

MICHAEL MARCUCCI

Satellites, Golf & Bridge are His Game. Can This Space-Explorer Complain?

Whisper it, *Vesta*. Caress the sound of it, *Ceres*. However you express it, these are words that make Michael Marcucci light up. As the two largest asteroids in our solar system, blithely doing what they do out there between Mars and Jupiter, *Vesta* and *Ceres* are part of the reason Marcucci for all his enthusiasm is a patient man. A very patient man. "It takes four years to get to *Ceres*, where we'll be for three months, then it takes another four years to get to *Vesta*. We'll be there three months...or until fuel runs out," he says, and you have to wonder how the guy thinks he will make the trip. Will he, like, *fly*? If he could, he would. But for the now the Rhode Island-born aerospace engineer with the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena and La Cañada Flintridge, California is satisfied to travel to these asteroids via satellite – the satellite with which he is so intimately connected he refers to its upcoming mission to *Vesta* and *Ceres* as "our" trip.

Of course, anyone would be smitten with a satellite that will be the very first to orbit 500 to 1,000 km above the asteroids' surfaces, gathering data, and proving to

Marcucci once again what a lucky son of a gun he is to love what he does. "It is very exciting," he says of his life building satellites. Pre-NASA Marcucci spent 10 years in the U.S. Air Force – building satellites – and before that, back at the Air Force Academy where he wanted to be a "jet jockey" but couldn't because of less than perfect eyesight, aerospace engineering up and grabbed him like a lover: *you're mine*. With a master's degree in same from the University of Michigan, the 1967 grad honeymooned at JPL and the marriage has been blissful ever since. "They have kept me working on planetary satellites – much more interesting than commercial, or telecoms," he says. "I plan them and build them" and? And thrill to them Marcucci might add. Instead he lets JPL's fascinating work speak for itself. The Galileo Jupiter mission; the Mars rovers (including the 1997 Mars Pathfinder and 2003 Mars exploration rovers); the Explorer, Viking and Voyager programs: these and other hot-shot deals of the lab founded in 1944 by rocket scientists have put Marcucci in a realm where his aerospace engineer's genius feels right at home.

"Here in Southern California you really can indulge your passions," says the owner of a 1964 Piper Cherokee 235 – "the 87th made with only 3,000 total hours on it." Needless to say, Marcucci's flying – he's a 550-hour pilot – importantly stands in for one of these passions. "My most exciting airplane adventure was a flight from California to Rhode Island," he says. "It was quite a trip!" Shuttling family on sightseeing excursions above Newport ("very picturesque"), historic Jamestown and other alluring destinations joins travel to Mammoth, Big Bear and Catalina Island, California, as a few of Marcucci's favorite jaunts. "Mexico," he says with longing. "I would like to get to Mexico." The passionate pilot probably *would* if he weren't so busy indulging his other off-hours pursuits. "I love



Marcucci in uniform at the JPL lab where the future is happening.

to golf," he says. "Also, I play a lot of bridge." Bridge? Of course. Is he good? Marcucci laughs. "It's all relative," he says. "I am good enough to enjoy tournaments. In fact, most of my flying is to tournaments. There's one every weekend if you want."

The thrills of competition likely won't be swallowing up the satellite man any time soon. His *Vesta* and *Ceres* mission launches June 30, 2007 from Cocoa Beach, Florida and he's got to be there. "It's a real science mission," he says. "We did it. We proved it. Washington approved it – very exciting!" What was done and proved was that "his" ion propulsion thrusters on the soon-to-launch spacecraft can and will get to the asteroids –

a first in aerospace history. "The thrust of one of our thrusters is equivalent to the weight of a sheet of paper – nothing compared to the millions of pounds of thrust some rocket engines deliver," Marcucci notes. The engineer's quiet pride at contributing to such a momentous moment in man's exploration of the solar system looks like it can only grow. "My next mission is a mission to Jupiter," he says. "We're going to orbit Jupiter." With an aviator as passionate about space exploration as Marcucci is as he helps the future happen, the horizon is bright indeed.

Go ahead, whisper it, *Vesta*. Caress the sound of it, *Ceres*. See if you, too, don't light up at the very idea of Marcucci's life.

