

THE UNSTABLE ROCKETEER

by Kevin Funk



Like most newcomers to this hobby, I viewed rocketry as a solitary pursuit. I

built and flew my rockets alone, unaware of the NAR and the thousands of other flyers across the country. Not until I joined the NAR in 1986 did I discover the number and variety of different people involved in the hobby. Through addresses gleaned from the pages of *American SpaceModeling** I began to correspond with some of these folks, picking their brains by mail for new techniques and tips. It was through this flurry of correspondence that I faced my first, major, challenge in the hobby: to come up with a witty and memorable closing line for my letters.

I was awed by the way these rocket types would sign off on their correspondence. "See you down range," "Stay thermalled," "Clear skies," "Keep 'em flying" - not a "Yours truly" in the bunch! I consider myself to be somewhat clever, but the prospect of coming up with an equally apropos close to my correspondence seemed like a daunting task. How do you compete with phrases like "In thrust we trust" and "More power to you?"

My first solution was to stop writing and start calling. You don't have to be witty when you end a conversation on the telephone, you just grunt, mumble a goodbye and hang up. The unfortunate thing I discovered is that even the most basic, "Hi, how ya' doin'" telephone call to a rocketeer lasts a half hour. A call concerning serious rocketry mumbo-jumbo will last at least an hour. (NOTE: Add one hour to these times if the call is on your dime.) Although staying in touch by phone helped reinforce friendships I had forged through correspondence, as well as helping to avoid the dilemma of how to sign off on that correspondence, it was fast becoming a burden on my rocketry budget. I hated to admit it, but it was time to sit down, so to speak, and face this challenge head on.

The first, and only, list of closing phrases for my letters wasn't very promising.

"Aim high - but not more than 30 degrees from vertical."

"Write if you get work!"

"Shoot the moon!"

I know, pretty pathetic stuff. I quickly gave up on creating a clever closing line and went about my business. That business was an interest in high power rocketry and, oddly enough,



it was that interest that finally helped me end my quest.

I attended my first high power launch at

Lucerne Dry Lake, near Victorville, California, in the summer of 1988. Lucerne launches are legendary, but the only legendary thing about Victorville is that it's home to the Roy Rogers Museum. Memorabilia from the singing cowboy's movie, TV, and roast beef days are on display under one roof. This man must have been a high power rocketeer at heart - who else would have had his horse and dog stuffed and put on public display? (I've often wondered if the NAR opened a museum commemorating its achievements who we would see stuffed and on display?)

As I toured the museum with several rocketry cohorts (who seemed obsessed with working out the CP and CG calculations for Trigger, Roger's lifeless horse), I came upon a display that played Roy Roger's classic theme song, "Happy Trails to You." As I listened to Roy and his wife, Dale Evans, crooning the lyrics, it hit me like a major cato! Trails, smoke trails, happy trails, Happy Smoke Trails! I had done it! The search for a clever close for my correspondence had finally ended! I quickly went to the gift shop and bought dozens of Roy Rogers Museum post-cards. On each I scribbled a two line message about the Lucerne launch and then, trembling with giddiness, boldly scrawled the words I had been searching for: Happy Smoke Trails! All that was needed now was to mail these cards, to have my words ordained by the United States Postal Service. I commanded my buddies to put Trigger back on his pedestal and we were off to the Victorville post office where my post cards were scattered to the far corners of the country.

**Footnote: The first issue of American SpaceModeling (now Sport Rocketry) I received as part of my NAR membership was the infamous Traci Reeves issue. Ms. Reeves, a hubba-hubba model featured in North Coast Rocketry catalogs at the time, was the cover girl on that issue of AmSpac (September 1986). I was pleasantly surprised by this and thought I had joined a real "with it" association. Alas, it didn't take me long to realize that the Reeves cover was a fluke, but it did take a year or two before I heard about the controversy that cover had caused. Even so, I keep renewing my NAR membership partly in hopes that lightning may strike the same magazine twice.*



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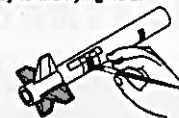
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