



PHOTOGRAPHS • GERD LUDWIG

# The Rockets' Red Glare

## NORFOLK, NEBRASKA

OBSESSION ignites the imagination with flights of fancy that soar beyond the routine and the conventional. The grandest schemes light up the days of all who get close enough to view.

Every once in a while I wonder vaguely what I will do very late in my declining years—when just sitting in a chair may be all I *can* do. The notion has kept recurring that (being a fireworks enthusiast) I would delight in being retained (at a nominal fee, mostly for travel) by Oriental fireworks manufacturers to be assisted out to a field and settled into a chair, possibly with a headrest attached so that looking up into the night sky would be comfortable, where my function would be to decide on names for their new aerial shells. I would be known as “The Shell Namer.”

May I hasten to explain. Aerial shells (or bombs, as fireworks people call them) from Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, and so forth were always imported into this country, or listed in their catalogs, with wonderfully fancy descriptive names attached. A shell would be labeled “The Monkeys Enter the Heavenly Palace and Drive Out the Tiger.” Or “Running Cur Violates Heavenly Clouds.” The importers felt this was all too farfetched and imaginative (and difficult to discern in the sky, anyway), and so in the American catalogs the Oriental nomenclature would be simplified to something like “Sky Monkeys” or “Frolicking Dogs,” and they would have done with it.

But one day that is what I have in mind to do—to get out there to the Orient where the new shells are being tested. I would sit out in the fields in my small bamboo chair (cushioned) with a note pad. I would watch a shell soar up, open above the rice paddies, and perform, and I would write down “The Blue Ox Comes Down the Turnpike,” or perhaps “The White Parrot Escapes from the Yellow Wicker Cage,” whatever, and if my imagination failed, I would call down to the pyrotechnician by the mortars and ask him to send up the same kind of shell for a second viewing: sorry, but



Orv Carlisle invented a flight system for lightweight rockets. His early models are now displayed at the Smithsonian.



by **George Plimpton**

GEORGE PLIMPTON's newest book is *Fireworks*. New York City's Fireworks Commissioner, he choreographed the Brooklyn Bridge Centennial pyrotechnics and Ronald Reagan's inaugural fireworks.

I was not inspired.

I had always assumed that I would be very much a loner at this—a solitary figure with a small suitcase, stepping slowly down to the platform of a dusty RR station in Yunnan Province. It seemed improbable that I could find anyone else who would like to tag along—it is a somewhat specialized retirement program, after all. Very recherché.

Indeed, I could think of only one candidate who might be interested—a shoe-store owner in Norfolk, Nebraska, named Orville Carlisle. First of all, he is a fireworks expert. In fact, off in a side room of his shoe store he has a fireworks museum, surely the only one of its kind in the world. Then, coming from a small mid-American town, he would provide a fine balance and

Not long ago Orv got a call from a fisherman who wanted to know how a rocket could best be used to carry his lure out beyond the surf. "Fishermen," Orv said, "are light in the conk."

perspective to our nomenclative choices. He would keep me in check. And besides, he is a fine phrasemaker. He says things like "It's colder than a well digger's nose."

I went out to Nebraska to see him not long ago. He is an old friend, and I wanted to see his museum. I thought that during my visit I'd ask him whether, if things got slack around Norfolk in years to come, he would be interested in going to Japan or China with me as a shell namer. Equal status. He would have his little bamboo chair, and I'd have mine. We'd confer. Perhaps we would not agree. We would call down to the pyrotechnician and ask for another shell of the same variety. The sky would blossom.

Norfolk is 112 miles from Omaha and eighty from Sioux City, serviced by a commuter airline called AAA. No one at the ticket counter seemed to know what the initials stood for—if anything. Carlisle and his wife, Mary, met me at the little airport, and we drove into town.

Carlisle is a thin, spare man, lively of manner, who seems slightly surprised by just about everything, so that his speech is sprinkled with mild expressions of wonder such as "jimony crickets," "heck," "criminentlies," "jimony krautz," et cetera, the sort of words one remembers from the balloons in comic strips. His wife has a hearing problem, but she can read lips remarkably well. In the car at red lights Orville would turn on the overhead light

and, speaking directly at her so she could follow his lips, give a quick synopsis of what we had been talking about.

