AIR FORCE BALLISTIC MISSILE DIVISION

news release

REL-59-64

AGENA FACT SHEET

(Editor's Note: The information in this fact sheet was extracted in part from an article by William A. Kinney published in THE AIRMAN.)

AGENA is one of the ten most brilliant stars in the heavens, located in the great constellation of the Centaur. To astronomers it is more familiarly known as Beta Centauri. Distant some 80 light years from our planet, AGENA is a blue star, the hottest celestial classification, and has a temperature in the order of 36,000 degrees Fahrenheit. It is 229 times as bright as the Sun, a run-of-the-mill yellow star, has a diameter three times greater than the Sun, and is four times denser in composition.

What made AGENA an appropriate name for a polar orbiting satellite is that this star is located just east of the Southern Cross (Crux) which indicates the location of the celestial south pole, the area at which Air Force Ballistic Missile Division launch crews must aim to put the satellite into a polar orbit.

Indeed, AGENA and a multiple star system known as Alpha Centauri have long been known as the "southern pointers," as well as "guardians of the cross," because a line projected through their positions will bisect the hypothetical traversing arms suggested by the four star formation of the Southern Cross. Alpha Centauri is of academic interest to space fans because one of its components, Proxima Centauri, is the nearest star in the Milky

(More)

Way galaxy to the Earth, except for the Sun. Its estimated distance is a mere 4.16 light years or a matter of only 24,452,480,000,000 miles.

AGENA was evidently named by an American, Elijah Buritt, for that designation of Beta Centauri first appears in his Geography of the Heavens, published in 1857.

-30-