

“Way to Go, Grandma” *by Joan Kwallek*



I’ve heard stories such as a man who went skydiving on his 85th birthday, and a lady well into her 80s who realized her dream to leap off a bridge and bounce up and down at the end of an elastic bungee cord. I’ve often thought if they could do it, surely I could. Neither skydiving or bungee jumping were available to me, however an opportunity to go zip-lining was!

I was already well past retirement age. I wondered if the chance to zip-line would ever come again. I decided.

Ready to ‘have a go,’ I signed my name, not once but twice. First, to register, then again to sign a release—sounded like it could be risky!

Cruising the coast from Panama to Costa Rica, our ship anchored in a lovely bay. About a dozen passengers were ferried across clear, tropical water on an inflatable zodiac boat. Heading towards the shore of the small bay fringed with lush vegetation, the zodiac nudged onto the sandy beach. Costa Rican vehicles were to transport us inland a few miles to the zip-line location. As it happened, the older model van I rode in got only about 200 yards along the dirt road before it quit, so we exited and wait while another means of transportation was located. Another attempt was made, with an equally well-used looking vehicle. The engine struggled as it climbed a hill, but this time we completed the journey, on the way navigating a badly potholed road and driving across the bed of a shallow, brown river.

When we finally arrived, harnesses, safety helmets and heavy gloves were passed among us. We were helped into our gear—straps around the waist and thighs, and carabiners dangling and jangling. Next came instructions on ‘how to zip-line,’ followed by a short practice run on a line only a few feet off the ground. I hung by a cable suspended by hardware from a sturdy, overhead steel cable. My left hand, in its thick leather-palmed glove, clasped the cable on which I dangled. This kept me upright, as I sat suspended in my harness. The right gloved hand, raised above my head, rested on the cable above me which ran from platform to platform. It was this hand that controlled braking. It seemed quite easy, I thought. The critical part was braking, after all.

Off we hiked along a trail and up the first flight of steps into the trees, to a platform about 30 feet off of the ground. Staff was there to clip my harness to the first cable of a series of cable runs. It came my turn to step off into space. This was the real thing! Well.... deep breath.... here I go.... and I was off! Flying down the cable between the trees, with the landing platform ahead, I applied the braking technique. A good landing. Nothing to it! My confidence was building.

There was another ladder to climb, higher into the trees. Another platform, even further off the ground. As I stepped away and zipped down the line I instinctively drew in my legs because those tree branches looked awfully close. But things were still going well, and I was beginning to relax.

It was a real pleasure gliding over the undergrowth and through the trees. There was no time to look for birds or monkeys in the rainforest tree tops, even on the slower runs. But the ravines and streams I passed over were so pretty, set in a forest floor like a sea of green tapestry.

By the time I came to the third run, I was pretty confident—perhaps even overconfident. Partway between platforms, hurtling too fast for my comfort and seeing the next platform looming much too close, I braked very hard, came to an abrupt stop in mid-run, and lost my grip on the cables.

There I was, dangling in mid-span, 40 or more feet above the undergrowth, twirling around and around like an upside down helicopter blade. I felt helpless and foolish as I struggled to right myself. Other members of the group, already waiting for me on my destination platform, were shouting encouragement: “Come on, Joan. You can do it!” Sadly, no-one took any photos of me dangling there. The staff prepared to do a rescue run, but I waved them away, managing to haul myself back into position, which wasn’t easy since I had to raise my unsupported upper body from the mid-air horizontal to the vertical, using one arm and my back and stomach muscles—all while dangling in space.

I eventually completed that run and went on to experience a total of 13 runs, the highest of them 100 feet off the forest floor. Cable spans were in varying lengths between platforms, the shortest about 300 feet, the longest a quarter of a mile.

Partway through, my legs were very weary from the intensive step climbing. With several more ladders and runs, increasingly higher and longer, ahead of me, I noticed a signpost pointing to a path that would return me to the main building. I would never forgive myself if I gave up, so I carried on. I was glad I did, because the remainder of the course went well, and the final quarter of a mile run, speeding down over the forested hillside to the finishing platform was joyfully, wonderfully exhilarating. A fitting climax, for which I could echo voices of my grandchildren in my head: “Way to go, Grandma!”