IT IS NOT OFTEN you meet someone who had a hand in putting Americans into space and that is just the honor I had when I sat down to speak with Dr. Robert Young.

An avid golfer, Young met with me in his quaint home in the Independence Village, a neighborhood of homes for those 55 and older, after a morning tee-time. At the tender age of 94, Young has an endearing smile and easy demeanor that immediately invites you to get comfortable and sit a while.

A doctor of veterinary medicine, Young’s trip to the launch pad stemmed from an early love of animals, and for finding a lucrative profession. Young graduated in 1938 from Sam Houston High School in Houston, Texas. The depression had hit the economy hard and living with his single mother, Young felt the need to contribute and became determined to find a job. Before graduation, Young had heard the National Guard was paying one dollar per drill and signed up. With the threat of World War II, the Guard was mobilized on October 6, 1940, just before the country declared war on Germany.

Young spent five years in WW II. His first 18 months were spent in the 36th Division Texas National Guard. A recruiter visited while he was in the Guard and said that any of the men that were under 28 years old with an IQ over 110 could apply for aviation cadets and Young was one of just a few to transfer to the Air Force for flight training. After having some difficulty with his vision at basic training, Young was assigned to an Air Force supply unit and spent 17 months in Naples, Italy as a Tech Sergeant. Young’s unit returned to the U.S. in 1945.

After being discharged, Young went back to his job with Skidmore Williams Paint Company only to find that they were still paying only thirty cents an hour. He had gotten married a few years prior to that and realized his salary could not support a wife. Before going back to the military, Young returned to in 1946 to study for a degree at Texas A&M University and applied. The program only accepted 64 students out of 350 applicants, but Young put his nose to the grindstone and was accepted.

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