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The Power of Unwavering Hope:

How Ada Blackjack Survived the Arctic without Survival Skills



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"1921 Wrangel Island Expedition team." University of Toronto Libraries, 1925.

Surviving the Arctic Alone: The True Story of Iñupiat Heroine Ada Blackjack

"If anything happen to me and my death is known, there is a black stirp for Bennett school book bag, for my only son. I wish if you please take everything to Bennett that is belong to me." – Ada Blackjack

In 1921, Ada Blackjack departed on an arctic expedition with the role of seamstress, seeking to earn enough money to care for her son. Little did she know that her role would soon involve cutting firewood, setting traps, and hunting in attempts to save a dying crewmate. She lived for two years on Wrangel Island, two months of which were in complete isolation before being rescued as the sole survivor of the fated expedition.

Ada Blackjack (née Ada Deletuk) was an Iñupiat woman raised in Alaska

amongst Methodist missionaries. In the late 19th century, the Inuit tribe made up 53% of Alaska's population, though the percentage declined with the migration of Americans after the Alaska Purchase.¹

Instead of hunting, Ada was taught English, how to read and write, pray, and cook "white people's food." Ada, who married Jack Blackjack, bore three children, two who had died, and the third, Bennett, who suffered from tuberculosis. Eventually deserted by her husband and living in poverty, she surrendered Bennett to an orphanage, promising to come back with enough money to take care of him.

Ada Blackjack received news of an opportunity to join a crew of four setting off to Wrangel Island. The one-year contract would provide \$50 a month, a well-paid sum that could change her life.

¹ Sandberg, Eric. "A History of Alaska Population Settlement." Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. April, 2013.



How the expedition of Wrangel Island came to be

Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson was known for his anthropologic work surrounding Inuit culture and advertised the Arctic as a friendly place to live. Stefansson had come off a controversial 1913-1916 arctic expedition resulting in lost lives when he sought to secure funding for an expedition to Wrangel Island.

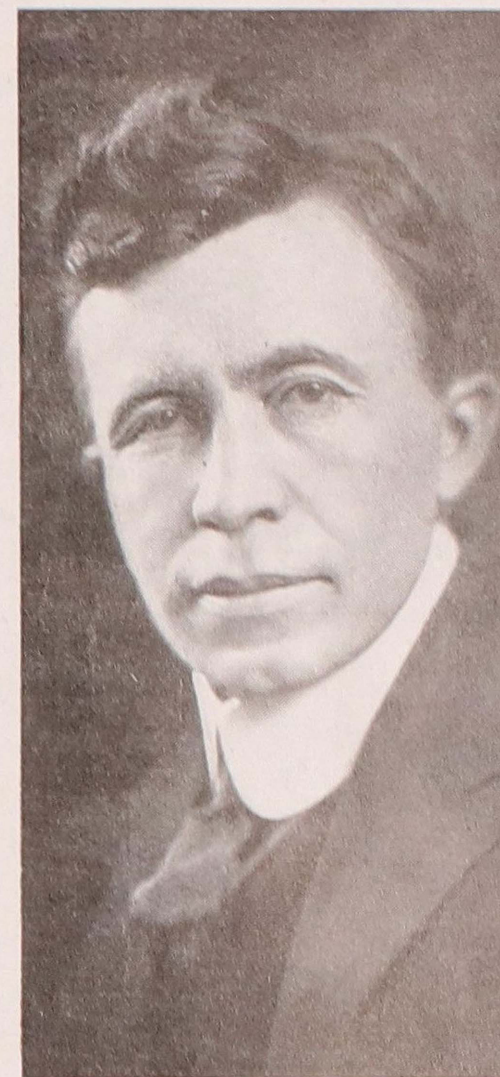
According to Stefansson, Wrangel Island was one of the best fur-trapping, walrus and seal hunting locations in the Arctic. With wide grazing-lands, he believed the island could support a large reindeer population, providing better livestock value than that of sheep.

Not only did Wrangel Island hold value for faunal opportunities, but it could serve as a hub for transpolar air commerce; the location was treasured for air temperature and constant sunlight in the summer months (making it ideal for travel) and for the shortcuts it would provide for travel.

