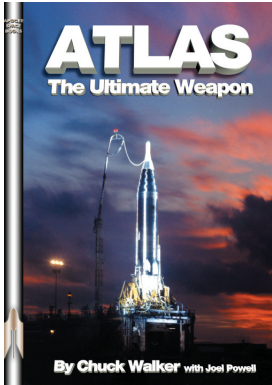


Online Book review August, 2005 at

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Atlas: The Ultimate Weapon, Chuck Walker (with Joel Powell), Apogee Books (<http://www.cgpublishing.com>), 2005, 304pp, £16.95, \$29.95, \$37.95CDN, ISBN 1-894959-18-3 [softback]

The Atlas, America's first Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), also has a history as a workhorse of the US civil and military space programmes. In recognition of this dual role, this book is split into two main parts: the first deals with the military career of the missile from conception to deployment, the second with its role as a launcher of satellites, interplanetary spacecraft and the early Mercury capsules. The author, Chuck Walker, worked for the Atlas prime contractor, Convair-Astronautics, from the early days and his book is based on his experience and that of a number of colleagues he interviewed for the book.

This substantial volume tells its story in 20 chapters of relatively small type interspersed by tables, diagrams and monochrome photos. It also benefits from a couple of eight-page colour inserts, but is unusual in the Apogee series for not including a CD-Rom or DVD, which would have added greatly to the package. It does, however, include a number of appendices - covering key events, the Atlas-Centaur flight record to 2004, and a number of biographies of key contributors to the book. There is also a short and not particularly comprehensive index.

The book, as a piece of research, will not satisfy most space historians, since its chapters simply list the names of contributors; there are no references and thus no way to check facts, follow up on information and generally expand the envelope of historical research. However, that is not the intention of the book. It is more concerned with placing "the people...and their words at

the forefront" in recognition of their dedication to the Atlas programme. And it does this well. Some of the quotes are incorporated into the sentence structure, but there are many longer 'block-quotes', presumably taken from the interviews. Although this tends to interrupt the general flow, it does give a more personal touch to the story, since we read what the people themselves had to say.

Despite the 'people bias', there is plenty of technical information here too, reflecting the author's engineering experience. This is crucial to the story of the missile, since histories written by historians or journalists tend to concentrate on the politics, the characters or the events...and miss the point of the thing itself. The Atlas, in common with all rockets and spacecraft, was an engineering creation.

The book also has its humorous touches. I particularly liked the memo complaining about "Horse Manure in the LOX Pits". Apparently, to stop a water line freezing, a base crew constructed a box around the pipe and filled it with horse manure, which as all 'rocket scientists' will know generates heat as it decomposes.

The memo complained about its proximity to the test site's liquid oxygen supply because of the risk of explosion ("horse manure is not compatible with liquid oxygen", it stated). Another anecdote describes a failed attempt to measure the noise of a rocket firing in a nearby town: "Unfortunately, the crew was stationed near a saloon", recalls a correspondent. "We had lots of 'holds' and the sound crew would sip a few beers while we were on hold. By the time we fired - hours later - they were pretty well crocked, so the sound data was inconclusive". If you want the inside story on "the ultimate weapon", look no further. <<<

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