

Ejected from Jet Fighter at 47,000 Feet and Surviving a Free Fall and Thunderstorm

[Cherie Bowser](#), [Yahoo! Contributor Network](#) Jul 28, 2009 "Contribute content like this"

Fifty years ago on July 27, 1959, in North Carolina, cumulonimbus clouds were forming and a man will have one unexpected journey that he would never forget and would live to tell the story for generations to come.

Lieutenant Colonel William H. Rankin, born in 1920, who was a veteran of World War II, the Korean War and a USMC pilot, was on a routine scheduled 600-mile navigational flight from South Weymouth, Massachusetts, to

Beaufort, North Carolina on July 27, 1959. As always, he checked with the meteorologist at the Massachusetts air station and they said that he might run into thunderstorms, with cumulonimbus cloud tops at 30,000 to 40,000 feet near Norfolk, Virginia. It was a sunny day as he took off in his F8U Crusader jet fighter.

As he was nearing Norfolk at around 6:00pm, he saw some black and rolling mass of thunderstorms. The tops of the cloud were slightly higher than 40,000 feet which was higher than the meteorologist had predicted. He thought he could go up to 50,000 feet to try and stay above the thunderstorms. He started to climb and when he reached 47,000 feet, he heard a rumbling sound in his plane, he then saw the bright red fire-warning light that flashed on, and all of a sudden the his F8U Crusader jet fighter started losing power very quickly. He tried to pull a lever to deploy auxiliary power, but the lever broke off into his hands. About 20 seconds later, he ejected at 47,000 feet.

When he ejected, from his jet fighter, the temperature outside was around 50 below zero and he was only wearing a light weight flying suit, gloves, helmet and marine field shoes. When he ejected he immediately had frostbite and decompression which caused his eyes, ears, nose and mouth to start bleeding. He felt severe pain of a stinging sensation throughout his body and his abdominal started to extend as if he was pregnant and somehow he managed to get his emergency oxygen supply on.

The chute was made to open at 10,000 feet. He jumped at 6:00pm and didn't reach 10,000 feet until 6:05pm. He was free falling for five minutes.

Once his parachute did open at 10,000 feet, he was then entering into the massive thunderstorms. Ten minutes later he was still riding in the Thunderstorms being hit by hailstones and being carried upward by updrafts. He said that at one point, he was shot up like a shell leaving cannon that raining so hard that he would drown and he would have to hold his breath at times. At one point, he thought he had died when a lightening bolt hit his parachute. He finally came crashing down into a tree trunk. When he landed his watch said 6:40pm. It was a long ride through the thunderstorms.

He was rescued and admitted to a hospital in Ahoskie, North Carolina. He had bruises, frostbite welts, and severe decompression and a loss of equilibrium, but believe it or not, he recovered and was soon flying again.

Later when the wreckage was examined by investigators, they came to the conclusion that the fighter jet had an engine seizure which caused extreme friction of unknown causes. After the incident, he wrote a book about his adventure called "The Man Who Rode The Thunder" that was published in 1960.