

# An Interview with Homer Hickam, Jr.

BY JOHN THOMPSON

*Editors note: Following is an E-Mail sent by Homer Hickam, Jr. (author of "Rocket Boys") in reply to a message sent to him by our own John Thompson. I've taken the liberty of reprinting it in its entirety, and converting it into "interview" format. Thanks to both John and Mr. Hickam for this interesting bit of correspondence. - Ed.*

**Homer Hickam, Jr.:**

Dear John:

First, thank you and all your pals for your service out there off the Horn. What is that like? I'm fascinated. Are you on an aircraft carrier or other ship? What's life like aboard? See also my comments below:

**John Thompson:**

>Subject: Rocket Boys" Are cool!!!!

>Sent: 2/25/99 10:53 AM

>Received: 2/22/99 12:23 PM

>From: John Thompson,

jethoms98@yahoo.com

>To: hhickam@hiwaay.net

Hey Mr Hickam Jr.;

My name is John Eric Thompson, and at present I am out near the Horn of Africa. I am in the Marine Corps and have been in for the last 13 years. I grew up in La Porte Texas, and half of the neighbors who lived in my neighborhood, worked at the Johnson Space Center in Clear Lake, just about 30 minutes away from where I lived. Bob Crippen was a good neighbor of ours, and we used to sail against each other out in Galveston Bay.

**HH:** I gave a pitch or two with Bob in attendance. He seems like a great guy.

**JT:** I have been into rockets ever since 1972 when I was only six years old, and saw the Launch of Apollo 16. In several ways, I can relate to your book. We had a club named the Bay Colony

Rocket Organization and we had a President, Vice president, treasurer and a scribe for all of our meetings. We established a bank account for projects and trips.

**HH:** Shades of the Big Creek Missile Agency!

**JT:** I am now officially stationed at Camp Pendleton Ca. and when I am not deployed I am out in the southern desert of California launching high powered rockets. I have been out on our six month routine float since December 5th, 1998. Wouldn't you know it, I took your book out with me to sea, and I couldn't put the book down is was very well written. Lo and behold a movie comes out and I am stuck out here until about June 1999 missing all of the hype.

**HH:** The movie, titled OCTOBER SKY, is doing great and the paperback version of ROCKET BOYS, also titled OCTOBER SKY, is on the NY Times Best-Seller List. That makes my publisher, and me, very happy, needless to say. I was on the Letterman Show this past Thursday and Dave and I had a nice time. I taught him to scuba diver over a decade ago so he likes me. I got in a plug for my home town, Huntsville, AL, Rocket City USA, in any case.

**JT:** The two clubs that I am affiliated with in the San Diego area, Dart 317, and the Ocotillo Test Range have gotten a chance to receive free passes to view the premiere of the movie and they e-mailed me to tell me it was great. My Friend Kevin Harness put out a static display of some of our rocket projects at the La Jolla AMC Theater for the movie, and I am sure we will have more participants out at our next desert launch. I know you had apparently served in the military during Vietnam.

**HH:** I was in the 4th Infantry Division but was an ordnance officer (a first lieutenant) assigned to the armored cav. I led a contact team of mechanics who could fix anything. When they became short of officers during Tet, I filled an armored officer slot for the cav until things sorted themselves out. First time an ordnance officer ever led an armored cavalry troop. It was an interesting experience. We guarded the roads from the top of the Mang Yang Pass to Pleiku until Tet 68 and then fought a running series of battles from Kontum to Ban Me Thuot. I was young and invulnerable and actually enjoyed the experience and the guys I met were the best in the world.

**JT:** What exactly did you do, and what type of degrees did to achieve in order to make it into NASA?

**HH:** All I ever got was a BS degree in Industrial Engineering. I started out in aerospace but decided I wasn't that interested in airfoils. I chose IE because it seemed to have a little bit of everything in it. When I came back from VN, Apollo was winding down so I went to work for the Army Missile Command. I was in Germany, installing a computer-driven targeting system (a 3-year assignment) when I was accepted by NASA, one of the happiest days of my life. Then I really got to work! I'll include my bio so you can see what I did.

