

**FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL**

Reading Challenge

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# The Girl Who Fell from the Sky

*The true story of Juliane Koepcke, who fell 3,000 metres into the Amazon and walked out alive eleven days later.*

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**Level:** B1

**Skill:** Reading

**Duration:** ~20 min

**Age:** Teens (11-16)

**Topic:** True Stories

**Event:** 24 Dec 1971

## The Article

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Juliane Koepcke was seventeen years old, sitting in seat 19F of LANSA Flight 508, when the world ended. It was 24 December 1971 — Christmas Eve. The Lockheed Electra turboprop had taken off from Lima, the capital of Peru, at 11:00 in the morning, carrying 86 passengers and 6 crew members to Pucallpa, a small city in the Peruvian Amazon. The flight was supposed to take one hour. Juliane was travelling with her mother, Maria, a **zoologist** who worked at a research station in the jungle. They were going home for Christmas.

### The Storm

Twenty-five minutes into the flight, the plane entered a thunderstorm. At first, it was ordinary **turbulence** — the kind that makes your coffee spill and the seatbelt sign flash on. But this storm was different. The sky outside the windows turned black. Lightning flashed continuously, so close that the cabin filled with white light. The plane began to shake violently — not the gentle rocking of normal turbulence, but a deep, structural shuddering that Juliane could feel in her bones. Passengers screamed. Luggage fell from the overhead compartments. And then, at approximately 12:36, at an altitude of three thousand metres, lightning struck the right wing fuel tank.

The plane did not crash in the way you see in films — a dramatic nose-dive followed by an explosion. It came apart. The **fuselage** broke into pieces in mid-air, ripped apart by the force of the explosion and the storm. Juliane felt a sudden, violent lurch. The noise was indescribable — the sound of metal tearing, wind roaring, and ninety-two people screaming. She saw the jungle spinning below her through a hole where the side of the plane had been. She felt her mother's hand grab hers. And then she was falling — still strapped into her row of three seats — spinning through the air, three thousand metres above the Amazon rainforest, on Christmas Eve.

### The Fall

She lost consciousness during the fall. What happened next has been studied by aviation experts and physicists for decades. The row of seats — three seats still bolted to a section of the cabin floor — acted like a crude helicopter blade, spinning as it fell, which slowed the descent. The dense **canopy** of the Amazon rainforest — layer after layer of branches, vines, and leaves — further broke the impact. And beneath the canopy, the forest floor was soft: a thick layer of decomposing leaves, mud, and organic material that cushioned the final impact like a natural crash pad.

Juliane woke up the next day — Christmas Day — lying on the forest floor, still strapped into the middle seat of her row. The two seats beside her were empty. Her mother was gone. The jungle was silent except for rain and the distant calls of birds. Juliane was alive. She had fallen three thousand metres — roughly the height of ten Eiffel Towers stacked on top of each other — and survived. She had a broken collarbone, a deep **fracture** in her right shin, a **concussion**, cuts across her arms and legs, and one eye swollen shut. But she was alive. She

was the only one. All 91 other people on LANSA Flight 508 — including her mother — were dead.

## The Walk

Most people, in Juliane's situation, would have stayed where they were and waited for rescue. Juliane did not. She knew — from growing up at her parents' research station in the jungle — that the crash site was deep in uninhabited rainforest, possibly hundreds of kilometres from the nearest settlement. Search planes might never find her beneath the thick **canopy**. Rescue teams might take weeks to reach this area. She could not wait. She had to move.

Her father, Hans-Wilhelm Koepcke, was also a **zoologist**. He had taught Juliane a rule that she never forgot: "If you are lost in the jungle, find water. Follow a stream downhill. Streams lead to **tributaries**. Tributaries lead to rivers. Rivers lead to people." On the second day, she found a small stream. She began to follow it. What followed was eleven days of walking through some of the most dangerous terrain on Earth.

The Amazon rainforest is not the romantic, sunlit paradise that films suggest. At ground level, it is dark, humid, and almost impenetrably dense. Every step required pushing through vegetation. The ground was uneven, slippery, and alive with insects. The stream that Juliane followed was sometimes knee-deep, sometimes chest-deep, and full of potential dangers: caimans — South American crocodiles — electric eels, anacondas, and **piranhas**. She walked in the water because it was easier than fighting through the undergrowth. She walked in shoes that were falling apart. She walked with a broken collarbone, an infected shin, and a cut on her right arm that was getting worse every day.

## The Wound

By the fourth day, the cut in her arm had become seriously infected. When she looked at it closely, she discovered the reason: **maggots**. Flies had laid eggs in the open wound, and the larvae were now feeding on the damaged tissue. It was, by any measure, horrifying. But Juliane — the daughter of two scientists who had spent their careers studying jungle life — knew something that most people would not: maggots, while disgusting, actually clean wounds by consuming dead tissue. They were, in a grotesque way, helping to prevent worse infection. She could not remove them without proper tools, so she left them. It was a decision that may have saved her arm.

She ate almost nothing for eleven days. She found a bag of sweets in some wreckage from the plane — **debris** was spread over a wide area of jungle — and rationed them over several days. She drank water from the stream, which she knew carried risks of parasites and bacteria but which was her only option. She was constantly **disoriented**, exhausted, and in pain. By the seventh day, she was experiencing **hallucinations** — seeing shapes that were not there, hearing voices in the forest. Her body was shutting down. But she kept walking.

