

The Storm in the Sky

William J. Rankin was an American pilot. It was the evening of July 26th, 1959. He was flying a plane called a Crusader F8U jet fighter. You can see one like it in the picture below. He flew over New York.



William J. Rankin was nearly nine miles up in the sky. There were no clouds. His plane flew very well. He was going home to his air-force base. As he went on, he could see that the sky was filling up with clouds. They were heavy thunder clouds. This was no problem. His plane was a very good one. He made the plane climb. Higher and higher it went. It climbed until it was right above the storm clouds. Here there was no storm. He could fly safely. He could see the storm below him.

Suddenly there was a rumbling noise. A light on the control panel flashed on. It said "Fire". Then the engine stopped completely. What could he do?

William J. Rankin had to think fast. The plane's speed would drop. Then it would spin down and crash. He would have to get out before that happened. He knew what to do. He already had his pilot's parachute. It was strapped to him.

He pulled an emergency handle. The plane's special seat pushed him right out of the plane. He had flown very high. He was up in the part of the sky where it was very cold. High, high up in the sky there is not so much air. He began to hurt all over because of the cold. The thin air made his body hurt too.

William J. Rankin fell spinning, down and down. He fell at 100 miles an hour. Then his parachute opened. He slowed down. He was going to fall right through the centre of the storm.

Then the storm hit. It blasted him upwards. Up, up in a rush of air. Next, he was falling again. He fell through the clouds.

Then the thunder exploded around him. How glad he was to have a helmet! The thunder battered him. The lightening surrounded him. There were blue sheets of light. The storm tossed him up again. Then he plunged down. Up and down, up and down. He was spinning round too.

All the time it was raining; raining so hard that William J. Rankin thought he would drown. Then came hail. The hailstones were huge. They hit his helmet. He could not open his eyes.

After forty minutes the air was smoother. The hail stopped. The rain was less heavy. He was out of the storm. He was floating down. His parachute was carrying him safely. He landed. He was bruised. He was battered. He was bleeding. But he was alive.