First we chatted about the town. Long-time residents, I was informed, pronounced the name *Nor' fork*—because the original German settlers established a community on the north fork of the Elkhorn River that they wanted, not unsurprisingly, to call North Fork.

"The people in Washington, who are about the same now as they were then," Carlisle explained, "got it bollixed up somehow, and the postal authorities gave us the name Norfolk, like the place in Virginia. In fact, last year a couple came through who were *looking* for Norfolk, Virginia."

"Oh, come on, Orv!" I said.

"Well, that's what they were saying around town. You've got to remember that the squirrels are not always up in the trees. The point is that the old-timers say *Nor' fork*."

"What's that business about the squirrels in the trees?"

"That there are a lot of nuts on the ground."

I thought for a bit. "Oh, yes, I see."

"There are other ways of saying that someone's not quite with it," Carlisle went on to explain. "You can say his elevator doesn't go clear to the top. Sometimes I say that he or she is a bit light in the conk."

"Oh, yes."

He switched on the overhead light and turned to his wife.

"I was telling George about the pronouncing of *Norfolk*."

"Oh, yes," she said, nodding.

Carlisle wanted to show me his shoe store (Carlisle's Correct Shoes, it's called) and the fireworks museum before we turned in. As he unlocked the store I remarked on the extremely heavy traffic on Norfolk Avenue just behind us. "Is something letting out?" I asked.

"It's Saturday night," Orv told me. "Those are the kids cruising out there—four or five of them to a car. It's the big ritual in these parts. I suppose there's some kind of communication between them—where the action is. Sometimes it's such a parade of cars the building here shakes."

Inside it was quiet. It was apparent from the long rows of shoe boxes that Carlisle's business consisted mainly of work shoes and children's shoes. "Not much high fashion in here," he said. "We stay out of it. Our slogan is 'How do they feel?' not 'How do they look?'" A big seller in here is a Red Wing Pecos with a steel toe... so your foot will survive when behind the barn you're stepped on by a critter. The soles on those shoes will wear like a pig's nose. After all, when the shouting's all over, that's what we are: agriculture."

Overhead was a long wire for a puppet bicyclist carrying a balancing bar to run up and down, to amuse the children. "Kids

## Bearings

### NORFOLK, NEBRASKA

Population: 20,230

Norfolk was first settled in 1866 by German farmers who migrated from Wisconsin. They wanted to name their town North Fork, because it is located on the north fork of the Elkhorn River, but when they applied for a charter, the Post Office Department amended the name to Norfolk.

Each of forty-four families was given 160 acres of land, but in the first winter they lived more or less communally.

From 1874 to 1877 the major farming problem was a plague of grasshoppers. The Indians mashed them up and ate them, but the farmers often went hungry.

Norfolk's major crops are corn and beans. The Elkhorn River is muddy and unnavigable, but the river bottom is considered some of the best farmland in the state.

Norfolk has a steel mill that relies on recycled boxcars for some of its raw material. The Norfolk Livestock Market is one of the largest livestock auction markets in the country; last year some seven hundred thousand head of cattle, hogs, sheep, and horses were sold to the highest bidders.

come into a shoe store thinking they're going to be vaccinated," Carlisle explained. He manipulated the puppet for me. It soared down the length of the store, and then back.

If that did not calm the children, there was always the huge cast of Robert Wadlow's bare foot to awe them. Wadlow was the most renowned of the world's giants. The Musebeck Shoe Company supplied its retailers with an aluminum cast of his foot to reflect its slogan, "We fit all sizes."