**JT:** I look forward to seeing the movie once I return, and Universal Studios has been very generous, they sent me a poster after I explained where I was at the present.

You take care Mr Hickam ..

Fair Winds and Happy Launching  
SSGT John E. Thompson USMC

**HH:** Thanks, John. You guys take care of yourselves, okay?

Homer

## BACKGROUND -

### HOMER H. HICKAM, JR.

Homer Hickam was born on Feb. 19, 1943, and raised in Coalwood, West Virginia. He graduated from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1964 with a BS degree in Industrial Engineering. Hickam began employment with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration at Marshall Space Flight Center, Huntsville, Alabama, in 1981 as an aerospace technician/engineer.

Prior to his retirement in February, 1998, Mr. Hickam was assigned as the NASA Payload Training Manager for the International Space Station Program (ISSP). His specialties include training on science payloads, and extravehicular activity (EVA) in the Neutral Buoyancy Simulator (NBS). Some of the past missions he has trained astronaut crews for include:

Starlab (training manager)

Hubble Space Telescope Deployment (EVA NBS engineer)

Hubble Space Telescope Repairs 1 & 2 (EVA NBS engineer)

Spacelab-J (training manager)

Solar Max Repair Mission (EVA NBS engineer)

Astro-1 (scuba training of crew)

Spacelab-1 and Atlas-1 (scuba training of crew)

Japanese Experiment Module deployment (EVA NBS engineer)

A free-lance writer, Mr. Hickam has published extensively in many magazines including Smithsonian Air & Space, American History Illustrated, Skin Diver, Sport Diver, etc.. He is also the author of Torpedo Junction, a Military History book of the month club selection, published by the Naval Institute Press in 1989, reprinted in paperback by Dell Publications in 1991, and in softback by Blue Jacket Press in 1995. He is also an award-winning underwater photographer, his work appearing in such publications as Skindiver, Sport Diver, and Underwater USA.

A U.S. Army veteran, Hickam served with the Fourth Infantry Division in Vietnam in 1967-68, returning with Army Commendation and Bronze Star medals. He served six years on active duty, leaving the service with the rank of Captain. Hickam was employed as an engineer for the U.S. Army Missile Command from 1971 to 1981 assigned to Huntsville, Alabama and Grafenwoehr, Germany.

Mr. Hickam became a scuba instructor in 1974 and has since instructed divers across the country as well as in Israel, Germany, and Honduras. His specialties include rescue and wreck diving, and diving first aid. He was the Chief Diving Instructor for the NASA Neutral Buoyancy Simulator with responsibilities to train astronauts in extravehicular activities (EVA).

Mr. Hickam organized the first diving rescue team in north Alabama in 1982. He holds Alabama's highest award, the Distinguished Service Award, for the attempted rescue of the crew and passengers of a sunken paddleboat in the Tennessee River in 1984.

Mr. Hickam also has consulted with international companies on neutral buoyancy simulations. His company, Deep Space, built underwater space suit simulators for the space agency of Japan. His company also provided diving instruction at the United States Space Camp and Space Academy at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville.

On a special contract, Mr. Hickam traveled in 1989 to New York to train David Letterman, the TV talk show host, to scuba dive. Mr. Hickam also trained Mr. Letterman on a special diving helmet for use on his television show.

In June, 1996, Mr. Hickam was honored by the United States Olympic Committee which selected him to carry the Olympic Torch through Huntsville, Alabama, on its way to Atlanta.

In 1996, Universal Studios optioned his book-in-progress, Rocket Boys, for a major motion picture. Rocket Boys is the story of Homer and his friends from Coalwood, West Virginia who decided to build rockets and, against all odds, succeeded past even their dreams when they swept the 1960 county and area science fairs and went to the National Science Fair in Indianapolis where they won a gold medal in propulsion. The book was purchased by Bantam Doubleday Dell and will be published by its Delacorte imprint in October, 1998. Rocket Boys, A Memoir will be simultaneously published in Japan, Spain, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, and other countries across the world. The film release date is presently December, 1998.

