Administration Approves First Step In Plan To Launch Spacecraft From California

WASHINGTON(UPI) — The administration has approved the first step of an Air Force proposal which eventually may lead to the launching of manned military spacecraft from Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif.

America's only manned orbital flights thus far have been conducted by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The first clues to the new possibility came in President Johnson's fiscal 1966 budget.

The budget contained a reference to plans for constructing "a Titan III missile launch complex at Vandenberg Air Force Base." There was no explanation of the project. That will come later in congressional hearings.

And there will be many more studies—and many hurdles to clear before astronauts go into orbit from the West Coast.

It was learned that what has been approved at this point is the conversion of an Atlas launching pad at Pt. Arguello, Calif., for use of a Titan III facility. Conversion may cost about $15 million.

The Titan III involved will be what is known as the "core vehicle" of the ultimately planned Titan III C, a gigantic booster which will have 2.5 million pounds of thrust at liftoff.

Plans call for using the core vehicle, a 500,000-pound thrust booster, to orbit Agena spacecraft similar to those now launched from Vandenberg but with less powerful Atlas boosters.

Agenas, America's only production line spacecraft, are put into polar orbits; one of their military missions in reconnaissance. Orbited around the earth's poles frequently — but without publicity — They cover the entire earth rather than a comparatively narrow band as is the case with satellites launched on an east-west course from Cape Kennedy.

A more ambitious part of the Air Force's plan is yet to be approved by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara.

This calls for building a facility at Vandenberg specifically for the Titan III C and the "manned orbiting laboratory" that is slated to carry aloft.

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