

Nightmare
in the
Jungle

Condensed from STERN

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Shortly before noon on December 24, 1971, LANSА Airlines Flight 508, a turbo-prop Electra, took off on a regularly scheduled flight from Lima, Peru, to Pucallpa, a jungle town 475 miles northeast across the high Andes. It carried 92 passengers, one of whom was 17-year-old Juliane Koepcke, a small, slender girl in a mini-dress, who was traveling with her mother. Half an hour after takeoff, the plane's captain radioed ground control that he expected to land in 38 minutes. Then the plane vanished. Search planes found no wreckage. Eleven days later, the girl in the mini-dress came out of the jungle—alone, tattered, barefoot, bleeding, pocked with worm lesions, but alive. Here, she tells her own extraordinary story.

I HAVE always enjoyed flying, and that sunny December day Mother and I had a good reason for taking a trip: I had just graduated from high school in Lima, and we wanted to spend Christmas with my father in our jungle hut. Daddy, an ecologist, and Mother, an ornithologist, had come to Peru from Germany 25 years before. Although they held professorships at San Marcos University in Lima, we spent a lot of time in the jungle where they carried on research.

I was sitting in the third row of seats from the rear, next to the window. Mother sat beside me, and a man we didn't know on the aisle. Everything seemed quite normal—the takeoff, the climb over the snow-

covered Andes, breakfast, the smiling stewardesses, then the green jungle stretching east to the horizon. People were reading or chatting; everyone was in a holiday mood.

In clear weather, the hour's flight from Lima to Pucallpa can be one of the most beautiful in the world. But 30 minutes after takeoff, when we were over the jungle, visibility diminished. Rain began to beat against the windows, and the air grew turbulent. Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning, terrifyingly near. The plane was shaking terribly. Hand baggage fell from the overhead rack. Someone screamed. Outside, I saw a bright yellow flame shooting from the right wing. I looked at my mother, and she said,

"This is the end of everything."

An instant later, there was a hefty concussion and I found myself outside the plane, flying apart from it, still strapped in my seat. I can remember turning over and over in the air. I remember thinking that the jungle trees below looked just like cauliflowers. Then I lost consciousness.

The rain woke me up. It was still light. I was lying under a section of three seats turned upside down. There was no sign of my mother, or of any other passenger, or of the plane. All I could hear were frogs croaking—and the rain. One shoe, one ring and my glasses were gone. One eye was so swollen I could hardly see. I had a bump on my head and a gash in one foot. I felt no pain, but I couldn't muster the energy to move and look around. Thus, I spent the whole night lying under the seat half asleep, in shock.

Three Dead Girls. Next morning I crawled out slowly, while everything swam dizzily before me. I saw a small package and opened it. It contained some hard candies and a Christmas cake. I tasted the cake, then dropped it. It was soaking wet

and revolting. I took the candies and picked up a long stick with which to probe the ground to avoid snakes, poisonous spiders and ants. My parents had taught me about the perils of the jungle in the years we had lived in it—that it's not the big animals, the ocelots, jaguars and tapirs, that are most dangerous, but rather the snakes and the tiny ones, the insects.

Feeling ahead with the stick, I started looking for my mother. I was so dizzy that after each few steps I had to rest. After hours of poking around, I heard gentle splashing nearby—a tiny brook. My parents had impressed on me that when lost in the jungle one should always look for streams and follow them to larger streams. Rivers are the roads here, and the Indian tribes and the white plantation people live on their banks.

But rivers in the tropical forest of Peru meander and circle. You can walk for miles along a bank and advance only a hundred yards toward your destination. Moreover, rivers are alive with mosquitoes—billions of them, all bloodthirsty—and caimans. But perhaps the most frightening creatures are the piranhas, and they would be attracted by the blood from the gash in my foot; if they attacked, they would strip off the flesh with their sharp teeth.

But I *had* to stay near or in the stream. Its banks were overgrown with tangled vines, making every step arduous; sometimes I had to wade through the water because

huge, rotted tree trunks barred my way. It was slow going. At one point I heard the buzzing of flies and followed the sound—to a row of seats from the aircraft. Three girls were strapped in them, dead. Flies covered them. I moved on.

Toads and Maggots. Nights in the jungle are scary. There was always a rustling somewhere: snakes? There was something crawling over my legs: a tarantula? Even the air seemed poisoned by decaying trees. I slept fitfully.

On the third day I heard vultures. Where there are vultures, there are usually bodies. I came upon a piece of airplane fuselage. But I could find no survivors.

