

The two Viking launches on 20 August and 9 September, 1975, although not heralded or publicized like Apollo, received increasing media and public interest as the days neared for the actual landings on Mars. The landing of Viking 1 was planned as a 4 July 1976 Bicentennial event. After the Orbiter began to send back pictures of potential landing sites, the journals became lavish in their coverage. Soffen explains the interest and publicity regarding Viking: "For one thing, it was a Bicentennial event. The new Smithsonian Air and Space Museum was opened by a signal beamed back from Viking to cut the ribbon. But I think people got interested because they were fascinated by Mars—and Viking stayed there taking pictures for a long time."²⁴

The landing of Viking 1 was delayed beyond the original target date of July 4 to permit the location of better landing sites. The delay only added to the suspense of the scientists, mission principles, newsmen, and selected laymen gathered at JPL. Mark Washburn, who was there, recorded the moment of touchdown in his book *Mars At Last!*

The final seconds were agonizing. Years of work and decades of dreaming were about to be fulfilled—or smashed on an unseen Martian rock.

And then—at 5:12:07 A.M. PDT (ERT), 20 July 1976—*touchdown!*

Von Karman Auditorium erupted in an orgy of cheers, hugs, and tears. In mission control, the controllers shouted and whooped, tore off their headphones and danced by the light of their computers. . .

*Viking was on Mars.*²⁵

The life-detecting experiments on the two Vikings turned up no positive evidence of life on Mars. In fact, no organic chemicals, the building blocks of life, were found; yet meteorites contain organic chemicals. According to Soffen, one explanatory theory holds that the atmosphere of Mars allows penetration of ultraviolet rays to the planet's surface so that organic chemicals on the planet's surface are oxidized. Soffen added that the Viking's search for life was "a high stakes gamble" and many scientists lost their interest in Mars after Viking.²⁶

The RTGs performed perfectly. "Considering what Viking did," said Soffen, "it was remarkable how the power worked."²⁷ A status report of 4 December 1976 on the RTGs indicated that on Vikings 1 and 2, requirements for 70 watts