

Author prepares for another day of chasing missiles with camera from cockpit of supersonic jet.



Here is the exciting story
of a "chase photographer"
who lived to tell of a
mid-air collision with
an erratic "bird."

"I Was Hit by a Missile!"

by Karl LaRoche, Jr.

"CHASE PHOTOGRAPHER," they call me. Riding jet planes,

I chase long-range missiles launched at the Missile Test Center, Patrick Air Force Base, Fla.

I work for the RCA Service Company, Inc., one of the companies that manage technical aspects of test-range operations. My job is to fly within 50 feet of a missile, and take its picture in flight. From these pictures, filmed with lightning-quick cameras, the engineers learn how to correct certain defects of the missile.

The "birds" are usually controlled from ground stations that stretch several thousand miles from Florida into the South Atlantic. My pictures tell the fellows on the ground whether their

controls are functioning properly.

Perhaps the missile's wings are flapping. Perhaps some part of the "bird" breaks off. The "chase photographer" is flying alongside to record the flap or the break.

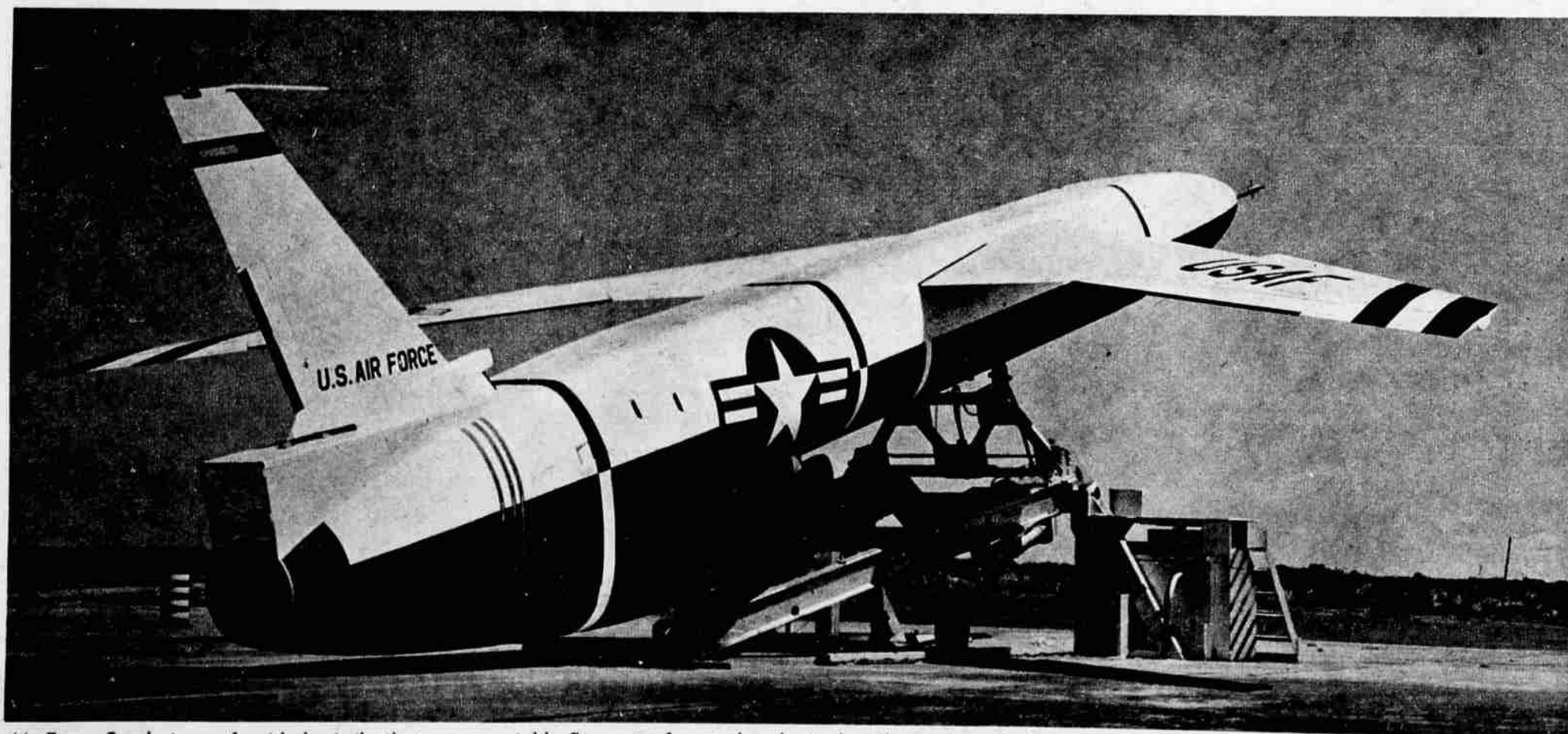
On this particular day, I met the pilot at 5 a.m. in the "Ready Room" where we went over the flight plan. We discussed the pictures I was after and the signals we would use in the air.

I put on my flight suit, a cover-all of nylon with plenty of pockets; then a Mae West in case we had to ditch the plane, a parachute, and a folded life raft which also served as a seat. Finally, a crash helmet with a built-in head-set and an oxygen mask with a built-in microphone.

The pilot was new on the job. "Nothing to it," I assured him. "I've done this dozens of times and there's not a thing to worry about." I didn't tell him about the time a missile exploded in front of our jet and we skimmed past the debris; or the time a missile stalled in a climb, and went into a dive right for our plane.

Our first flight that morning was routine. We roared in over the launching pad at about 400 miles an hour, 300 feet off the ground. We passed over the pad a split second after the "bird" was launched and flew alongside it through the "climb-out," filming all the way.

Our second mission was to go out and pick up the "bird" and



Air Force Snark, type of guided missile that unaccountably flew out of control and struck author's plane, is shown in take-off position at Missile Test Center in Florida.