

Real Life Safety Heroes: Vesna Vulović



On Jan. 26, 1972, a terrorist bomb exploded aboard JAT Yugoslav Airlines Flight 369 over Czechoslovakia. There were 28 passengers and crew members aboard the Douglas DC-9. Miraculously, one of them survived. A 22-year-old flight attendant named Vesna Vulović fell over 33,000 feet (10.15 kilometers/6.31 miles) without a parachute and came out alive.

Surviving the Unsurvivable

The bomb, believed to have been planted by a Croatian nationalist group, exploded in the luggage department, and tore the plane apart mid-air, sucking everybody out into the cold winter air. Vulović was on her way to being tossed out of the rear of the plane when she got pinned by a food cart trapping her in the plunging fuselage. So, instead of a freefall, she'd die inside the remains of the plane.

But fate had other plans. Stuck inside the equivalent of a metal coffin plummeting to earth at rapid speed from a distance equivalent to the peak of Mount Everest, Vulović crashed into a remote, snow-covered forest. Miraculously, the combination of tail section, trees, and snow cushioned her landing.

Lying in an isolated, snowy forest with a fractured skull, 3 crushed vertebrae and multiple broken bones,

including both legs and pelvis, Vulović's escape from death should have been short lived. But luck intervened again when a woodsman heard the screams of what sounded like a human voice amid the falling debris. Vulović was taken to a hospital where she lapsed into a coma. A month later, she awoke paralyzed from the waist down but still alive.

After surgery, Vulović soon regained the ability to walk. And she insisted on returning to work. Although it refused to let her fly, the airline gave her a desk job negotiating freight contracts. A native Serbian, Vulović became a celebrity in what was then called Yugoslavia which treated her like a national hero. When Yugoslavia broke apart into national pieces, she remained politically active in pro-democracy causes before JAT fired her in the early 1990s for taking part in protests against the genocidal Milošević government.

Vulović got married in 1977 and divorced in 1987. She also fulfilled a lifetime dream by meeting and befriending Rock legend Paul McCartney. She retained no memory of her fateful fall from the sky until her 2016 death in Belgrade at age 66.