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PIONEERING PRIVATE SPACEFLIGHT: ROBERT TRUAX AND HIS VOLKS ROCKET PROJECT

**Abstract**

Robert C. “Bob” Truax began experimenting with rockets as a teenager in the 1930s. As a military officer, he led US Navy development of liquid JATO in the 1940s and directed the US Air Force intermediate range ballistic missile program in the 1950s. He retired from active duty to become director of advanced development at Aerojet-General Corporation’s Liquid Rocket Plant in Sacramento, California, during the 1960s. While there, he conceived and designed the super-large Sea Dragon, which he also referred to as the “Big Dumb Booster.” Truax’s lifelong quest focused on pursuing reusable rocket boosters to lower the cost of spaceflight. To that end, he later founded Truax Engineering Incorporated and, in the mid-1970s, initiated Project Private Enterprise. One of the world’s earliest private spaceflight ventures, it sought to develop and launch a reusable X-3 Volks Rocket to send paying civilians to suborbital altitudes above 60 miles. Truax’s personal papers and typescript autobiography, supplemented by the notebooks and recollections of employees and volunteers who worked with him, plus a variety of media sources—newspapers, magazines, radio interviews, and television clips—reveal technical and financial details about the Volks Rocket project. Ultimately, despite financial failure, Project Private Enterprise further confirmed Bob Truax’s technological acumen. He mapped a visionary pathway, decades before wealthier entrepreneurs, toward achievement of spaceflight without government support.