And then, of course, if the children were still distracted and broody, there was always the fireworks museum with its treasures. It is not large as museums go (about twenty-four by twelve feet), but it is chock-full of memorabilia, all defused and harmless. Very little in Carlisle's museum is not of interest—at least to me, a fireworks buff. Most of the items on display induce pangs of nostalgia for the days before World War II, when all kinds of fireworks were available to the public. My particular favorites in Carlisle's museum were the cardboard novelty devices made to resemble fire engines, or ocean liners, or animals, or various kinds of buildings, all of which after varying performances (usually the emission of smoke and a piercing whistle) would blow up in a sharp report. Perhaps the most original of those Carlisle showed me was a representation of a cardboard outhouse, which he told me performed by pouring smoke out of the half-moon ventilator and then slowly

destroying itself in a series of small, flatulent explosions.

Carlisle, who is going to be sixty-eight in July, has been collecting fireworks, cap pistols, and various noisemakers (including exploding canes that *bang!* when you hit the ground with one) for sixty years and has had them on display in the shoe store for twenty.

His involvement with fireworks was due largely to his father, a "traveling man"—a rather more glamorous descriptive than "salesman"—who sold Palmer Candy out of Sioux City and eventually settled in Norfolk. Norfolk was the jumping-off place for his sales territory, which extended from Rushville, Nebraska, to the west, up to Winner, South Dakota, to the north—a "wild and woolly part of the West in those



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times," as Orv noted. His father was a generous man, the more so because his own childhood was relatively deprived. His father was a Methodist preacher who kicked his son out into the world after the boy turned down an ultimatum to give up playing baseball on Sunday ("Go, and never darken my doorway again!").

"So the result was," Orv said, "that our father was always very openhanded when it came to his three sons. He brought us back things from his travels—and always, on the Fourth of July, fireworks... piles of them, horrifying the neighbors, and on the Fourth he'd take the stuff out on the front porch to parcel it out to us. He'd sit in the swing and from time to time he'd sing out in that big voice of his, 'Spread out! Spread

out!' to keep us from getting too close to each other.

"Then, of course, heck, we got the Gilbert chemistry sets at Christmas. Those sets had a lot more in them in those days—potassium nitrate, barium nitrate, strontium nitrate, with which you could make colored flares. We could make chlorine gas, and we tried it out on grasshoppers to find out if it was lethal. It was. Later in high school we had the components to make nitroglycerin, but we got scared halfway through, cold feet, and we flushed the stuff down the drain."

Carlisle's more formal education with pyrotechnics was with the Readers, an Italian fireworks family up in Yankton. He learned enough from them to help with the big fireworks affair of the summer (besides the annual Fourth of July festivities), which was the sham battle arranged by the Lyck Company out of Omaha and sponsored by the American Legionnaires. Orv would help prepare the "battlefield" with ground bombs, small sticks of dynamite, flares, and so forth, through which the old soldiers, bursting out of their uniforms, and pretty well "snookered up," as Orv described them, would caper, miming the actions of the Battle of St. Mihiel, or the Marne, or Château Thierry (the battles changed every year, so no one would feel slighted by having one's battle not included), while their families watched from the hill. "Roman candles would be shot back and forth," Carlisle said, "though I don't remember any Germans. No one wanted to play them. Everything was started by a large choir singing 'Just Before the Battle, Mother.' Very stirring stuff."

As the town specialist in pyrotechnical

**O**rv's collected fireworks for sixty years and displayed them for twenty in the side room to Carlisle's Correct Shoes.



matters, Orv, or "Oz," as in *The Wizard of Oz*, as many of the townsfolk know him, is on call for many more occasions than simply the Fourth of July. When the high school orchestra plays Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* in the City Auditorium, Carlisle stands backstage and, on the conductor's cue for the cannon barrage called for in the score, fires a pistol through a hole into a fifty-five-gallon drum. One year a thunderstorm happened by, and right on the

button, following a terrific lightning bolt, a thunderclap lifted everybody in the auditorium out of his seat. Carlisle laughed. He said, "You haven't heard a thunderclap until you've heard one that comes out of a Nebraska thunderstorm. A lot of folks there thought I was responsible and that it was my finest hour."

Almost any loud noise in Norfolk is attributed to Orv. Back in the 1950s when sonic booms from military planes were more common, Carlisle would hear a particularly loud clap, the phone would ring almost instantly, and whoever was at the other end would inquire anxiously, "Orv, you all right?"

