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'It was just not my day for dying'



Vesna (left) with JAT colleagues in 1971

In 1972, air stewardess Vesna Vulovic's plane was blown up in midair by terrorists. Incredibly, Vesna survived. But did she ever recover from the trauma?

'Would you like some more orange juice?' was the first thing stewardess Vesna Vulovic said when, in January 1972, she awoke in a hospital bed in rural Czechoslovakia. 'Maybe that's what I was serving at the time of the explosion,' Vesna, now 52, suggests as she recalls events of 30 years ago, when the JAT flight from Stockholm to Belgrade via Copenhagen was blown up at 33,330 feet by a terrorist bomb.

Serbian-born Vesna was the archetypal air hostess. Young, vivacious and sexy, she could have been the 'Coffee, Tea Or Me' figure in any 70s airline ad.

She never intended to be a stewardess, but the travel bug gripped her. On a summer visit to England after school, she fell in love with London, its music and clubs. A friend then suggested they go on to Stockholm together. But when Vesna telephoned her parents from the Swedish capital, they were horrified: 'They thought of the drugs and the sex and, because I was only 19, they made me come home.'

Vesna returned to a Yugoslavia that was enjoying a burgeoning tourist trade under communist president Tito, and it was a turning point for her. In Belgrade she met up with a friend who was a stewardess. 'She was in uniform, and looked so nice. She had just been to London for the day. I had to fly,' she says.

On the wall of her Zagreb apartment is a fading colour photograph of her in her JAT uniform. Her

face is that of a cheeky young woman – a far cry from the Vesna I meet today. Now, albeit smartly dressed, the browns and blacks she wears hint at a darker story.

Vesna had only been a flight attendant with JAT, the Yugoslav national airline, for eight months when she boarded flight 364 on January 26, 1972. She had spent the previous night in Copenhagen, staying in the hotel of her dreams – a Sheraton.

In retrospect, she feels the crew knew something was about to happen. 'Everybody wanted to buy something for his or her family,' she says, as if searching for signs. 'I went shopping with them to buy clothes for wives and jumpers for brothers. It was as if they wanted to leave their family with a memory.'

The flight was running late. Vesna and the rest of the crew stood in the terminal at Copenhagen and awaited the JAT flight's arrival from Stockholm.

'I saw all the passengers coming out of the plane. One man looked terribly anxious. I think it was the man who put the bomb in the baggage. He left the plane in Copenhagen and never reboarded.'

Then, shortly after take off, and at 33,330 feet over Czechoslovakia, the aircraft exploded. Debris rained down on hillsides near the town of Srbska-Kamenice. All 29 passengers and crew were presumed dead.

A German man, who had served as an army medical officer during the Second World War, was one of the first to arrive at the scene and detected a small >



Despite being surrounded by religious icons in her apartment, Vesna still believes in the power of fate. 'Maybe I was born in the wrong place. Yet everybody thinks I'm lucky - I'm not'

They eventually gave her an office-based job, negotiating freight contracts and liaising with travel agencies. Yet it was politics rather than health that forced Vesna out of JAT. 'It was Slobodan Milosevic. I was against him, I was telling my colleagues not to vote for him. Then I got a smaller salary, although I was doing the same job. Finally I was forced to go on a pension. Politically, I was forced out.'

Vesna continued her campaign against Milosevic and was regularly seen demonstrating in the streets of Belgrade. While the police often made arrests, Vesna remained untouchable; she was, and still is, a national hero. At the time the Milosevic regime finally tumbled, Vesna was on the balcony at city hall as one of the celebrities making victory addresses, which went on to a night of partying for the Serbian people.

Even today, at 52, Vesna is recognised wherever she goes – and, indeed, appears in a TV commercial for back-pain products. As we enter a Serbian restaurant, the waiter suddenly looks at her and shouts 'Vesna!' followed by what I took to mean: 'Can it really be you?' He had been a waiter at the hotel on the coast where she had convalesced. He had not seen her since 1972.

The years have not been easy for her. She married a few years after the accident, but now claims to be 'happily divorced'. There are no children. Not because of the accident. 'I did actually get pregnant, but it was ectopic and had to be aborted. It was not to be. Once again I was close to death but survived.'

Many would argue that Vesna was extremely lucky. She thinks otherwise. 'If I was lucky, then I wouldn't have had the accident. My mother and father would be alive. The accident ruined their lives, with all the worry. The first years that I fought for my life, I really don't know for what reason. Maybe I was born in the wrong place. Yet everybody thinks I'm lucky – I'm not.'

