



Missile zooms toward Surf on its way into space.



A marine helps Mrs. John Martinez with her children as they hurry away from their home during evacuation.

The Town That Runs for Its Life

Photos and Text by JAMES JOSEPH



A housewife boards a bus the Navy sends to take Surf residents out of missile range.

WORRIEDLY, a housewife in tiny Surf, Calif., scans the horizon. It's not rain she fears as she readies to hang out the family wash; it's missiles.

Due north of Surf loom the missile launch pads of Vandenberg Air Force Base, the West Coast's Cape Canaveral. She smiles, noting that the towering gantries—plainly visible from her bedroom window—are empty.

"Today," she sighs with relief, "we won't have to run." There have been other days—more than 160 of them since 1958 and, during last October, nine days running—when Surf's 40 residents fled for their lives, leaving wash on the line, suppers unfinished, and beds unmade.

Tiny Surf—a railroad community lying in direct line of fire of every missile lobbed into polar orbit southward over the Pacific Missile Range—lives closer to the missile age than any town in the world. The thunderous roar of missiles overhead is as common as the raucous cry of sea birds, but in deserted Surf—evacuated before every firing—there is none to hear save assistant trainmaster Bob Wolfe and a telegrapher, who, moments before a missile is launched, barricade themselves in a hillside bunker.

Familiar to Surf's main street is the military cadence of white-helmeted security police with their urgent door pounding and hurried warning: "Evacuation, ma'am—in exactly one hour!"

"We try to give a day's warning," says a security officer at the Navy's Port Arguello Missile Facility, which supervises down-range ground safety, "but many of Vandenberg's launchings—unlike Canaveral's—are under the strictest security. Sometimes we're not notified ourselves until a few hours before a firing."

"We haven't really unpacked for more than three years now," says Mrs. John Martinez, whose telegrapher husband usually stays at his key, along with trainmaster Wolfe. "The kids and I just head for buses the Navy has ready. For the kids, it's more fun than a circus."

As guests of the U. S. Navy, Surf's families are treated to a picnic if it's a daytime launching.

For night "shots," Surf's half-dozen families get what one 13-year-old girl calls "the royal motel treatment—a big splashy pool to swim in, breakfast in bed if we want it, and even the morning paper delivered to our door."

Despite such freg holidays, not all Surf wives look forward to being routed from their homes on a moment's notice. "But," says one resignedly, "we've come to expect the unusual—having the whole town run for its life."

Surf, Calif., becomes a ghost town when missiles thunder overhead from the nearby launch pads of the West Coast's Cape Canaveral



This is the shelter where Trainmaster Bob Wolfe (above) stays during missile firing.