Carlisle's reputation in the fireworks field extends far beyond Norfolk. He is a consultant to the National Fire Protection Association. Five years ago the Smithsonian Institution got in touch with him to find out if its windows were going to stand up to the concussions of the massive fireworks display organized on the Mall (which the Smithsonian fronts) on the occasion of Ronald Reagan's inauguration. "I told them there were two very reputable fireworks companies involved, and they had nothing to fear."

Not long ago Orv got into a phone exchange with a striped-bass fisherman from Atlantic City who wondered how a rocket could be best used to carry his lure out beyond the surf. Did he need a permit from the authorities to do such a thing? "We worked on it," Carlisle told me. "He didn't need a permit, but an awful lot of rockets. He was going to lose one every time he got the lure out there in the ocean. The notion didn't seem to bother him. Fishermen are crazier than duck hunters."

"Lighter in the conk," I suggested.

"Yes, lighter in the conk. Exactly." He turned to his wife. "I was saying that fishermen are light in the conk."

"Oh, yes," she said.

Of course, the Fourth is Orv's big day. One time he actually fired three shows on the Fourth: the first one at the country club in the early evening, the aerial shells against a sky still tinted with the sunset, so the members would have plenty of time for dancing later; then at the Drive-In; and finally a few blocks away at Memorial Field, where just about everybody, according to Orv, had gotten "sloshed" from waiting around.

More recently, Carlisle shoots his show—fireworks, which he carefully choreographs, provided by Rich Brothers from Sioux Falls—at Skyview Lake, where between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand spectators turn up to watch. He has been doing that show since 1976, "knocking their socks off" each time. Last year, though, the Jaycees, who raise the money for the event, got offered a big deal by a discount store for putting on the show under its sponsorship. They asked him to be involved, but Carlisle didn't want to be

part of a commercial venture. "Lots of love and trouble goes into my fireworks show. I can't dance, or sing, but I can shoot fireworks."

His wife interjected: "The thing is, Orv was born only two days after the Fourth. He asked his mother why he wasn't born on the Fourth, and she said, 'Well, son, you were a firecracker with a slow fuse.'"

"That's right," Carlisle said, laughing. "That's absolutely right."

The next morning Orv Carlisle gave me a tour of Norfolk. We went by the steel mill, which stands on what Orv says was the best coyote and jackrabbit hunting area in the country. We drove by Skyview Lake, where he does the fireworks shows, and down by the plant where they make dis-

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posable hypodermic needles. We went past Mary's Cafe, which is the truckers' favorite spot in town, and out into the countryside. Rolling fields. Tree lines of oak and maple. Orv said that these had all been planted by the early settlers. "Gee whiz, there weren't any trees here at all, except the cottonwoods and willows down in the creek beds. Just the roll of the Great Plains, horizon to horizon. They planted the trees to keep the farmland from blowing away. [The wind] whistles down from Canada in the winter—colder than a well digger's tool."

"I thought it was 'nose'—'colder than a well digger's nose.'"

"Either one," Carlisle said. "They're interchangeable."

It occurred to me I had yet to ask him about coming to China and Japan as a shell namer. I was going to, but it did not seem appropriate while he was showing me through his hometown.

We were driving by a swimming hole called Silver Hole. "It's a good name," Orv told me. "The cottonwoods give off this silver fuzz, which layers the surface of the water so thick that when a kid dives in, he makes a hole right through the stuff."

We went over to Highway 81, which runs from Canada down to Mexico and in its brief passage through Norfolk turns into Thirteenth Street. We passed by the house in which Johnny Carson lived as a teenager. The house, an upright white

clapboard structure with a rather scruffy lawn in front and a lone rocking chair on the front porch, was up for sale.

"Oh, I remember him," Carlisle said. "There was a young man's club in town that was organized to keep us from getting mixed up in dens of iniquity. Local older men showed home movies. Carson, who was in junior high school at the time, turned up every once in a while with his ventriloquist's dummy. Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy were very big then, and every kid starting off in show business had his dummy to help him. Carson did magic tricks. He had that old one where you put a cigarette in your ear and it looks like it goes right through your head and comes out your mouth. You could tell he was on his way."

