

# ON “COLD-EYED ROCKET MAN”

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*Nova Lux, New Mexico, USA, Sol III*

26 March 2026

*I unpack the phrase that runs through my work; a particular cast of mind anchored in John Aaron’s diagnostic calm during Apollo 12, in Bowie and Hadfield’s orbital estrangement rendered as lived infrastructure, and in Tom Godwin’s pitiless rocket equation. Method, not temperament; clarity, and Doing the Next Thing.*

“Cold-eyed rocket man” is a phrase I use deliberately. It has a meaning cloud, and it is a significant part of my public persona. I will unpack it.

The phrase runs through much of what I have written; it names the cast of mind I bring to politics, technology, biology, engineering, and the cybernetics that ties them together. It is the discipline by which I try to keep all of them honestly coupled to the world.

The first figure behind it is John Aaron, the Apollo engineer remembered as a “steely-eyed missile man.” During the Apollo 12 lightning strike incident, he was the one who recognized the signature of the failure and called the fix, “SCE to Aux,” before the astronauts punched the abort system on launch.<sup>1</sup> That is the ancestral core of the phrase: diagnostic calm in the presence of real failure, where rhetoric is useless, time is short, and the machine does not care how noble your intentions may have been. Being right a few seconds late

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<sup>1</sup> **John Aaron and the “steely-eyed missile man.”** John Aaron was an Apollo-era flight controller whose calm diagnosis of cascading instrumentation failures during the Apollo 12 launch is often cited as the origin of the phrase “steely-eyed missile man.” When telemetry went chaotic seconds after liftoff due to a lightning strike, Aaron recalled an obscure alternate failure-mode path (“SCE to AUX”) and called for the switch under extreme time pressure, just before the capsule’s abort system was about to be activated. The phrase later became shorthand inside NASA for engineers and flight directors who could reason clearly under failure, not heroically, but diagnostically. Oklahoma Historical Society, “John Aaron: Oklahoma’s Legendary Steely-Eyed Missile Man,” <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=AA015>.

is merely another way of being wrong.

The second figure in the background is Major Tom, as authored by David Bowie in “Space Oddity,” and later re-rendered by Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield, singing and playing guitar aboard the International Space Station in a zero-g music video of unsettling grace.<sup>2</sup> That lineage matters because it captures the other half of the orbital condition: distance, fragility, managed isolation, the thinning of contact, the fact that space is not a poster but an environment actively hostile to mammals and their delusions. Hadfield matters especially because he folds the metaphor back into engineering. What had been cultural mood becomes again what it always was underneath: procedure, voice comm, air, power, mass, containment, and a thin technical truce with vacuum. It also becomes lived experience rather than mere symbol. I like his paraphrase of the lyrics.

The third figure is author Tom Godwin, by way of the short story “The Cold Equations,” published in 1954, the year of my birth.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> **David Bowie, “Space Oddity,” and its orbital re-rendering.** “Space Oddity” (1969) is Bowie’s breakthrough single about Major Tom, a fictional astronaut who drifts into functional isolation as Ground Control fades into static. The song charts not triumph but uncoupling; contact persists even as purpose dissolves. Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space\\_Oddity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Oddity). Official studio recording: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9\\_M3uw29U1U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_M3uw29U1U).

In 2013, Chris Hadfield, then commander of the International Space Station, recorded and released the first professionally produced music video filmed in space, performing a revised version of the same song while floating weightless with Earth in view. Guinness World Records: <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/first-music-video-filmed-in-space>. Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ka0C9danxNo>. Hadfield’s rendition places the lyrics in literal orbit; the song’s existential imagery is inverted into operational reality, where voice loops and life-support are engineered systems rather than metaphors.

<sup>3</sup> **The cold equations.** *The Cold Equations* by Tom Godwin is a science-fiction classic first published in *Astounding* magazine in August 1954. It follows Barton, pilot of a tiny Emergency Dispatch Ship (EDS) launched to deliver emergency

That title contributes the hardest edge of the phrase. I do not mean the sentimentalized version, in which people feign surprise that arithmetic has no mercy. I mean the older and less consoling point: that some systems have no hidden slack, no moral appeal, and no indulgence that can be wrung from the universe by the sheer loveliness of one's motives. Mass remains mass; margin remains margin; the rocket equation cannot be evaded. Physics counts heads and kilograms with equal indifference. Things break, and then one must *Do The Next Thing*, with pain.

So the phrase braids together Aaron, Bowie, Hadfield, and Godwin: Apollo diagnostic clarity, orbital estrangement rendered as lived infrastructure, and the pitiless bookkeeping of real systems. I mean it as a declaration of method. Not the dreamy space cadet, not the booster, not the man intoxicated by stainless steel and PowerPoint destiny, but the engineer who asks first about coupling, logistics, cybernetics, failure cascades, recovery time, thermal limits, and what breaks when assumptions drift. This is a useful habit, because much public talk about politics, war, technology, empire, progress (choose your intoxicant) consists of barking preference at systems that have not agreed to cooperate and will not listen.

"Cold-eyed" does not mean cruel. It means unwilling to let sentiment overwrite mechanism. Metal is cold; vacuum is cold; arithmetic is cold. The point is clarity, and *Doing the Next Thing*.

This is what I meant. A way of looking, trained by systems that

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medical supplies to a frontier colony. The ship is loaded with just enough fuel for its planned mass; when Barton discovers an eighteen-year-old stowaway aboard, her extra mass makes safe deceleration impossible. No technical workaround exists. After exhausting all alternatives, the situation is explained to her in full. Understanding the equations and the consequences, the young woman agrees to be spaced through the airlock, preserving the mission. The story's force lies not in coercion but in its refusal to invent slack. Physics does not argue, and neither character pretends that intent can substitute for arithmetic. Wikipedia, including publication data: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Cold\\_Equations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cold_Equations).

can actually fail.

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*Originally published on Facebook, 26 March 2026.*