complete revision of the maps of a large portion of that island. In addition, the sciences of meteorology and hydrography greatly benefited from his observations in Greenland and on the Arctic ice cap. Peary’s tidal observations, the most northerly ever made, were of great value to understanding the tides of the Arctic Ocean. Finally, Peary gathered much information about hitherto little known Eskimo tribes, which proved invaluable to anthropologists.

 The U.S Postal Service issued a stamp to commemorate Peary’s final Arctic expedition of 1909. The stamp, unlike that of Radm Rousseau, honors the entire expedition rather than Peary as an individual. Nevertheless, Radm Peary is the only other Civil Engineer Corps officer to be associated with a postage stamp. Radm Peary was more than just an Arctic explorer, he was an explorer par excellence, whether in the jungles of Nicaragua searching out the path of an inter-oceanic canal, in the Arctic dashing for the North Pole, or in the air pioneering a new, revolutionary means of transportation and warfare. Radm Peary, civil engineer, explorer, and aviation advocate, was a genuine twentieth century pioneer.

 "Invenium viam aut facium"

 Find a way or make one