

Juliane Koepcke: The girl who fell from the sky (Peru, 1971)

*Written by David Long*



Through her window Koepcke could see flashes of lightning around the aircraft. With the storm obviously closing in she too began to feel scared. Above the sound of the propellers several passengers could be heard crying as she reached across for her mother's hand.

The violent pitching continued like this for nearly ten minutes, throwing the aircraft this way and that. Gripping her mother's hand more tightly now, Koepcke looked out of the window and saw that one of the engines was glowing brightly. Her mother also noticed this and very quietly said, 'That is the end. It's all over.'

These were the last words Koepcke ever heard her say.

Moments later the cabin was plunged into darkness, and the Electra went into a steep nosedive. Koepcke couldn't see anything in the pitch black, and could hear nothing but the roar of the engines. Then, just as suddenly, everything went silent. With a shock the teenager realised she was somehow outside the aeroplane, still strapped in her seat but tumbling over and over and over. With nothing around her but the rush of cold air, she was plummeting down towards the jungle.

Coming out of the clouds she momentarily glimpsed the tops of the trees spinning up to meet her like a patch of giant broccoli. It was petrifying, but she must have passed out immediately because the next thing she remembered was waking up the following morning. It was Christmas Day. She was still strapped into her seat, but it was now wedged firmly into the ground.

Forty minutes after taking off, the aircraft had apparently been struck by lightning, one deadly bolt causing a fuel tank to explode and rip off the right wing. As the fuselage began to disintegrate around her, Koepcke had been thrown clear of the airborne wreckage and then fell more than two miles down into the jungle below.

Despite the trauma of this experience, she realised at once what had happened.

Looking up at the trees she knew she had survived an air disaster, probably because her seat had broken the fall as she crashed through the dense foliage.

Unsurprisingly, the seventeen-year-old was in considerable pain and feeling dizzy. She had broken her collarbone, damaged a ligament in one knee, and sustained deep cuts and bruises as she hit the ground.

Her left eye was also swollen shut, but she could still walk and knew she had to start finding a way to safety.

Koepcke had learned enough about the jungle from her parents to know it wasn't as dangerous as people like to think. Travelling on foot, it was important to keep a cool head and not do anything foolish, but she had no idea where she was, or where any of the other passengers had come down.

She had also lost a shoe and her glasses, which complicated things as she was very short-sighted. Nor was she dressed for a jungle trek, with only a light cotton summer dress to protect her from the hordes of biting, stinging insects that were buzzing all around her.

The first thing to establish was if anyone else was nearby, especially her mother, but when Koepcke called out there was no response except the chatter of startled animals. Some time later she was thrilled to hear an aircraft circling overhead. Presumably the crew were looking for survivors, but since she couldn't see the plane through the thick canopy of trees she quickly guessed they couldn't see her either. This realisation made her feel utterly alone.

For a while the Koepckes had lived in a remote scientific research station, and Hans Wilhelm had taught his daughter some useful survival tips. For example, he told her that walking through shallow water can be safer than walking on land – snakes and other poisonous creatures are hard to spot on the ground and may attack if anyone steps too near them. Koepcke also knew that jungle settlements tend to be built on rivers, so if she stayed near water she would stand a better chance of meeting someone and finding help.

Until this happened, however, her situation looked desperate. She had nothing to eat except a small bag of sweets, and she had no idea how far she might have to walk to reach safety. Soon dozens of insects were dropping onto her skin and climbing into her hair, and with the sun up the rain forest was unbearably hot. It was also very wet because torrential storms like the one that had brought down the Electra continued on and off throughout the day.

Having failed to find signs of anyone nearby Koepcke started to walk, and when she came to a small stream she decided to follow it. It was lucky that there was plenty of water to drink, but the rainy season meant there was no ripe fruit on the trees, and from her parents' jungle training she knew that eating anything else would be too risky.

At nightfall the temperature dropped dramatically, and with her sleeveless dress wet through Koepcke felt terribly cold. She also felt very lonely as well as frightened. Unable to sleep, she sat shivering as she listened to the startling sounds of the rainforest at night.

The following morning she continued slowly along the course of the stream. It didn't take long before the little bag of sweets was empty, and when her watch stopped she rapidly lost track of time.