

Juliane Koepcke: How I survived a plane crash

BBC News



Juliane Koepcke was flying over the Peruvian rainforest with her mother when her plane was hit by lightning. She survived a two-mile fall and found herself alone in the jungle, just 17. More than 40 years later, she recalls what happened.

It was Christmas Eve 1971 and everyone was eager to get home, we were angry because the plane was seven hours late.

Suddenly we entered into a very heavy, dark cloud. My mother was anxious but I was OK, I liked flying.

Ten minutes later it was obvious that something was very wrong.

There was very heavy turbulence and the plane was jumping up and down, parcels and luggage were falling from the locker, there were gifts, flowers and Christmas cakes flying around the cabin.

When we saw lightning around the plane, I was scared. My mother and I held hands but we were unable to speak. Other passengers began to cry and weep and scream.

After about 10 minutes, I saw a very bright light on the outer engine on the left. My mother said very calmly: "That is the end, it's all over." Those were the last words I ever heard from her.

The plane jumped down and went into a nose-dive. It was pitch black and people were screaming, then the deep roaring of the engines filled my head completely.

Suddenly the noise stopped and I was outside the plane. I was in a freefall, strapped to my seat bench and hanging head-over-heels. The whispering of the wind was the only noise I could hear.

I felt completely alone.

I could see the canopy of the jungle spinning towards me. Then I lost consciousness and remember nothing of the impact. Later I learned that the plane had broken into pieces about two miles above the ground.

I woke the next day and looked up into the canopy. The first thought I had was: "I survived an air crash."

I shouted out for my mother in but I only heard the sounds of the jungle. I was completely alone.

I had broken my collarbone and had some deep cuts on my legs but my injuries weren't serious. I realised later that I had ruptured a ligament in my knee but I could walk.

Before the crash, I had spent a year and a half with my parents on their research station only 30 miles away. I learned a lot about life in the rainforest, that it wasn't too dangerous. It's not the green hell that the world always thinks.

I could hear the planes overhead searching for the wreck but it was a very dense forest and I couldn't see them.

I was wearing a very short, sleeveless mini-dress and white sandals. I had lost one shoe but I kept the other because I am very short-sighted and had lost my glasses, so I used that shoe to test the ground ahead of me as I walked.

Snakes are camouflaged there and they look like dry leaves. I was lucky I didn't meet them or maybe just that I didn't see them.

I found a small creek and walked in the water because I knew it was safer.

At the crash site I had found a bag of sweets. When I had finished them I had nothing more to eat and I was very afraid of starving.

It was very hot and very wet and it rained several times a day. But it was cold in the night and to be alone in that mini-dress was very difficult.

On the fourth day, I heard the noise of a landing king vulture which I recognised from my time at my parents' reserve.

I was afraid because I knew they only land when there is a lot of carrion and I knew it was bodies from the crash.

When I turned a corner in the creek, I found a bench with three passengers rammed head first into the earth.

I was paralysed by panic. It was the first time I had seen a dead body.

I thought my mother could be one of them but when I touched the corpse with a stick, I saw that the woman's toenails were painted - my mother never polished her nails.

I was immediately relieved but then felt ashamed of that thought.

By the 10th day I couldn't stand properly and I drifted along the edge of a larger river I had found. I felt so lonely, like I was in a parallel universe far away from any human being.

I thought I was hallucinating when I saw a really large boat. When I went to touch it and realised it was real, it was like an adrenaline shot.

But [then I saw] there was a small path into the jungle where I found a hut with a palm leaf roof, an outboard motor and a litre of gasoline.

I had a wound on my upper right arm. It was infested with maggots about one centimetre long. I remembered our dog had the same infection and my father had put kerosene in it, so I sucked the gasoline out and put it into the wound.

The pain was intense as the maggots tried to get further into the wound. I pulled out about 30 maggots and was very proud of myself. I decided to spend the night there.

The next day I heard the voices of several men outside. It was like hearing the voices of angels.

When they saw me, they were alarmed and stopped talking. They thought I was a kind of water goddess - a figure from local legend who is a hybrid of a water dolphin and a blonde, white-skinned woman.

But I introduced myself in Spanish and explained what had happened. They treated my wounds and gave me something to eat and the next day took me back to civilisation.

The day after my rescue, I saw my father. He could barely talk and in the first moment we just held each other.

For the next few days, he frantically searched for news of my mother. On 12 January they found her body.

Later I found out that she also survived the crash but was badly injured and she couldn't move. She died several days later. I dread to think what her last days were like.