Vesna's strength masks a yearning for a normal life. While she parades her photos with Paul McCartney and her *Guinness Book Of Records* award, and speaks with passion about her years demonstrating against Milosevic and her delight at his downfall, she mourns for what could have been.

Pensioned off, she leads a solitary life. Her apartment, with the potential to be grand, is dark and cold. She lets out a room to a lawyer to bring in extra income.

Despite what she has endured, she believes in fate: 'If it's your destiny to die, you will die, that's it,' she asserts. 'In the plane or in the car or in the street. But it's a funny thing if you have to die: the easiest way to go is in a plane. It was just not my day for dying.'

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Can you ever really recover from such a traumatic experience? Share your views at eve's website.



Philip Baum was head of security training at TWA. He is now a consultant to airlines in hijack management and editor of *Aviation Security International* magazine.

sign of life in one of the bodies protruding from the wreckage. Vesna explains: 'A colleague was lying over me. My legs were in the plane and my head outside. A galley trolley was smashing my backbone and holding me in place.' Incredibly, she had survived the fall.

They rushed her to a local hospital: 'I was in a coma for three days,' she says, deeply inhaling her cigarette – she is by now chain-smoking, obviously distressed at having to recall the details of the event. After seven days, despite fears of damage to her brain, she was moved to Prague by helicopter. Paralysed from the waist down, almost every bone in her body was broken.

Two weeks after the accident, the doctors told Vesna what had actually happened. 'Apparently I fainted when I heard the news. I felt guilty I was alive, while my colleagues and the passengers were dead.'

She still cannot remember being told. She remembers nothing from one hour before the accident until one month after it.

Soon after the incident, a fascist Croatian Nationalist terror group calling itself Ustashe admitted they planted the bomb. 'I was told all the terrorists were either caught or killed, but as I had possibly been the only witness to the bomber, I had an armed police guard at my door. Every six hours they changed shift.'

Finally, in March, Vesna returned to Belgrade and continued her hospitalisation close to her family. By this time she had become a celebrity, and visitors had to be limited to doctors, close family and the occasional VIP, including President Tito's wife. Vesna's face was regularly in the Yugoslav newspapers, and the public followed her recuperation with avid interest. By September of 1972, she was walking freely again and, with the scars buried beneath her clothing, she was able to return to normal life, although she had to undergo extensive surgery to repair her spine.

Vesna's story spread well beyond the borders of the former Yugoslavia, too. She was to claim her place in the *Guinness Book Of Records* for surviving the highest fall. She returned to London to receive her award on the same day as David Frost and Paul McCartney, who were also in the book. Though it was several years and 33,330-feet later, Vesna was at last standing next to one of her idols and the reason she adored England: the Beatles. 'I told Paul it was because of him I started flying. He was so nice. I got to know Linda as well. We went to some parties together.'

While Vesna herself now had celebrity status, she still needed a job, and wanted to fly again. With no recollection of the accident, she had no fear – and it was what she had been trained to do.

The airline, however, had different ideas. 'They said I was not healthy enough to fly. The reality is they didn't want any more publicity about it. My flying again would keep the incident in people's memories.'

HOW DO YOU SURVIVE A FALL OF 33,330 FEET?

■ Some experts believe Vesna survived because the fuselage hit the side of the hill at an angle and slid down, rather than hitting the ground directly. But nobody can explain why she was the sole survivor.

■ In practical terms, the fact that she fell 33,330 feet rather than 2,000 feet is irrelevant: once you've fallen 1,880 feet (which would take 13-14 seconds), you reach a terminal velocity of approximately 120mph (assuming you are free falling). In other words, you can't fall faster, and the impact with the ground will be the same. As it was, Vesna's fall would've taken around three minutes.

■ Others have survived falls above 1,880 feet, however. In 1942 a Russian pilot baled out at nearly 22,000 feet when being attacked by German Messerschmidts. He landed in thick snow and made a speedy recovery. And, in another war story, RAF gunner Nick Alkemade fell 18,000 feet and only sprained a leg. Tree branches and the snow on the ground saved him.

■ Vesna thinks she survived the explosion because of her very low blood pressure. 'In fact I should never have been an air hostess because it was so low. Before my medical examination, I drank a lot of coffee to raise my blood pressure. Maybe the low blood pressure helped me survive this accident,' she says, though no doctors we spoke to could confirm this.