

On Christmas Eve, seventeen-year-old Juliane Koepcke was flying high above the South American rainforest when the airliner carrying her and her mother was hit by a violent storm. The previous evening had been prom night at Koepcke's school, but now term was over and they were heading home for the holidays. Home meant the remote Amazonian town of Pucallpa in Peru, where Koepcke's father, Hans-Wilhelm, worked as a biologist. Her mother, Maria, was an ornithologist who studied birds and their behaviour. Sharing her parents' passion for science and nature, Koepcke planned to follow their example by studying biology at university.

On board the four-engined Lockheed Electra aeroplane she could hear other passengers complaining because their flight had been delayed by nearly seven hours. But they were airborne now and Koepcke was happy to be on holiday and looking forward to seeing her father. From her window seat she noticed storm clouds in the distance, but she loved flying and had no reason to feel afraid.

Her mother felt less relaxed about the storm. Never quite believing that something metal could rival the birds she studied, Maria didn't like flying at the best of times. Now she began to feel anxious as the Electra dipped suddenly and entered a massive, rain-dark cloud. Before long the plane was being buffeted about by the air currents, and after a few minutes even Koepcke began to feel that something wasn't quite right.

Bags and other pieces of luggage started to fall from the overhead racks and drinks tipped into passengers' laps. Soon Christmas presents and parcels began bouncing around the cabin as the aircraft was pitched up and down by the turbulence.

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. 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.