



When he is not directing the launching of the Snark (above), Capt. Ricks spends his leisure at home with his family (l. to r.), Connie, 9, wife Chip, Cindy, 11, Ricky, 2.



merce in nearby Cocoa was so carried away by the missile boom that it erected a sign urging visitors to make reservations on the first manned rocket to the moon.

My two girls, Cindy, 11, and Connie, 9, think of nothing but missiles. Connie was bragging to me the other day that she had the only Snark daddy in the fourth grade. Some of the other kids had Atlas, Thor, Vanguard, and Redstone daddies, but these were definitely inferior, in her prejudiced view.

When the rumble of a missile echoes across Canaveral, the kids leap from their school desks and flock to the windows for a look. Things have gotten to the point where local schoolteachers have inaugurated an after-school course in which missile experts tell the teachers enough about rockets so they can keep up with the youngsters!

Squabbles among the kids down here are seldom over whose daddy can lick whose daddy—but instead focus on whether one daddy's Thor is a better missile than another daddy's Titan. The kids are whizzes on missile ranges, speeds, and modifications. Our youngsters have even started a scrapbook containing just about every clipping they come across on the subject.

With all of this, it's no wonder that my wife, Chip, suffers from acute missile mania, too. And she's not alone.

The moment the base radar-tracking antennae begin rotating or the sighting telescopes are focused on a launching site, the wives telephone one another. In minutes, they bundle themselves and the kids into cars and drive like mad for a good dune from which to watch the launch, their field glasses aimed at what hubby's trying to get up into the air this time.

Although Chip has seen an Explorer satellite fired, two moon shots, and dozens of other launches, she has never seen Snark blasted off because our site is relatively hard to see from the beach. She has heard its roar, though, as it streaks toward Ascension Island 5,000 miles away in the South Atlantic.

Chip and the other wives of the squadron form a pretty tight-knit bunch, seeing each other often on the beach and socially during the week. There's a certain amount of inter-unit rivalry down here which prompts this.

Like the day the first Explorer was orbited successfully and all the wives of that crew went around the base wearing special Explorer hats which rubbed in the fact that their husbands had won the race into outer space.

SINCE SO MUCH of our missile work is secret, the ladies have to attempt a lot of guessing about what we're doing and how we're doing it. Cancelled parties and late nights out are both pretty good indications that a missile is being readied for firing. Chip complains that when I was a Strategic Air Command pilot, all I used to discuss with the other men at parties was flying. Now we're all in missiles and it's the one thing I never talk about.

I was a pilot in an Alaska-based SAC outfit in 1957 when I received the phone call which put me into missiles. I had applied for such duty earlier, hoping to put my Texas A & M engineering degree to work for me, and my break finally came. Missiles work, I feel, is not as adventurous as flying, but it is demanding, and I believe that the future of the Air Force is bound up with rocketry.

Soon I reported to Hawthorne, Calif., where I joined the 556th at the Northrop plant there. Every man in the outfit was hand-picked and top-flight. After weeks of blackboard lectures and shopwork, we graduated as missile jockeys and were told to reassemble at Cape Canaveral, where we were to learn to fire our strange new birds.

When I drove Chip and the kids from El Paso to our new home in Florida, we followed a giant truck convoy much of the way, the convoy hauling a giant Atlas missile to its Florida launching pad. It was almost as if we were following the missile into a whole new world of the future—which in many ways is exactly what we've done.

I suppose that the climactic moment for everyone is the dramatic countdown that precedes each missile

launching. As one of the 556th's maintenance officers, it's my job to turn over a mechanically perfect Snark to the team which will position and launch it.

My men are wizards in electronics, jet engines, and armament. They go over each Snark like doctors checking a patient. In a bomber, the failure of one engine or the malfunctioning of the navigational gear need not destroy the plane's combat potential. With a missile, the breakdown of a tiny two-cent electrical contact could doom the shoot to failure. When my crew says the bird's ready to go, she has to be ready to go!

We watch the launch from a concrete blockhouse buried in the sand a few yards from the launching pads. Periscopes allow us to look up at the bird.

With a final "Three! Two! One! Fire!" the key is turned, there's a burst of crimson flame, and the earth-shaking roar of two 100,000-pound-thrust booster rockets signals another successful firing.

Our men don't scream "Go, baby, go!" or anything as colorful as that, but a couple of the guys wear their hats backward during a launch for good luck. And there's a collective sigh of relief and exultation each time a bird leaps into the blue without a hitch.

Undoubtedly, the most contented men in the world are those who can sit in the blockhouse after the shoot and watch the tracking of the Snark as it courses along the Atlantic missile range. The tracking reports radioed, teletyped, and phoned back to us are the most welcome sounds in the world!

Each successful launch means only one thing for our outfit: next day we start preparing for the next shoot in the series, testing a fire-belching bird under yet another set of simulated combat conditions.

The missile age, in short, is not just around the corner. It's here now. Don't take my word for it; just ask the men of the 556th.

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