

# Ada Blackjack

## One Woman's True Story of Survival



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

Ada was an Iñupiat woman. Iñupiat are native Alaskans. Ada was born in Solomon, Alaska. Ada later moved to Nome, Alaska. She got married and had three children. Sadly, two of her children died. The child that survived was very sick. When Ada's husband left her, Ada had no money to support herself or her son. Left with no choice, Ada put her son in an orphanage. She promised to return for him as soon as she had the money.

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Ada heard of a job working on an expedition doing the cooking and sewing. The job paid \$50 per month, which was a huge amount for Ada at the time. It was enough to get her son out of the orphanage and pay for a hospital to treat his illness.



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

A very famous Arctic explorer named Vilhjalmur Stefansson organized the expedition. The purpose was to claim Wrangel Island for England. Stefansson was a very experienced explorer. He knew how to survive in the harsh Arctic

environment. The rest of the crew on the ship, however, did not have much experience. Stefansson did not go on the expedition.

The small crew was made up of four men plus Ada. The ship left Nome, Alaska for Wrangel Island in 1921. Stefansson gave them six months of supplies for a two-year stay on the island.



By law they needed to stay **The landscape of Wrangel Island** for two years in order to claim the island. Stefansson told the crew that their supplies would be more than enough. He told them it would be easy to live off the land. They left in September, 1921.

Ada said she knew something was wrong from the moment she stepped on the island. It looked too big and empty to her. Indeed, there wasn't much game for the landing party to hunt. By January, they had only found a few animals to eat. But they didn't worry too much. A ship was supposed to bring them supplies that June.

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Unfortunately, a summer ice storm made this impossible. The storm froze the water around the island. It was impossible for a supply ship to get through. The small landing party was out of luck and supplies. They began to starve. One of the men in the party, Lorne Knight, became sick. By then, the other men knew they had to find help. On January 29, 1923, the men left Knight with Ada. They took some precious supplies and left in search of help. A massive winter storm rolled through the next day. 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...

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“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 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.

Ada used the money 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>