After outlining the island's resource value, Stefansson's proposal for funding was denied. Raising funds of his own, he assembled a crew of four men to claim the island for the British Empire: Allan Crawford, Errol Lorne Knight, Fred Maurer, and Milton Galle. He recruited families of indigenous Alaskans, though none showed up to set sail except for Ada Blackjack.

**From the collection: P. M. Wordie,
V. Stefansson, et al., Correspondence Blocks,
April 27, 1921- October 8, 1923.**

(Available to view via institutional or trial access)



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VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON,
Arctic explorer, who declares he seized
Wrangell Island for Great Britain to
circumvent the Japanese.

Rough Beginnings

The Wrangel Island expedition was underway, and Errol Lorne Knight started to write a diary on September 14, 1921, detailing events of the day, game sightings, and weather conditions. Ada Blackjack makes her first appearance in Knight's diary on September 16, 1921, when he writes, "We have an Eskimo woman with us who is busy sewing clothing and she is doing very nicely."

What started as a job well done seemed to change in a few weeks; according to Knight, Blackjack had emotional outbursts: she intermittently denied sewing duties, feared her crewmates' intentions (except Crawford), refused food, wandered away from camp, and expressed worries that she would never see her home again. In his diary, Knight called her "the lost one" and "the foolish woman."

Knight initially treated Ada kindly but grew frustrated with her continued behavior. Unfortunately, the crew would have to turn to stern repercussion after months of patience had failed. Upon Ada's refusal to patch a pair of boots, Knight "tied her to the flagpole until she promised to repair them." When Ada was uncooperative, the crew denied her meals, and made her sleep out in the cold.

From the collection: Arthur R. Hinks, E. L. Knight, 1921-1923.

(Available to view via institutional or trial access)

Arthur R. Hinks, E.L. Knight. "Diary on Wrangel Island, 14 September 1921-23 March 1923."
Advance party of Stefansson Arctic Exploration and Development company. Wiley Digital Archives:
Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

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Knight's Diary

on

Wrangel Island.

Sep. 1921 - Mar 1923.



*Presented to
The Royal Geographical Society
for the reference of members.*

*A photostat copy of the actual diary may be seen at the library
of the Royal Geographical Society, 1 Albemarle Street, London W.*

J.R.S. Nov 26

We're Not in Alaska Anymore: Arctic Hysteria

Ada Blackjack was homesick and terrified. She felt unwanted after her romantic interest in Crawford was rejected. She knew she was a burden and feared for her life because of it. Knight believed that she was “slightly touched.” He continued by writing, “Too bad we did not know it in Nome. She surely would not be here.”²

Unbeknownst to all, Ada was showing signs of arctic hysteria, a mental health condition that can develop due to cold temperatures and the endless day and night patterns of the polar regions.³ Though the condition became known as common among far north indigenous societies, unfortunately for Ada, mental health conditions were largely misunderstood in the early 20th century and negatively stigmatized due to a lack of professional knowledge.

As Ada adapted to her new environment and left initial expectations behind, she began to cooperate and sew again.

Fridtjof Nansen. “Sketch of a Polar Bear.” RGS Images Online, 1927.
Wiley Digital Archives: Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

² Arthur R. Hinks, E. L. Knight. “Diary on Wrangel Island, 14 September 1921-23 March 1923. Advance party of Stefansson Arctic Exploration and Development company.” Wiley Digital Archives.

³ Niven, Jennifer. Ada Blackjack, A true story of survival in the Arctic, Reprint Edition. New York: Hachette Books, 2004.



