

-PASADENA, Calif. (AP) -

America's Viking 1 spacecraft landed today on a dusty plain of Mars to search for life on the red planet. In a spectacular space achievement, Viking began sending back razor-sharp photos of the planet's surface.

The pictures arrived dramatically, appearing line-by-line on television monitors after traveling 213 million miles at the speed of light. The failure of two earlier Soviet Mars landing crafts had heightened the tension in the project laboratory.

"The details are just incredible," said Dr. Thomas Mutch, head of the lander imaging team.

"It just couldn't be better," he said as the first picture, a portion of the surface directly under one leg of the lander appeared on television monitors at Jet Propulsion Laboratory. It was of the Chryse Planitia, the Gold Plain of Mars - the smoothest place on a planet marked by volcanic peaks and deep valleys and craters.

Later, the unmanned threelegged lander will make life-detection and soil sampling tests. For more than 100 years scientists have thought Mars

might harbor some form of life.

Scientists cheered and hugged each other as the 1,300-pound craft radioed that it touched down on Mars at 4:53 a.m. PDT. The signal took 19 minutes to reach earth. For many, the achievement was a childhood dream come true - a Mars landing.

President Ford telephoned his congratulations to the project headquarters, calling the mission a "'wonderful and most remarkable success."

He said, "'I think it's amazing that in

the span of a single lifetime, the exploration of space has grown from the dreams of very, very few individuals to such a massive cooperative reality."

Science fiction writer Ray Bradbury was at JPL for the touchdown, his dreams racing ahead of the Viking mission.

"I know in the next 20 years we'll have a manned landing on Mars — eventually we'll have colonized and taken over the planet," Bradbury said.

The first picture showed an area of soil strewn with what seemed to be chunks of rock of varying sizes. Mutch said it looked as though some of the

rocks had tails of dirt formed by the rushing of strong Martian winds across the surface.

Scientists had expected the landing site, a low plain where streams may once have run, would be covered by a blanket of material deposited by the water. Although the pictures showed a rocky surface, the lander apparently avoided any geologic hazards that project officials had feared might imperil the touchdown.

In the corner of the first picture could be seen one of Viking's round metal landing footpads. The rivets on the footpad were visible and the footpad cast an oval shadow in the late afternoon sun as it rested on the soil among the rocks, which Mutch described as "'a beautiful collection of boulders.'"

The second picture was to be a panoramic view of the Martian landscape, made by a camera on the lander with the ability to sweep a long path across the horizon.

Viking 1, the first of two unmanned American spacecraft scheduled to land

on Mars this summer, was launched
last August 20.