

## **EXTREME SPORT: PARACHUTING INTO A THUNDERSTORM**

**U.S. Marine Corps pilot William Rankin had the unfortunate experience of almost becoming a human hailstone when the engine in his fighter jet, a supersonic F8U, failed at 47,000 in the upper levels of a severe thunderstorm over Norfolk, Virginia, in 1959. He bailed out and free fell 37,000 feet through the storm cloud before his parachute engaged. Instead of floating gently to earth, he was caught in the violent updrafts of the storm and actually rose 6,000 feet. For 45 minutes he was lifted and dropped through the thunderstorm's cloud.**

**I was blown up and down as much as 6,000 feet at a time. It went on for a long time, like being on a very fast elevator, with strong blasts of compressed air hitting you. Once when a violent blast of air sent me careering up into the chute and I could feel the cold, wet nylon collapsing about me, I was sure the chute would never blossom again. But, by some miracle, I fell back and the chute did recover its billow.**

**The wind had savage allies. The first clap of thunder came as a deafening explosion that literally shook my teeth. I didn't hear the thunder; I actually felt it an almost unbearable physical experience. If it had not been for my closely fitted helmet, the explosions might have shattered my eardrums.**

**I saw lightning all around me in every shape imaginable. When very close, it appeared mainly as a huge, bluish sheet several feet thick, sometimes sticking close to me in pairs, like the blades of a scissors, and I had the distinct feeling that I was being sliced in two. It was raining so torrentially that I thought I would drown in midair. Several times I had held my breath, fearing that otherwise I might inhale quarts of water. How silly, I thought, they're going to find you hanging from some tree, in your parachute harness, your lungs filled with water, wondering how on earth you drowned.**

**In fact, Rankin did eventually land in a tree, unharmed if a bit shaken. He managed to walk away and was eventually picked up in Rich Square, North Carolina, 65 miles southwest of, and more than nine miles below, where he first bailed out.**