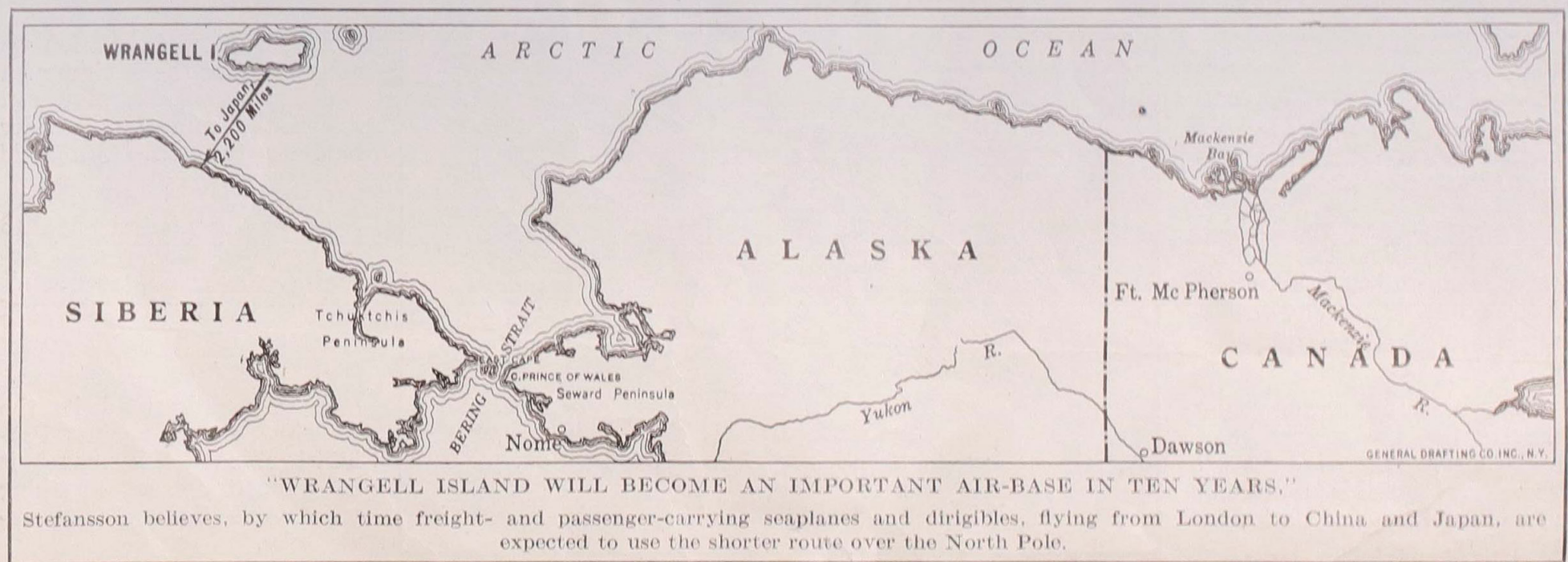
A Change of Plans and a Last-Ditch Effort

At the end of September 1922, morale was low as the crew's relief ship failed to arrive. An unusually harsh winter left behind thick pack ice that wasn't resolved through the summer months, months that typically allowed safe passage for ships headed to the Arctic. This meant that the crew would have to extend their food stores until next summer.

Stefansson had provided the crew with 6 months-worth of food for a one-year contract, claiming that hunting opportunities would easily extend the food supply. Though in the following months, there was scarce, almost nonexistent game. Food stores dwindled, and the crew was forced to issue rations.

Crawford and Knight attempted a last-ditch rescue effort across the ice but were stopped by extreme fatigue; Crawford suffered from frostbitten fingers, while Knight's stamina was severely impaired by ever-worsening scurvy.

A final decision was made: sending three men would provide a better chance for survival while also alleviating the severe food shortage at camp. Immobilized by scurvy, Knight was left behind with Blackjack as Crawford, Maurer, and Galle headed across the sea ice towards Siberia to search for relief. The three would never be seen again.



"Wrangling Wrangel Island:" The Call for Survival

Ada's job changed from seamstress to provider and caregiver as she chopped wood and checked traps for foxes in an effort to save her crew member. On February 7, 1923, Knight wrote, "She insists on doing practically everything, and I willingly permit her, for I am not able to do much."

Though terrified of gunfire, she taught herself how to shoot, even building a gun rest out of driftwood to help mitigate the rifle's recoil.⁴ Ada carried on the work of four men while dealing with starvation and sometimes bedridden from crippling symptoms of her own.

