

**The Honorable James W. Plummer
Inducted 1989**



The Honorable James W. Plummer was born 29 January 1920, in Idaho Springs, Colorado. He received his Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1942, taking as many courses as he could in electronic communications. His Master of Science, also in electrical engineering, was earned from the University of Maryland in 1953.

After graduation from the University of California in 1942, he entered the U.S. Navy as an ensign. He received radar training at Harvard; M.I.T.; and the Navy bases at Corpus Christi, Texas and Ford Island, Oahu, Hawaii. He then reported to Torpedo Squadron 10, Puunene Air Base, Maui, in the Hawaiian Islands. From 1947 to 1955, Plummer first served as a civil servant in the Tactical Test Division, Naval Air Test Center, Patuxent River, Maryland, but soon transferred to the Electronic Test Division, where he managed communications and navigation equipment.

In 1955 Lockheed Missile and Space hired him as a research engineer. There, he first participated in the engineering of the instrumentation and telemetry for the USAF's X-17 reentry test rocket in Van Nuys, California. Later, Plummer moved to Palo Alto, California, to help write Lockheed's successful proposal for WS-117L. He became involved in the writing of the proposal during the drafting of the second version. Consequently, his work was primarily editorial, making sure that the proposal was sensible technically and sounded feasible and logical. It was sound enough to win the competition for the development of the Air Force's initial space program for Lockheed Missile & Space. Under the program, his task was to organize the development of payload applications, communications, and the power supply for the vehicle. His work led to his promotion as Lockheed's manager for the Discoverer program. Discoverer's main purpose was to develop a recoverable payload that would store data that the U.S. could retrieve directly from the repossessed capsule.

The Under Secretary of the Air Force decided he needed a very small, fast-moving, streamlined engineering group at Lockheed Missile & Space modeled after Kelly Johnson's Skunk Works in Burbank. This procedure enabled rapid development at lower cost than possible with conventional bureaucratic management. At the behest of the President of Lockheed Corporation, he established what became known in the company as the "Northern Skunk Works." At first, Plummer set up shop in a motel in Palo Alto with only an aide and a couple of engineers. Lockheed planted a cover story announcing that he "had gone into the nuclear bomb business" Both Lockheed and the government did not subject Plummer's group to their normal oversight so the group enjoyed relative freedom of action. Discoverer had a publicly disclosed biomedical project involving mice and monkeys, however, the primary mission remained highly classified. Though the initial twelve launches of Discoverer failed, Plummer ensured his engineers learned from these defeats which led to the ultimate success of Discoverer.

Plummer grew up with Lockheed's Space Division. He began as the payload manager, then graduated to the management of the Discoverer program. After that, he became director of all of Lockheed's space programs, including those of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Subsequently, he took the position of Assistant General Manager of Special Programs, Space Systems Division, and then the position of Assistant General Manager of Space Systems Division. He served as the General Manager of the Space Systems Division from 1969 to 1973.

Plummer's work on the military applications of near-earth satellites and his role as a consultant to the Secretary of Defense in 1972 and 1973 led to his appointment by President Richard M. Nixon to serve as the Under Secretary of the Air Force. He served in this capacity from December 1973 to mid-1976. For a brief period, from 23 November 1975 to 2 January 1976, he was the Acting Secretary of the Air Force. Following his tour as Under Secretary of the Air Force, he returned to Lockheed Missile & Space Company as its Executive Vice President and General Manager, and at the same time served as a Vice President of its parent company, Lockheed Corporation. He retired from Lockheed in February 1983.

In December 1983 he became a member of the corporate board for the Aerospace Corporation, a non-profit corporation which provided the architecture and engineering expertise for military space systems. Aerospace Corporation named Plummer Vice Chairman of its Board in December 1984 and Chairman in December 1985. He retired from the Aerospace Corporation in December 1992.