

Kittinger's Super Swan Dive

In 1958, USAF launched Project Excelsior to study the dangers of high-altitude escape. Test director was Capt. Joseph Kittinger Jr., a man who really got into his work. Kittinger made a series of death-defying high-altitude jumps, but the granddaddy of them all came on Aug. 16, 1960. A helium-filled balloon released from Holloman AFB, N.M., carried Kittinger to 102,800 feet. Then, the 32-year-old "asked the Lord for help," leaped from the gondola (below), and began a 20-mile free fall lasting 4.5 minutes. He reached a top speed of 614 mph (a shade under Mach 1) before his experimental parachute opened at 18,000 feet. Kittinger landed unhurt. When rescuers arrived, Kittinger remarked, "I'm very glad to be back among you." His record for highest, fastest, and longest skydive has remained unbroken for 51 years.

