

VIGIL CONTINUED

ALL READY—BUT NOT CALLED ON

Near Honolulu Nick Klimis waited through the four days in a hangar which had the expectant air of a firehouse. As a senior master sergeant, Klimis was straw boss of the 76th Air Rescue Squadron which was on duty at Hickam Air Force Base—as other squadrons were in 17 other bases around the world—waiting for the alarm that might come. If Gemini 4 landed off target in the North Pacific, two big planes were ready outside the hangar to rush para-rescue men to the scene, drop them and a flotation collar into the sea, and “duckbutt”—circle overhead—until a recovery ship arrived. For a week before the orbit, Klimis’ men had rehearsed spacecraft recoveries. Twice they jumped into 12-foot seas at night to attach flotation gear to dummy capsules.

Although the prospect of a possible Gemini rescue excited some of the younger hands, Klimis took it in a veteran’s stride. He had already backed up three of the previous manned flights and he had, in fact, salvaged eight different pieces of space hardware—from missile nose cones to film canisters. He had even helped perfect the inflatable collar which kept the space craft afloat. Four years ago when Gus Grissom’s

Mercury capsule sank, Klimis was watching from an airplane 1,000 feet overhead. “We could have gotten that collar on the thing,” he recalls, “but the Navy never even asked us to help. They just sat there with their helicopters and made waves.”

Since Gemini’s orbital paths brought the Astronauts over his area three times a day, Klimis left his station in the hangar only for meals. At night he slept in the alert office or sacked out in a sleeping bag on his parachute-rigging table. By day he worked on a new parachute harness he has invented and mused about the time—he clearly envisions it—when para-rescue men will ply their trade in outer space. “All they have to do is give us the necessary tools and training,” he says, “and we’re up there too. No parachute. Just two jet tanks, open the hatch, move out, connect with the guy in trouble, and that’s all. The only difference between what we’re doing now and what we’ll be doing then, I guess, is one of altitude and technology.”

Master Sergeant Klimis signals O.K. at squadron briefing during the flight. Klimis, 41, has been in the Air Force 17 years and made more than 450 parachute jumps.

