

Book review in February 2004 issue of

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A REVIEW OF ASTRONOMY

University of London Observatory

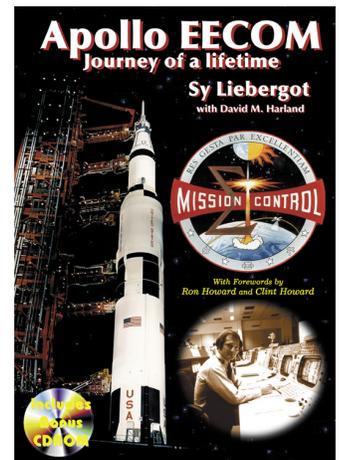
Apollo EECOM: Journey of a Lifetime, by S. Liebergot (Apogee Books, through Gazelle, Lancaster), 2003. Pp. 216 + CD-ROM 26 x 17.5 cm. Price £23.95/\$29.95 (hardbound; ISBN 1 896 52296 3).

While astronaut biographies abound, there have been few books written by those who worked in support of the handful of men and women who ventured into space in the 1960s and 70s. Sy Liebergot was one of those 'mission controllers' and so I looked forward to reading about the space programme from his perspective. Liebergot tells his story as a work in three parts and, like the curate's famous egg, it is best described as being 'good in parts'.

Part one describes Liebergot's early life and recounts how he came to find himself in Apollo mission control. It seems his childhood was an extremely difficult one and his multiple family problems and adolescence are described in far more detail than I really cared about. Although one should be amazed that he managed to build a life out of such a shambles, like most people who will buy this book, what I am interested in is the space programme, not the gory details of a 1940s' childhood. I came away with a distinct feeling that writing this book was a process of catharsis more directed to some of Liebergot's extended family than to the reader.

Once the story reaches Houston it becomes more readable and provides some interesting detail of life behind a console at mission control. There is good background material and some fairly technical stuff for the pundits, all interspersed with a few anecdotes and other light relief. The story concludes with a mercifully brief section on his life, also not all that easy, after leaving mission control in 1975.

Technically the book is well produced, with an interesting collection of images, although I found the excessive number of chapters, some no more than long paragraphs, irritating. Although I was rather disappointed by the lack of depth in the recounting of the Apollo missions, the book was saved, for me at least, by the CD-ROM tucked in the back. This includes a number of candid photographs of off-duty flight controllers, but the bulk is several hours of recordings from the flight controller's intercom loop before and during the start of the *Apollo 13* crisis. It's quite fascinating to listen to the controllers and their support staff as they wrestle with the broken and confused telemetry coming down from crippled *Apollo 13* spacecraft. Slowly the magnitude of the crisis begins to dawn on them but again and again the flight directors come back with the same questions "Can it really be this bad?", "Are you sure?", "Have you considered this possibility?", "Could we try that idea?", and "What else can we do to save the mission?" It's fascinating stuff if you have some idea of what was going on and can make sense of the technical language the controllers are using. - JOHN DAVIES.



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