During the afternoon of the third day, I heard the noise of aircraft. I shouted. I knew it was senseless, but I yelled, "Hello! Help!" over and over again. They must have been quite near, though I never saw them and, of course, they didn't spot me. Then the noise of the planes faded and I was once again alone. But not disheartened. I could walk, I wasn't hungry and I could drink from the clear stream.

On my fourth day I finished the candy, the only nourishment I had. I was swollen from the stings of mosquitoes and horseflies. Here and there armies of ants on the march blocked my path. And struggling through the tangled undergrowth to avoid them, I covered only a few hundred yards an hour. However, my stream did run into a larger river. As I pressed on downstream

along its bank, huge, dark toads jumped awkwardly and fell back to earth with a frightening slap. I considered eating parts of these toads, but didn't. Amazingly, I wasn't hungry. I resisted delicious-looking fruit because here many things that look tempting are poisonous.

The open wound on my foot was now getting worse, because of infection by insects. Every time the flies stung, they were laying eggs in my wounds, out of which were hatching maggots. Helplessly I watched them emerge, wagging heads that looked like tips of canned asparagus. I still had a ring—a spiral that could be stretched—so I started using it to gouge the maggots out of the wounds on my legs and arms. They were eating me alive. One sore was now large enough to hold a finger. "God help me," I thought. "They will amputate—if I ever survive."

Hunters With Gasoline. The river was widening. Whenever I could get a good view ahead, I risked swimming. It was faster because the current carried me along. On land I picked my way, careful to watch where I put my feet because the rotting foliage could conceal a snake or a poisonous thornback crab.

Walking had become progressively harder. The lack of food and the humid, 110-degree heat had made me weaker. The river was now so swift that I couldn't swim in it. Late one afternoon—the tenth day, as I later reconstructed it—I was looking for a spot to lie down for the night when I saw a boat moored on the

riverbank. And there was a path leading to a small hut. I entered and saw on the floor a small outboard motor, carefully wrapped in plastic, and a can of gasoline. Clearly, someone would be back. But when?

I lay down on the floor. I slept badly. I kept listening for human voices. But I heard only the screaming of monkeys and the screeching of parakeets.

The next morning I wanted to push on. It might be days, even weeks, before the people came for their boat. But I didn't want to take the boat—it was somebody else's. However, because the rain was pouring down, I stayed in the hut. With a sliver of palm wood, I gouged out more maggots. Then I heard voices, and three men plunged in from the downpour. "Well!" one of them exclaimed in Spanish. "What have we here?"

The men were *mestizo*—half-white, half-Indian—hunters. They told me they kept several huts in the jungle for their expeditions. They knew about the crash. One man had been in a search plane which flew over the jungle after the accident. "We could see nothing," he said. "No people, no wreckage."

They poured gasoline on my maggot sores and extracted 30 more worms from the wounds on my legs and arms. They washed me with salt water and put salve on my wounds. They made fruit mash for me, but I was unable to eat.

Early next morning they took me downriver in their boat. My river—

it was the Shebonya—became wider, swifter and more dangerous. I looked at the shore where I would have had to walk and saw that it became more and more impassable. At the junction with another large river, the Pachitea, there were nasty rapids and whirlpools. It took us hours to get to the jungle settlement of Tournavista. People came running and shouting to stare at me. One of my rescuers explained why. My eyes were so bloodshot that they looked entirely red. My face was disfigured and swollen out of shape from the insect bites. My arms and legs were pocked with worm lesions. I was a living nightmare.

Tournavista had a small dispensary where I was washed and my wounds were treated. Eleven and a half days after our crash, I again boarded an airplane, a small twin-engine machine that took me to the U.S. mission base of the Summer Institute of Linguistics near Pucallpa, where an American physician looked after me. With the help of my directions, search planes found the wreckage. Daddy arrived to stay by my side. He told me what I had suspected, that my mother was dead.

Searchers found the Electra scattered over ten miles of jungle. The cause of the crash, and how Juliane got safely down, are unknown. One theory is that the plane exploded at 10,000 feet, and that the fall of some pieces was cushioned by an enormous updraft of air in the storm.

Though Juliane alone came out of the jungle alive, she was not the only passenger to survive the crash. The first searcher to reach the scene reported: "At least 12 people, perhaps 14, survived, some of them for ten days. The proof is simple: when we found them, their bodies had decomposed very little or not at all. Those who died outright in the crash had been eaten, right down to the bones, by the vultures and flies."

Juliane Koepcke, now living in Kiel, Germany, has recovered. Her fears about amputation were unfounded. She was lucky on several counts. The hunters who found her in the hut said that they came there only about once every three weeks. They had come the one right time. Had Juliane not waited because of the rain, but started downstream again, she would never have walked out. There were no settlements that she could have reached.