Despite her efforts, on June 23 of 1923, Knight passed away. Ada Blackjack was left to fend off the harshness and isolation of Wrangel Island alone, but didn't give up: she began to write a diary as her crew mates had done, hunted birds and seals, reinforced the camp for the upcoming winter, mended her winter gear that was worn down, and even made a pair of slippers to give to her son, Bennett. Her determination was fueled by an unacceptable thought: 'I will not let Bennett have stepmother,' she said to herself, and that was that.⁵

On August 20, 1923, relief had arrived – a skin boat was headed towards shore to bring Ada home.

⁴ Niven, Jennifer. *Ada Blackjack, A true story of survival in the Arctic*, Reprint Edition. New York: Hachette Books, 2004.

⁵ Niven, Jennifer. *Ada Blackjack, A true story of survival in the Arctic*, Reprint Edition. New York: Hachette Books, 2004.

Arthur R. Hinks, E.L. Knight. "Diary on Wrangel Island, 14 September 1921-23 March 1923." *Advance party of Stefansson Arctic Exploration and Development company*. Wiley Digital Archives: Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

Oct. 20 Thursday
Max 18.1 Sunday Worked all day cleaning out house, building the ends
Min 1.2 and plugging roof and walls. Will build the stormshed
Max 18.2 tomorrow. Our seamstress has practically quit work and she
Min -1.5 will not give us any reason. Crawford who is the only one
of us who has any influence with her told her today that if
Oct. 21 Monday she did not finish the skin she has been scraping at for
Max 21.5 the last day or two by tonight, that she would be put on
Min -1.5 bread and water. That accelerated her a bit but at bed
time tonight the skin was not finished. Will try the
"Sing-Sing" fare on her tomorrow. Ice can be seen on the
sky line but none near shore. Light breeze from the
North. Clear. In sight.
Oct. 22 Tuesday
Max 15.4 Built a snow stormshed in front of winter house.
Min -1.9 today. The seamstress worked some but not enough to hurt
anyone. A few scattering cakes of ice to be seen. Fresh
wind from N.E. Cold & Clear. North. Young ice forming
on the sea.

The Hero of the Arctic

Ada Blackjack came home to a swarm of press. Praised as an arctic hero, she was a local celebrity – though the fame was unwelcomed and she tried to escape it. She pondered the fates of her three crewmates who had set out on a rescue mission and were never heard from again. Although their relationship was complicated, Ada mourned the loss of Lorne Knight, who died only two months ago and whose body was buried on the island.

The arctic buzz continued to sweep the headlines, and many were eager to document Ada's story – primarily for capitalistic gain. Her diary, which she hoped to give to the Knight family, was claimed without her consent. Stefansson underpaid Ada for information regarding her experience in the arctic and denied her royalties when he published his book titled, *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*.⁶ The money was desperately needed to take care of Bennett and her newborn son, Billy.

Despite her initial moment in the limelight, Ada Blackjack did not have the happy ending she deserved: though cured of his tuberculosis, Bennett Blackjack battled with sickness for the remainder of his life, passing away from a stroke at the age of 58. Ada lived most of her life unable to work due to her own poor health and became a forgotten heroine with time.

Ada's strength, however, is worthy of remembrance: her perseverance to overcome her fears allowed her to adapt to a harsh environment. The unconditional love for her son fueled a fierce determination to survive. Her strength to carry on the work of four men was an inspiration during the early 20th century, a time when women in America were fighting for equal rights. Despite many hardships, she lived to the ripe age of 85. And, when Ada Blackjack passed, she was buried right where she wanted to be: next to her son, Bennett.

⁶ Niven, Jennifer. *Ada Blackjack, A true story of survival in the Arctic*, Reprint Edition. New York: Hachette Books, 2004.

Stefansson, Vilhjalmur. "The Adventure of Wrangel Island." London: J. Cape, 1925. Digitized by York University - University of Toronto Libraries and the Internet Archive in 2014.



ADA BLACKJACK IN WINTER COSTUME.



ADA BLACKJACK AND VIC ON THE DONALDSON.



"1921 Wrangel Island Expedition team." University of Toronto Libraries, 1925.

The Wrangel Island Expedition is one of many expeditions covered in Wiley Digital Archives. Explore the diary of Errol Lorne Knight and a unique variety of manuscripts, photographs, maps, and correspondence with a **free trial**.

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