

Missile outside Norco American Legion post saddled up

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By **JERRY SOIFER**
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NORCO - Chris Mielke didn't fly below the radar when he put a saddle on a U.S. Navy guided missile outside American Legion Post 328 on Old Hamner Avenue.

But the Norco resident escaped the notice of many people when he used a forklift to attach the saddle with rivets to the rocket, about 20 feet above the ground. The saddle symbolizes Norco as an equestrian community. The missile is a token of Norco as home to the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Corona division.

Alan Leggett, commander of the Norco legion post, said the missile was operational when it was installed outside the legion post in the mid-1970s. He said Navy officials came along and took out the innards later on. He said the saddle was added to the missile in late 2001-early 2002 as a joke.

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Donna Johnson, of Norco, first noticed the saddle atop a U.S. Navy guided missile on Saturday.

The saddle has survived rain, wind and attempts at vandalism. Many people haven't even seen it.

"I did not notice the saddle," said Norco City Councilwoman Kathy Azevedo. "I was just over there Saturday for the rededication of the horse library."

Sheriff's Sgt. Don Williamson, who started work in Norco in 2005, said he has not seen the saddle either.

The saddle has been attached to the Talos missile since 2001 when Mielke, a 60-year-old trucker, attached it as a symbol of the city.

"I saw that rocket," he said. "I kept looking at it ... When I saw that rocket, I thought that thing needs to be rode -- this is Norco; this is a horse town. I wanted to be the first one to ride it."

Mielke brought along three friends to help install the saddle. He had a picture taken of himself sitting on it, astride the rocket. The Army veteran is a member of Post 328.

"There was no danger other than the thrill of doing it," Mielke said. "I used to climb 40-foot silos as a farm boy (outside Green Bay, Wis.). I used to jump (3 feet) from one roof to another."

The Talos was used on U.S. Navy cruisers during the Vietnam War. It had a top speed of Mach 2.5 and a range of more than 65 nautical miles, according to the Post 328 Web site. The one in Norco is attached to a brick and mortar base.

Legion member Gene Vinlove, a Mira Loma resident, said the post made a collector's pin with a cowboy mounted in a saddle on the missile. It will soon adorn the post T-shirt.

Donna Johnson noticed the saddle for the first time last Saturday. "It's cute," she said. "I didn't expect to see it. That's Norco. We have to have a saddle on everything. What a clever idea!"

"It was a nice touch for a horse community," said Linda Olson, a Corona resident who is a member of the legion auxiliary.

City Councilman Harvey Sullivan quipped, "That's where old cowboys go to die. They get on that rocket and ride off into heaven."

For Councilman Frank Hall it brought to mind a 1964 movie starring Peter Sellers. "It kind of reminds you of 'Dr. Strangelove.' He rode that rocket down."

"Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying And Love the Bomb" was about the absurdity of nuclear war. It ends with a B-52 pilot, Maj. T.J. "King" Kong, played by actor Slim Pickens, riding the bomb to oblivion over the Soviet Union. Mielke said his next goal with the rocket is to replace the weather-beaten saddle with a newer one. He so far hasn't decided when that will be.