THE MAN WHO SURVIVED A 33,000-FOOT FALL

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

✓ Reading Passage   ✓ Comprehension Questions
✓ Answer Key   ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

TERMS OF USE

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)

✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4

✓ Complete answer key with explanations

✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE MAN WHO SURVIVED A 33,000-FOOT FALL

In 1972, Serbian flight attendant Vesna Vulovi■ was working on a Yugoslav Airlines flight when a bomb exploded in the cargo hold. The plane broke apart at 33,333 feet—higher than Mount Everest. Vulovi■ fell over six miles without a parachute and survived.

Her survival seems impossible. A fall from that height should be fatal many times over. Terminal velocity—the maximum speed a falling human reaches—is about 120 miles per hour. At that speed, hitting anything solid means instant death. Yet Vulovi■ lived, though she was the only survivor among 28 people on board.

How did she survive? Several factors may have contributed. Vulovi■ was in the tail section of the aircraft, which may have acted like a crude parachute, slowing her descent. She landed on a heavily forested, snow-covered mountainside in Czechoslovakia, which cushioned her impact better than hard ground would have.

She was also found by a villager who happened to be a medic in World War II. He stabilized her until help arrived. Despite a fractured skull, three broken vertebrae, broken legs, and broken ribs, she survived.

Vulovi■ spent 27 days in a coma. When she woke, she had no memory of the explosion or the fall—her brain had blocked out the traumatic event. She spent months in the hospital and needed years of rehabilitation, but she eventually made a nearly complete recovery.

The Guinness World Records lists Vulovi■ as surviving the highest fall without a parachute. Her case has been studied by aviation safety experts trying to understand how anyone could survive such trauma.

Vulovi■ returned to work at the airline in a desk job—she was afraid to fly after her experience. She became a celebrity in Yugoslavia and remained famous until her death in 2016. Her survival remains one of the most remarkable stories of human resilience ever recorded.

Word Count: 306 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Guinness World Records

Reading they'll actually do.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 **From what height did Vesna Vulovi■ fall?**

○ A) 10,000 feet

○ B) 20,000 feet

○ C) 33,333 feet

○ D) 50,000 feet

2 **What is terminal velocity for a falling human?**

○ A) About 50 mph

○ B) About 120 mph

○ C) About 200 mph

○ D) About 500 mph

3 **What factors may have helped Vulovi■ survive the fall?**

○ A) She was wearing a parachute

○ B) The tail section, snow-covered forest, and a medic who found her

○ C) The plane landed safely

○ D) She fell into water

4 **Why doesn't Vulovi■ remember the explosion or fall?**

○ A) She was asleep

○ B) Her brain blocked out the traumatic event

○ C) She never knew what happened

○ D) She was too young

5 **Why is Vulovi■'s case studied by aviation safety experts?**

◯ A) To prevent bomb explosions

◯ B) To understand how the human body can survive extreme trauma

◯ C) To design better parachutes

◯ D) To train flight attendants

6 **What combination of luck, circumstance, and human response contributed to Vulovi■'s survival?**

◯ A) Only luck mattered

◯ B) Her position in the plane, the landing surface, and immediate medical help all played critical roles

◯ C) Modern medicine saved her

◯ D) She was naturally indestructible

ANSWER KEY

The Man Who Survived a 33,000-Foot Fall

1. C) 33,333 feet

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The plane broke apart at 33,333 feet.'

2. B) About 120 mph

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'Terminal velocity—the maximum speed a falling human reaches—is about 120 miles per hour.'

3. B) The tail section, snow-covered forest, and a medic who found her

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage mentions the tail section acting 'like a crude parachute,' the 'snow-covered mountainside,' and 'a villager who happened to be a medic.'

4. B) Her brain blocked out the traumatic event

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states: 'she had no memory of the explosion or the fall—her brain had blocked out the traumatic event.'

5. B) To understand how the human body can survive extreme trauma

DOK 3 — Analysis. The passage notes experts study her case to understand 'how anyone could survive such trauma.'

6. B) Her position in the plane, the landing surface, and immediate medical help all played critical roles

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. Multiple factors aligned: her position in the tail, the snow-covered forest, and the medic who found her all contributed—showing survival involved many fortunate circumstances.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Man Who Survived a 33,000-Foot Fall

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Vulovi■'s survival required many fortunate factors aligning. Does calling it 'luck' undervalue or properly describe what happened?
- Vulovi■'s brain blocked out the traumatic memory. Why might forgetting be protective, and when might it be harmful?
- Vulovi■ became afraid to fly after her experience. Is this fear rational given that she survived, or completely understandable?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research terminal velocity and calculate how long it would take to fall 33,333 feet at 120 mph.
- Compare Vulovi■'s survival to other 'impossible' survival stories. What common factors appear in multiple cases?
- Write a news article about Vulovi■'s survival as if you were a journalist in 1972, using only information available at that time.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- Guinness World Records / BBC

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