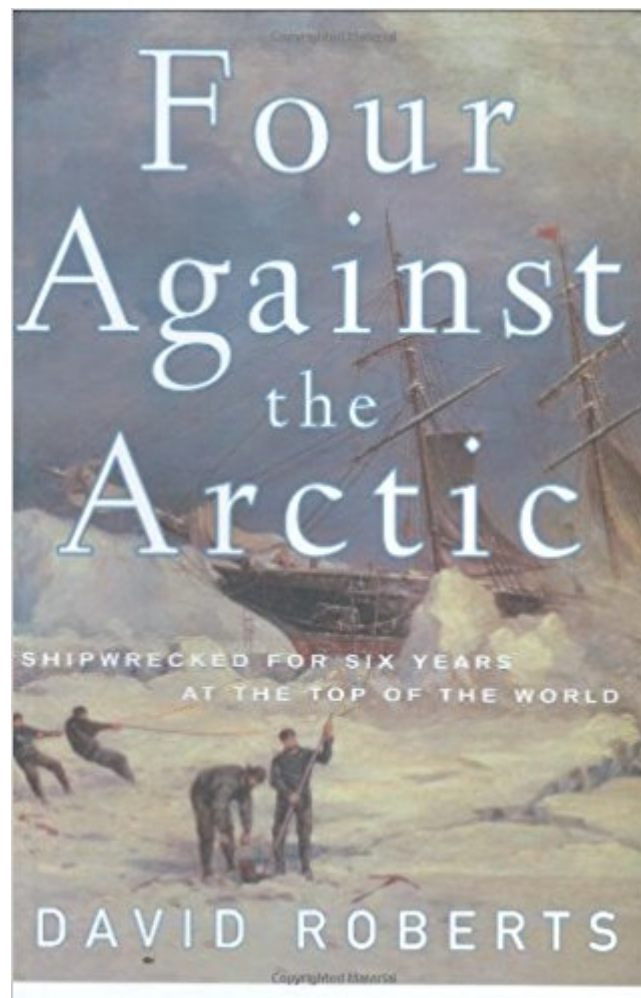




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# Four Against The Arctic: Shipwrecked For Six Years At The Top Of The World



## Synopsis

Follows the author's reconstruction of the survival story of four eighteenth-century Russian sailors who were shipwrecked on the barren Arctic island of Svalbard for six years.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The author of *Escape from Lucania* uncovers an extraordinary tale, set in the mid-18th century, about four Russian hunters stranded on a desolate Arctic isle with scant resources, who survived for six years. Initially, Roberts is so preoccupied with debunking earlier histories of the shipwreck that the drama barely comes to life. He fumes at the shortcomings of other historians such as the "pomposities" and "basic mistakes" of the writer P.L. Le Roy. But these records give the author significant information as he embarks on his own Arctic journey in order to better understand his subjects. Luckily, few things can get in the way of a good story, and when Roberts manages to get out of his own way, he captures it with precise, thoughtful prose. With each discovery and every interview, he pieces together the mystery of how the four men actually survived. Whether detailing how these men fashioned clothing from animal hides, drank the warm blood of reindeer to prevent scurvy or crafted bows and arrows from "driftwood, polar bear tendons, flattened nails, and bird feathers," Roberts succeeds in creating an inspirational survival story. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

In 1743 a Russian ship bound for walrus-hunting grounds in the Arctic was wrecked by ice during a gale, stranding the vessel's four survivors on the barren island of Svalbard. They survived for six

years with almost no provisions. The men miraculously found a prefabricated log cabin left behind by an earlier expedition. Their only possessions were a musket, a knife, an ax, a kettle, 20 pounds of flour, a tinderbox and a small amount of tinder, a pouch of tobacco, and four pipes. Roberts tells how they killed 10 polar bears with homemade lances and how they made bows and arrows to kill reindeer and foxes. Roberts, the author of 14 other books, writes that their lives depended on keeping a fire going, fueled only by driftwood. In researching the book, Roberts went to libraries and archives on two continents, and he led a four-man expedition to Svalbard. The book is an astonishing story, an almost unbelievable feat of survival. George Cohen Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Author David Roberts has made an important contribution to literature, even though he is not versed in languages- in that he brings names/titles of old, long forgotten, rare books to the attention of the modern reader. If only these books in Russian, German, or whatever language - could be translated and distributed !! I can sense that the Author did not just want to be an armchair researcher of what happened to the four men, he wanted to prove- as much as possible , what happened over 250 years ago. A daunting task indeed ! That is why the Author details the steps he took. It was a treat to be taken, with the Author, to Mezen- a remote village on northern Russia. Thanks so much for writing this, Mr. Roberts !

