

17. Revving Up

Revving Up SpaceX in 2002, Tom Mueller's childhood in the remote town of Saint Maries, Idaho, played a significant role in shaping his later career. Raised in a logging family, Mueller was introduced early to hands-on work, which he later channeled into his passion for rocketry. His fascination with science fiction and rocketry led him to build and launch model rockets, sparking a lifelong interest that guided his future endeavors. Mueller's path to aerospace was unconventional, as he balanced his studies in engineering at the University of Idaho with his job as a logger, ultimately providing the foundation for his technical expertise and innovative mindset.

After graduating, Mueller moved to Los Angeles with a singular goal—breaking into the aerospace industry. He secured a job at TRW, a company renowned for its role in the space race, including the engines that powered the Apollo missions to the moon. However, Mueller's ambitions didn't stop with working at TRW. In his spare time, he, along with his partner John Garvey, ventured into the Mojave Desert to build and test their own homemade rockets. Their efforts led to the creation of the world's most powerful amateur rocket engine, which further solidified Mueller's reputation as a true innovator in the field of rocketry.

In January 2002, Elon Musk, a tech entrepreneur interested in space exploration, sought out Mueller to discuss propulsion technology. Musk, intrigued by Mueller's work with TRW's TR-106 engine, saw in him the expertise necessary to build rockets capable of reaching space. What began as a technical conversation quickly turned into a collaboration, where the idea of founding a private space exploration company was born. Musk, who was already making waves in the tech industry, was keen on pushing the boundaries of space exploration, and Mueller's experience with rocket propulsion made him a perfect fit to lead the charge in building SpaceX's rockets.

Despite his initial reluctance, Mueller saw the potential in Musk's vision. As a cautious and practical engineer, he insisted on securing a financial safety net before committing to SpaceX. Musk, understanding the value of Mueller's skills, respected this request and agreed to the terms. Mueller's involvement in SpaceX as the head of propulsion was a game-changer, and it allowed Musk to focus on his broader ambitions while ensuring that the company had the technical leadership it needed to succeed in the aerospace industry.

The securing of Mueller's expertise was a critical turning point for SpaceX, as it set the stage for the company's rapid growth and eventual success. Musk's drive for space exploration was matched only by his pragmatic approach to setting up operations, which included securing a warehouse near Los Angeles International Airport. This location became the heart of SpaceX's early endeavors, where the company's team began the process of building and launching rockets. The partnership between Musk and Mueller, based on a shared vision of revolutionizing space travel, laid the foundation for SpaceX's future achievements and helped propel the company into the forefront of the aerospace industry.

As SpaceX's early successes began to unfold, it became clear that the collaboration between Musk and Mueller was one of the keys to the company's ability to challenge the status quo of space exploration. This relationship not only accelerated the development of rockets but also established SpaceX as a force to be reckoned with in the aerospace sector. By fostering an environment of innovation, practicality, and teamwork, SpaceX set out to redefine the way space travel was approached, ensuring that it was not only possible but sustainable for the future. Through their combined efforts, Musk and Mueller were able to push past the traditional limitations of aerospace engineering, setting the stage for SpaceX to eventually revolutionize the space industry.