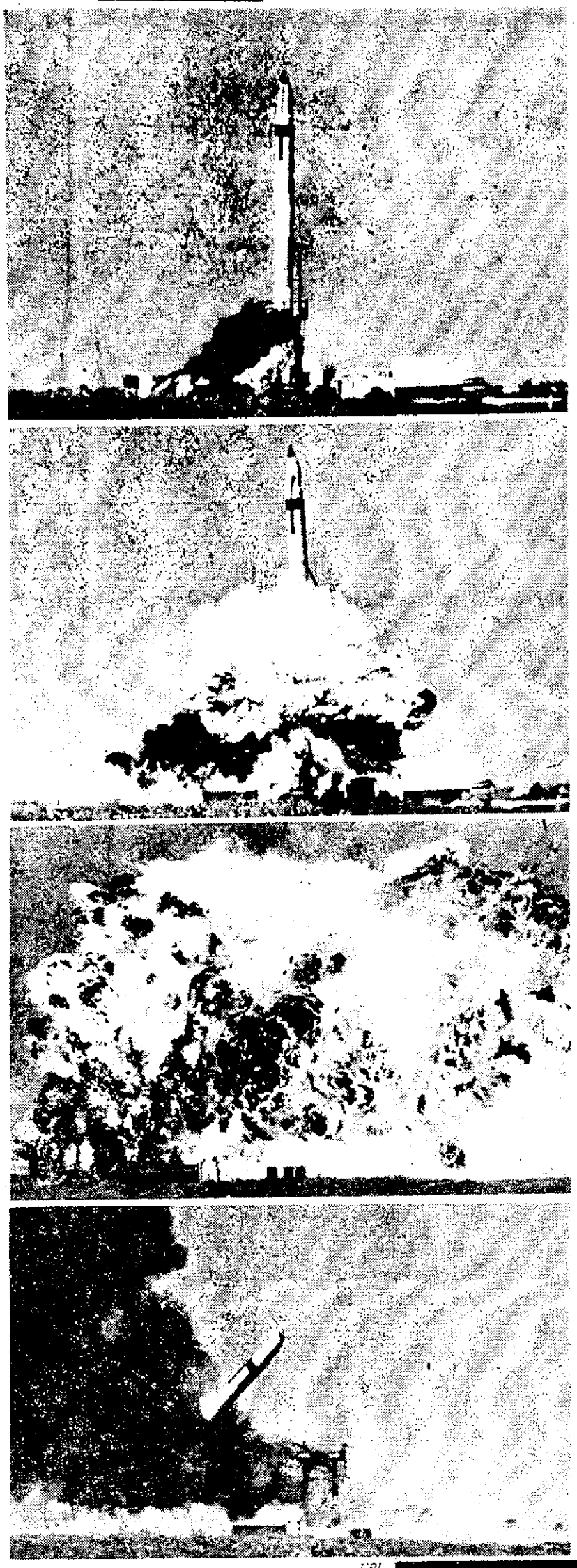

UPI

Rocket Explodes During Test

The 55-foot Percheron rocket (top) begins a test of its engine, then explodes on the test pad. A huge ball of flame envelopes the test pad as the rocket is thrown into the air and then falls back to earch (bottom) within feet of test pad.

Hopes For First Commercial Rocket Explode; Owners Call It Six-Month, $1.2 Million Setback

MATAGORDA ISLAND, Texas (UPI) — Test-firing the engine of America's first commercial rocket was supposed to bring private enterprise into the space age. But something went wrong on an isolated Texas launch pad. The Percheron rocket blew its top.

Engineers for Space Services Inc. said they believe the failure of a tiny liquid oxygen valve sparked Wednesday's spectacular explosion of the slim white rocket, costing the fledgling venture $1.2 million and setting them back at least six months. No one was injured.

"Welcome to the rocket business," said SSI spokesman Charles Chafer.

The 55-foot Percheron rocket, scheduled for a test launch later this month, was nearing the end of a five-second "burp" test when the top two-thirds suddenly blew 200 feet into the air.

Four chunks of the rocket's nosecone landed harmlessly back on the ground — well clear of the closest observers, a team of engineers huddled 600 feet away in a nearby sandbagged trailer. The rocket's base stayed bolted to the launch pad through three explosions.

"We're disappointed, of course, but we'll keep going," Chafer said. SSI believes it can place business communication satellites in space cheaper and faster than the government — which currently has a five-year waiting list of companies.

SSI officials today planned to begin an estimated two days of gathering engineering data to determine exactly what happened during the test, spokesman Gary Gartner said. He noted both the United States and Japan had rocket failures.

Gartner said it is assumed the liquid oxygen valve failed to open and caused kerosene to run onto the engine. The kerosene could have caused a small explosion in the engine department that in turn caused the kerosene tank to explode.

The countdown phase of Wednesday's "burp" test went successfully but Chafter said immediately after the brilliant yellow flame roared from the bottom of the bolted-down rocket, technicians knew there was trouble.

Ironically, SSI received Federal Aviation Administration approval only Wednesday for a sub-orbital launch that was planned for later this month.

David Hannah, who invested $600,000 of the initial $1.2 million spent on the project, said, "Well, we've got to have setbacks and now we've got one behind us. This is just part of the process."

Chafer said it would take at least six months to rebuild the special Percheron rocket, designed to be the workhorse of the nation's first commercial rocket venture.

GCH Inc. of Sunnyvale, Calif., built the first Percheron, which weighs 75,000 pounds and is 55 feet long and 4 feet in diameter.

SSI officials wouldn't comment on the condition of the engine, but Gartner said "visually there was no structural damage to the launch pad itself."

The test occurred on the desolate barrier island about 60 miles northeast of Corpus Christi on private property owned by Dallas oilman Toddie Lee Wynne.

The Percheron is about the size of the Redstone rockets NASA used to launch Alan Shepard and Gus Grissom into sub-orbital flight in 1961.

U.S. Doctors Challenge Mount Everest

KATMANDU, Nepal (UPI) — Members of an American medical research expedition left Katmandu by bus today to study heart and lung functions at high altitudes while they climb Mount Everest.

Eighteen members of the team set out for Dolalghat, 47 miles northwest of the Nepalese capital, to start their trek on foot to a base camp 113 miles away. They will be joined by three others.

The $50,000 expedition includes 12 heart specialists. The leader, Dr. John West, 52, of San Diego, Calif., said, the "studies will help us improve the management of patients with heart and lung diseases."

The expedition plans to set up three medical laboratories on Everest, the highest 21,300 feet up the 29,028 foot mountain. There the medical experts will monitor the hearts and lungs of eight members of the expedition, who each plan to carry eight pounds of medical equipment to the summit.

The climbers will attempt to conquer the world's highest mountain by scaling the southeast ridge. The climb is not expected to start before the first week in September.

First members of the expedition must spend three weeks treking through tropical, leech-infested forests and traversing swollen mountain rivers to reach the base camp.

Hundreds of porters have been employed to carry tons of equipment to the base camp. Much of it was taken to Khumbu near the base camp before the onset of the current monsoon season.

This is the third American attempt on Everest. Previous attempts on 1963 and 1976 were successful. In 1978 Raymond Genet of Anchorage, Alaska, scaled the mountain with a West German expedition but died a day later after being forced to bivouac in the icy air near the summit.

The expedition is climbing in the autumn climbing season when conditions are more difficult that in spring because the time for climbing is shorter, winds are fiercer and temperatures much colder.