## Rescue

On the tenth day, the stream had widened into a river. Juliane noticed something that made her heart stop: a boat. A small wooden canoe, tied to a tree on the riverbank. Where there was a boat, there were people. She waited. Nobody came. She spent the night beside the boat, too exhausted to go further. The next morning — 3 January 1972, eleven days after the crash — she heard voices. Three local lumberjacks appeared on the riverbank. They stared at her in disbelief: a teenage girl, emaciated, covered in insect bites and infected wounds, her dress torn to rags, standing barefoot in the mud beside their canoe. She spoke to them in Spanish: "I am Juliane. I was in the LANSA crash."

The lumberjacks treated her wounds with kerosene — a traditional jungle remedy — and took her by boat to a logging settlement, where a pilot flew her to a hospital in Pucallpa. She was reunited with her father, who had spent eleven days believing she was dead. The doctors who treated her found a broken collarbone, a torn ligament in her knee, deep lacerations, severe **concussion**, infection, and dozens of **maggots** still in her arm wound. She was malnourished, dehydrated, and had lost over ten kilograms. But she was, remarkably, alive.

## After the Fall

Juliane Koepcke's survival is considered one of the most extraordinary in aviation history. She is the sole survivor of a mid-air aircraft break-up — the only person known to have fallen from a disintegrating plane at cruising altitude and lived. The fall itself was a combination of physics and luck — the spinning seats, the forest **canopy**, the soft ground. But the eleven-day walk was something else entirely. It was knowledge, determination, and the kind of **resilience** that defies explanation.

She returned to Germany, completed her education, and became a **zoologist** — following in her parents' footsteps. She earned a doctorate in biology and eventually returned to Peru, where she became the director of a research station in the Amazon — not far from the site where she had fallen from the sky. She published a memoir in 2011 called *When I Fell from the Sky*, and the director Werner Herzog — who had almost booked a seat on the same doomed flight — made a documentary about her story.

When asked how she survived, Juliane gives a characteristically simple answer: "I did not do anything heroic. I just kept going. Every day I told myself: one more step. One more hour. One more bend in the river. I did not think about the whole journey. I just thought about the next step." She pauses. "And I listened to my father. He said: follow the water. I followed the water. The water brought me home."

Juliane Koepcke's story is not just about survival. It is about what the human body and mind can endure when there is no alternative. It is about the difference between giving up and taking one more step. And it is about a seventeen-year-old girl who fell three thousand metres from the sky on Christmas Eve and walked out of the jungle eleven days later — because she refused to stop.

## Vocabulary Cards

## Comprehension Quiz

## Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
<b>Turbulence</b>	Sudden, violent movements of air that cause an aircraft to shake
<b>Fuselage</b>	The main body of an aircraft, where passengers sit
<b>Canopy</b>	The upper layer of branches and leaves in a rainforest
<b>Concussion</b>	A brain injury caused by a hard blow to the head
<b>Fracture</b>	A break or crack in a bone
<b>Decomposition</b>	The process of dead matter breaking down naturally over time
<b>Tributary</b>	A smaller river or stream that flows into a larger river
<b>Piranha</b>	A freshwater fish found in South American rivers, known for its sharp teeth
<b>Maggot</b>	The larva of a fly, often found in wounds or decaying matter
<b>Zoologist</b>	A scientist who studies animals and their behaviour
<b>Disoriented</b>	Confused about where you are or which direction to go
<b>Intact</b>	Not damaged or broken; still in one piece
<b>Hallucination</b>	Seeing or hearing things that are not really there
<b>Debris</b>	Scattered pieces of rubbish or remains of something destroyed
<b>Resilience</b>	The ability to survive and recover from extremely difficult situations

## Comprehension Quiz

### 1. What caused LANSA Flight 508 to crash on 24 December 1971?

- A) The pilot made a navigation error
- B) The plane flew into a severe thunderstorm and was struck by lightning, breaking apart at 3,000 metres
- C) The plane ran out of fuel
- D) Birds flew into the engines

### 2. How did Juliane survive a fall of 3,000 metres?

- A) She was wearing a parachute
- B) She fell while still strapped to her row of seats, which spun like a helicopter blade, and the dense rainforest canopy broke her fall
- C) She landed in a lake
- D) The plane crashed gently into the forest

### 3. Why did Juliane decide to follow the stream downhill?

- A) She read a survival guide on her phone
- B) Her father, a zoologist, had taught her that streams lead to rivers and rivers lead to people
- C) She heard voices calling from downstream
- D) A rescue helicopter directed her

### 4. What was the most dangerous challenge Juliane faced during her eleven-day walk?

- A) Attacks from jaguars
- B) An infected wound in her arm full of maggots, plus dehydration, injuries, and constant danger from the jungle
- C) Running out of drinking water completely
- D) Getting lost in a cave

### 5. What makes Juliane Koepcke's story historically remarkable?

- A) She was the youngest person ever to fly on an aeroplane
- B) She is the only known survivor of a mid-air aircraft break-up and survived eleven days alone in the Amazon with no equipment
- C) She discovered a new species of animal in the jungle
- D) She flew the damaged plane to safety herself

## Answer Key

#	Ans	Question
1	B	What caused LANSA Flight 508 to crash on 24 December 1971?
2	B	How did Juliane survive a fall of 3,000 metres?
3	B	Why did Juliane decide to follow the stream downhill?
4	B	What was the most dangerous challenge Juliane faced during her eleven-day walk?
5	B	What makes Juliane Koepcke's story historically remarkable?

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