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Mars Isn't an Easy Destination

From: RSchatte@aol.com
Date: Thu, 26 Jun 1997 23:52:34 -0400 (EDT)
Fwd Date: Fri, 27 Jun 1997 08:46:08 -0400
Subject: Mars Isn't an Easy Destination

Forwarded message:
Subj: Mars Isn't an Easy Destination
Date: 97-06-26 22:55:14 EDT
From: AOL News

.c The Associated Press

By JANE E. ALLEN

PASADENA, Calif. (AP) - The path to Mars is fraught with peril. The last four space missions to the red planet - one American and three Russian - have failed.

The most notable was NASA's \$1 billion Mars Observer, which disappeared on Aug. 21, 1993, just before getting into Mars orbit.

On Nov. 16, 1996, Russia's \$300 million Mars 96 suffered a rocket engine failure after launch and crashed into the Pacific Ocean.

The twin Soviet Phobos probes, launched in July 1988, also failed. Phobos 1 received an inadvertent suicide command from Earth. Phobos 2 stopped transmitting in 1989, after collecting data about Mars and the small martian moon for which it was named.

``Getting to Mars is hard. Doing stuff at Mars is right out on the edge of human technological capability,'' noted Roger Bourke, an engineer on the staff of the Mars Exploration Directorate at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. ``It's 1,000 times farther away than the moon.''

Of at least 16 Russian or Soviet attempts to reach Mars, only one achieved its mission - a strong contrast to the tremendous Soviet successes landing on Venus and the U.S. track record of six Mars successes in nine attempts.

``It's like they (the Russians) were just plagued in this Mars arena and I don't think there's any single explanation,'' Bourke said.

The Soviets actually kicked off the era of Mars exploration in October 1960 when they launched two unnamed spacecraft four days apart that never even reached Earth orbit. Other failures or partial successes followed in 1962, 1964, 1971 and 1973. The Soviet's single, unqualified success was the Mars 5 mission in 1973, which returned data and pictures.

NASA did better with the six Mariner spacecraft it sent up between 1964 and 1971. Four completed their missions. Mariners 4, 6 and 7 made successful picture-taking flybys. In 1971, Mariner 9 became the first spacecraft to orbit another planet. NASA lost contact with Mariner 3 shortly after launch in 1964; Mariner 8 plummeted into the Atlantic after launch in 1971 because of a rocket failure.

The biggest martian achievement so far came from America's twin Viking orbiters and landers, launched in the summer of 1975. Together, they transmitted more than 50,000 images back to Earth. They also sampled dusty soil but found no evidence of life. Viking 1 stayed in operation until 1982.

End Adv for Sunday, June 29
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