

# Sole Survivors



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There are only 14 people in the world who are known to be sole survivors of various airplane crashes that took the lives of all others on board. Here we bring you the dramatic accounts of several of these crashes and the stories told by their sole survivors.



## Survived a Fall from 30,000 Feet

January 26, 1972

Jet Yugoslav Flight 367—DC-9  
33,000 feet above Czechoslovakia

To this day, Vesna Vulović still cannot decide whether she experienced tremendous good luck or bad luck that fateful day.

The fact that she was on the airplane at all, was a coincidence. It had been the turn of another stewardess, whose first name was also Vesna, to fly that day. Due to a technical error, however, Vulović was the one called to service that flight. She was happy about the mistake since they would be flying to Denmark and she had not been to Denmark in a long time. The flight attendants would be put up in the Sheraton Hotel, which she would enjoy as well.

Whatever her plans, fate had something else in mind. A terror group, the Ustasha, had planted a bomb on Yugoslav Flight 367. The Ustasha was a Croatian fascist movement that had already carried out dozens of terror attacks in Yugoslavia. Extremist nationalists, during World War II they slaughtered Serbs with reckless abandon. They were also enthusiastic supporters of the Nazis, even going beyond them in cruelty (as hard as this is to believe) to carry out the Final Solution and perpetrate atrocities against the Jews. Although by 1972 there were few



Jet Yugoslav airplane that crashed, leaving only one survivor.

Jews in their homeland to slaughter, the Ustasha targeted Flight 367 as part of their bid for Croatian independence.

The flight was cruising at 33,000 feet above the city of Srbska-Kamenice, when the powerful bomb detonated. The DC-9 was reduced to chunks of debris instantly. For three minutes the remains of the 28 unfortunate passengers mixed with the remnants of the airplane rained down on an icy mountain below.

The first to reach the site of the crash was a German man. He saw immediately that none of the passengers had survived—except one. Vulović was lying unconscious, half of her body still inside a piece of the plane. She lay under one of the carts the flight attendants had used to serve passengers food and drink. The German man had been a paramedic during WWII and he did what he could for her while he waited for more help to arrive.

When Vulović's parents arrived at the hospital a few hours later, the doctors gave a very grim prognosis. Although she still exhibited signs of life, she was not expected to survive. Her head had been badly damaged and she had lost a lot of blood. She had also suffered numerous bone fractures and was paralyzed from the waist down.

Three days later Vulović awoke from her coma.

Her condition was far from stable. Most of her body remained paralyzed. Nevertheless, she was hanging on to life and was even conscious. Considering that she had fallen from over 30,000 feet, it was a miracle.

The patient was shocked when she woke up in the hospital in such terrible shape. She would have no memory of anything that occurred from one hour before the crash through a full month afterward. The trauma triggered a case of amnesia. Her doctors had to explain to her what had happened. They also gave her newspapers to read the reports about the incident. The stories were completely shocking to her.

The doctors operated on Vulović and slowly she began to regain control of her body. Everyone was delighted when in the



Path of the airplane before the crash, site of the crash, and the rest of the flight path as scheduled.

end she left the hospital on her own two feet.

By the following September, Vulović was prepared to go back to work. However, she had become something of a national celebrity as a result of the incident. Instead of sending her back to work as a flight attendant, the airline promoted her to a position in the company's central offices.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of her story is that Vulović never suffered psychological trauma as a result of her harrowing experience. She also never developed a fear of flying, which would have been expected after such a story. She remains active today and continues to fly often.

How did she survive the fall? Doctors think that it is related to the fact that Vulović has very low blood pressure. She may have passed out immediately after the explosion and thereby avoided the trauma of the actual fall.

Most people would think of themselves as extremely fortunate to have survived such a fall. But Vulović sees things differently. In an interview with a journalist 30 years after the event, she said, "Everyone believes I am lucky, but if I would really be lucky I would not have been on the airplane, and I would not have struggled for my life and would not have suffered such pain for so long, and my father and mother would not have died young from worrying themselves sick over my situation."

You can choose to see the cup as half full or as half empty.

The Guinness Book of World Records has recorded Vulović's unplanned drop as the greatest fall survived without a parachute.

That, at least, is the official version of the events.

There can be no doubt that Vulović was the sole survivor of that airplane crash. However, there is some doubt about whether she survived a fall from 30,000 feet.

Close to 40 years after the disaster, in January 2009, two Austrian journalists revealed the results of their investigation into the crash. They believe the true events that transpired over the hills of Czechoslovakia on that fateful January day were quite different than what was believed until then.

Peter Hornung and Pavel Theiner claim that they uncovered secret documents that prove that Yugoslav Flight 367 was not the target of a terrorist bombing. Instead, they claim, the plane had been intentionally shot down by a MiG fighter after being mistakenly identified by the Czechoslovakian air force as an enemy plane.

According to Hornung and Theiner's version, the plane had stumbled into restricted territory. It was met by an interceptor and was flying at low altitude. Furthermore, the Austrian journalists say



Members of the Ustasha movement.