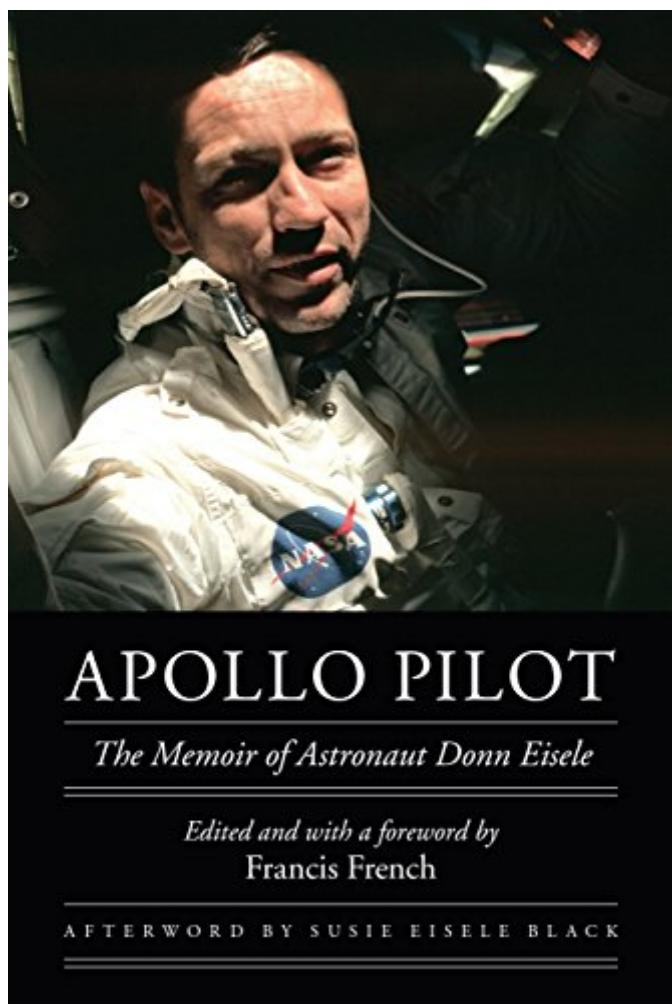


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Apollo Pilot: The Memoir Of Astronaut Donn Eisele (Outward Odyssey: A People's History Of Spaceflight)



Synopsis

In October 1968, Donn Eisele flew with fellow astronauts Walt Cunningham and Wally Schirra into Earth orbit in Apollo 7. The first manned mission in the Apollo program and the first manned flight after a fire during a launch pad test killed three astronauts in early 1967, Apollo 7 helped restart NASA's manned-spaceflight program. Known to many as a goofy, lighthearted prankster, Eisele worked his way from the U.S. Naval Academy to test pilot school and then into the select ranks of America's prestigious astronaut corps. He was originally on the crew of Apollo 1 before being replaced due to injury. After that crew died in a horrific fire, Eisele was on the crew selected to return Americans to space. Despite the success of Apollo 7, Eisele never flew in space again, as divorce and a testy crew commander led to the three astronauts being labeled as troublemakers. Unbeknownst to everyone, after his retirement as a technical assistant for manned spaceflight at NASA's Langley Research Center in 1972, Eisele wrote in detail about his years in the air force and his time in the Apollo program. Long after his death, Francis French discovered Eisele's unpublished memoir, and Susie Eisele Black (Donn's widow) allowed French access to her late husband's NASA files and personal effects. Readers can now experience an Apollo story they assumed would never be written as well as the story behind its discovery.

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Customer Reviews

Eisele's memoir adds another piece to the puzzle that is Apollo. With little more than 100 pages, it does not lend itself to a great deal of detail and focuses on the flight of Apollo 7 to exclusion of much else. From details given in the foreword and afterward, it seems Donn sadly ran out of time before finishing his work. Most of what I would have liked to know more about is only touched on in a casual and 'oh, by the way' manner. There is no 'there but for the dodgy shoulder joint, I would have been sitting next to Gus and Roger' personal revelations. There is no detail of his work on Cooper's back up crew on Apollo 10. No discussion or insight as to why that work never lead to another flight for any member of that back-up crew. Although he gives a good account of his impressions of his commander, Schirra, few of the other astronauts' personal attributes/foibles get more than a passing comment. Early in the book he obliquely mentions the community of the other astronaut wives and their shortcomings. Suzie's afterward takes those incidents further, resulting in one or two surprising (and very sad) revelations regarding how the political machinations and personal frailties of the Astronaut Office actually impacted on the Eisele family. Overall, due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, this book, while I am thankful it was published, is an example of a missed opportunity. This is not a book I would recommend as a starting point to learning of Apollo. It is certainly one that will add some colour and perhaps fill out other stories that have been told in greater detail by other astronauts and historians.

This book was compiled from the extensive notes, records and written narrative left by Donn Eisele, Command Module Pilot on America's very first manned Apollo space flight. Clearly, as the editor warns in the forward, Eisele is bitter about the way he was treated by NASA, which deliberately excluded him from future space flight. Nonetheless, this first person narrative cuts through the Life Magazine PR screen to reveal the astronauts and NASA as an ego-driven, often self-aggrandizing collection of inconsistent standards, privileges and even performance: Eisele is merciless, even deprecating in his description of a show-boating, ego-driven but not technically sound Wally Schirra. The book is revealing and captivating in its description of life aboard an Apollo spacecraft for eleven days, and completely down-to-earth in the revelation of the sadly faithless behavior of the majority of

the the astronauts, according to one of the own and worse, the hypocrisy of them all, including NASA brass, for black balling Eisele for taking the "Cape Cookie" relationship beyond the boundary of recreational extramarital sex and actually marrying the "other woman." That, along with Schirra's mutinous "no helmets on reentry" damned both Eisele and fellow crewmember Cunningham in NASA's eyes. The book is a must-read for space program fans.

Through the assembly of Donn Eisele's contemporary, often handwritten notes written over a span of decades, we get an unvarnished look behind the personalities, politics and proclivities behind man's greatest adventure. Not surprisingly, when JFK committed the US to a moon landing in less than a decade, he placed the recently created NASA in a pressure cooker unlike anything before... EVERY procedure, manual and piece of hardware had to be invented, built, tested and approved AND integrate seamlessly to leave Earth and go to the moon.. Add to the pressure cooker a group of highly motivated Type Double A Plus Alpha male test pilots and highly opinionated engineers, and it is surprising there weren't weekly headlines of fisticuffs in NASA... Credit Chief Astronaut Deke Slayton for managing his pilots. Eisele provides insight into what it was really like to be an astronaut, describing the dozens of myriad duties, conferences, meetings, tests, and public appearances that were unrelated to the task of actually flying Apollo 7.. In fact, actual training for the assigned mission was a small part of astronaut duties. Eisele's description of the technical challenges of flying the Apollo 7 mission were fascinating and written so as to be understood by a reader without technical knowledge. For most of the public, Apollo 7 was just a stepping stone to the Big Enchilada of Apollo 11, but it effectively completed the mission of Apollo 1, which claimed the lives of Grissom, White and Chaffee during a test, and needed to succeed to allow flight to the moon. The book loses a star because it is somewhat repetitive in parts, likely because it was a second party reconstruction of decades-old notes written at various times years apart. It would likely be more coherent if Eisele had survived to complete the manuscript. Highly recommended for any Apollo/Space program devotee!

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