This book has such diverse reviews, I have to add my "two bits." I loved this book for what David Roberts was able to learn about an incredible survival of the four men. One part that really fascinated me was the way the three healthier men did their best to keep the man alive who became ill. They were challenged every day to keep themselves alive, but they showed compassion for the one who was no longer able to contribute to daily survival means. I would agree that Roberts can be pompous, but he has conquered quests most of us only contemplate. I'd love to visit Svalbard myself, but I would settle for a Polar Cruise and not do anything on the level of his adventuring. The book has a vast collection of informational tidbits on many topics that tie into his basic story of the four Russian men stranded on Edgeoya (or nearby). Another part I enjoyed was that about his trip to the Russian town (village?) where the men lived before and after their arctic adventure. Roberts was able to learn new details from residents where the story had been kept alive.

I'm an incurable fan of anything about the Arctic or Antarctic. Maybe because of my Norwegian roots. I devour this stuff, so David Robert's self-interest couldn't stop me. Nevertheless I have to agree with

some of the other reviewers. There wasn't a whole lot in these 304 pages about the four Russian sailor/survivors. Robert's research at Cambridge got pretty slow, but when he finally arrived on Svalbard's shores, his own adventure, it was better. What troubled me was his continuous disdain of previous writers and even his disdain for his fellow adventurers on Svalbard. I think I learned a bit about Polar Bears though. How awesome that people can survive in these extreme environments. I'd like to try it some day.

I have read this book before and wanted it for my collection. It is in very fine condition. However, it does not contain the original 60-page story that got the author interested in this misadventure in the first place. This is important information and is included in other publications of this book. This was very disappointing.

This narrative is an excellent account of how people can survive in the face of a challenge. Unfortunately, the author details the actual writing of the tale much more effectively than dramatizing the task of wintering the arctic. The actual story, (which is hard to find in the book), and the photography would have made a very interesting cover story of a National Geographic. What is ultimately presented turns out to be a mediocre story of how the author did toil to research the information in his book. But that was not about what I had wanted to read.

The story material has great potential. In the 1740s, four Russian sailors are shipwrecked on one of the more remote parts of the Svalbard archipelago. They survive for six years before being rescued. Of course, Svalbard is not the Antarctic, there is lots to eat there and people have been living there at least seasonally since the early 1600s, but still, it makes for a pretty interesting survival tale. It's not only a question of how they fed themselves, but also of how the four of them got along with each other for six years. It also raises the politically sensitive issue of the early Russian presence on Svalbard. And interestingly enough, though the story of the Russian sailors has survived, the location of their camp has been forgotten. The author decides to try to find it, does a fair amount of library research with the help of various assistants, makes a largely unsuccessful trip to Russia, and assembles another group of four men (hence the double meaning of the title). They arrange to be dropped off by a cruise ship in one area where the Russian's camp might have been, and spend a couple weeks in an old trapper's hut fending off polar bears and squabbling amongst themselves. Unfortunately, the book doesn't do justice to its material. One gets the feeling that although the author did a lot of research and trip planning, he didn't put as much time into figuring

out how to make the story interesting to his readers. But the real problem is that he is a trying companion. He wants to come across as a gentleman explorer with a swashbuckling streak, who alternates time in the wilderness with research in rare-book libraries and evening-long meals at fine French restaurants. (Think of the contrast between James Bond's daring deeds, and the computer guy back at headquarters who gives backup support.) Unfortunately, he comes across, and I am sorry to have to put it this way, as pompous and not that well informed. He has a tourist's knowledge of Scandinavia and Russia, he has a tendency to namedrop, and he spends a lot of time taking cheap shots at his admittedly inept Swedish Svalbard guide. Most of the research questions are left unanswered, although the author presents this as a result in itself and a lesson in limits. To be fair, the author's curiosity is genuine and sincere; the book is far from worthless, and provides something of an introduction to Svalbard for novices. But it would be much better to start with Andreas Umbreit's travel guide to Svalbard or Christiane Ritter's fine memoir *A Woman in the Polar Night*.

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