

Ada Blackjack

One Woman's True Story of Survival



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Ada Blackjack was a small woman who stood only five feet tall and was deathly afraid of guns and polar bears. She was not the type of person you would expect to survive in the Siberian Arctic for two years on her own—but she did!

Ada was an Iñupiat (native Alaskan) woman who was born in Solomon, Alaska. When she was still young, Ada moved to Nome, Alaska where she later got married and had three children. Sadly, her only surviving child contracted tuberculosis, a serious lung disease, and was very ill. When Ada's husband left her, Ada had no money to support herself or her son and not many options. Left with no choice, Ada placed her son in an orphanage and promised to return for him as soon as she had the money.

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Soon after, Ada heard of a job working on an expedition doing the cooking and sewing. The job paid \$50 per month, which, to Ada, was a huge sum at the time. It was enough to get her son out of the orphanage and pay for a hospital to treat his illness. When Ada found out what the job involved—an expedition to the Arctic—she was less enthusiastic, however she was desperate to help her ailing son and agreed to go.



Ada Blackjack (center) with the four men from the Wrangle Island expedition

A very famous Arctic explorer named Vilhjalmur Stefansson organized the expedition that Ada agreed to join. The purpose of the expedition was to claim Wrangel Island, near Siberia, for England. Stefansson was a veteran explorer who knew first-hand how to survive in the harsh Arctic environment.

The crew Stefansson hired for the expedition, however, did not have much Arctic survival experience and Stefansson had no plans of joining them on the expedition.

The small expedition, made up of four men plus Ada, sailed from Nome, Alaska for Wrangel Island in September of 1921. Stefansson gave them six months of supplies for a two-year stay on the island—according to international law, they needed to stay for two years



The landscape of Wrangel Island

in order to claim the island. Stefansson reassured the crew that six months of supplies would be more than enough because they could hunt and live off the land—plus, he promised to ship more supplies to them in six months.

Ada said she knew something was wrong from the moment she stepped on the island because it looked too big and empty to her. Indeed, there wasn't much game for the landing party to hunt and by January of 1922, they had barely caught any animals. Without meat from game to supplement their supplies, the group relied heavily on the supplies they brought with them. And in temperatures of -50, they needed a lot of energy to stay healthy and therefore burned through their supplies very quickly.

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That June, a summer ice storm froze the water surrounding the island and made it impossible for any supply ship to reach them until the following summer. Out of luck and nearly out of supplies, the small landing party slowly began to starve. One of the men in the party, Lorne Knight, became sick with scurvy, a serious illness caused by a vitamin C deficiency. By then, the other men knew they had to find help. On January 29, 1923, the three healthy men left Knight with Ada, took some precious supplies, and left in search of help. Unfortunately, a colossal winter storm rolled through the next day and the three men were never heard from again.

With Knight too weak to get out of bed, Ada had to find a way to survive plus take care of the sick man. When Knight died six months later, Ada was completely alone.

Ada survived by hunting and trapping the few animals she could find on the island. She had a number of run-ins with the polar bears she dreaded so much. Here is an excerpt from the statement* she gave US Marshals after she was rescued from Wrangel Island. In this statement, Ada described what happened right after she shot a seal.

“[The seal] was so far out that I knew that I couldn't get it to the tent without something to help me. So I went back to the tent and got a poling line... I was nearly [back to the seal] when I looked up and saw something that looked just like a yellow ball coming towards me. Finally I realized it was a polar bear and I was four hundred yards from my tent. I turned and ran just as hard as I could until I got to my tent. I was just about ready to faint when I got there, too. I had built a high raft at the back of my tent and I climbed up onto this and took my field glasses and watched the bear and her young one eat my seal... so I waited until the next morning. I went out and took a look but my seal was gone...

“One day, just after I had cleaned my second seal, I heard a noise just like a dog outside of my door and I looked out the door and about 15 feet from the tent was a big bear and a young one. I was very scared but I took my rifle and thought I would take a chance. I knew if I just hit them in the foot or some place where it would only injure them a little, they would come after

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me, so I fired over their heads and they turned and ran a little ways and turned and looked as if they would come back, so I fired five more shots at them and they ran away for good then.

Shortly after she scared away the polar bears, a ship finally came to rescue Ada. Back at home, Ada became a celebrity and appeared in many newspapers. Vilhjalmur Stefansson, however, did not pay her what he promised to pay her—he paid her much less—and tried to make her look bad by saying she didn't take proper care of the deathly ill Knight.

Ada used the money she made to reunite with her son and get him the medical treatment he needed in Seattle, Washington. Eventually, Ada returned to Nome, Alaska and became a reindeer herder. She died in 1983 at the age of 85.



Ada with her son

*from <https://timeline.com/ada-blackjack-stranded-island-4e6f0d2e198e>