At one point, Carlisle told me, some people in town wanted to change the name of Thirteenth Street to Carson Boulevard, an idea Carlisle did not warm to. "After all," he said, "we have some other Norfolk people who have gone out and made a name for themselves."

"And who are they?"

"Well, there's Don Stewart, who was the surgeon on the soap opera *The Guiding Light*. He's a Norfolk boy. And then we have Thurl Ravenscroft, or at least we have his voice. It's his real deep voice that comes out of Tony the Tiger and says 'Gree-e-e-a-a-t!' in the Kellogg's Frosted Flakes ads."

"Oh, yes," I said. "Of course."

Carlisle himself had one great chance for renown and fortune. In 1954 he invented a solid-propellant motor for lightweight rockets and a parachute recovery system so the rocket could be reflown—thus pioneering the industry of modern model rocketry. Carlisle's first two models, the Mark I and the Mark II, sit on display in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

The return from his invention could have been considerable had things gone as planned. Officials in the industry estimate that a million hobbyists in this country, most of them teenagers, have bought various kits to fashion rockets that soar up and float down in parachutes from heights that vary from several hundred to a thousand feet. Some of the more complex kits contain two- or three-stage models; some, rather than use parachutes, turn into gliders at the apex of their rise and sail back to the ground. One company actually sells a miniature rocket-camera that snaps a single picture of the earth below when it reaches the top of its climb.

All of these are propelled by what Carlisle contributed: a round tube of slow-burning propellant that fits into the bottom of the rocket and is disposable after use, meaning that a single rocket can be used indefinitely.

For complicated legal reasons (he spent three years in court), Orv lost his exclusivity-of-patent rights ("A patent is sim-

ply a license to fight," he complained to me), specifically for failing to give a completely adequate notice of infringement to a competitor.

"What if it had all worked out?" I asked him. "What would you have done differently with your life? Would you have left Norfolk?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Orv said. "My friends are here. I grew up in Norfolk, and it's a good place. I don't think much would have changed. I might have done some more duck hunting and goofed off more."

I had once seen Orv off his home turf. He came to New York to help me celebrate the publication of a book I had written about fireworks. The city, as he put it, "boggled his mind," and one morning he stayed all by himself in his hotel room.

"Did you go out to see the Statue of Liberty?"

"Well, I saw it from the airplane. Trouble was, I felt hemmed in. No place to run to. More people were on the street than there are in all of Nebraska, all going everywhere but straight. Guess what? I came to the conclusion that it's a great place to visit. It's no big deal for most people, but it was for this old dog. I'm a country jake at heart. Going home, I felt I was on my way to be decompressed."

Hearing all this made it seem unlikely I was going to get Orv to China for our retirements. But I asked. I told him about naming fireworks. We would go to the Orient with our little chairs and sit in the testing fields. He brightened visibly. He knew a lot about the Oriental fireworks nomenclature. "Ogatsu," he said (naming a famous Japanese fireworks firm), "had a catalog with almost two thousand items listed in it. Some of those names threw me clear out of the wagon: 'Dragon Skipping a Ball with a Report.'"

"That's a good one," I said.

"'Spring Wind Makes the Willow Grow.'"

"Excellent!"

"How about 'Five Dragons with Flashlight Parasol?'"

"I would travel many miles to see such a thing in the sky."

"Or 'Celestial Maiden Welcomes Heroes with Encircling Dew.'"

"We can hardly do better," I said. "So you're with me. You'd go?"

"Of course," he said. "Taiwan. Macao. I'll be there." He seemed a little wistful. "We'd have to come back from time to time. Wouldn't we? To get refreshed and do some duck hunting?"

I thought for a bit. Then I told him I had a better idea. "We'd establish *such* reputations as shell namers that the Orient would have to come to us. They'd come to Norfolk."

"Now, there's an idea," Carlisle said warmly. "We'll cut those shells loose from Skyview Lake. I'd like that just fine. Just fine!" **E**

# THE ROCKET'S' RED GLARE

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