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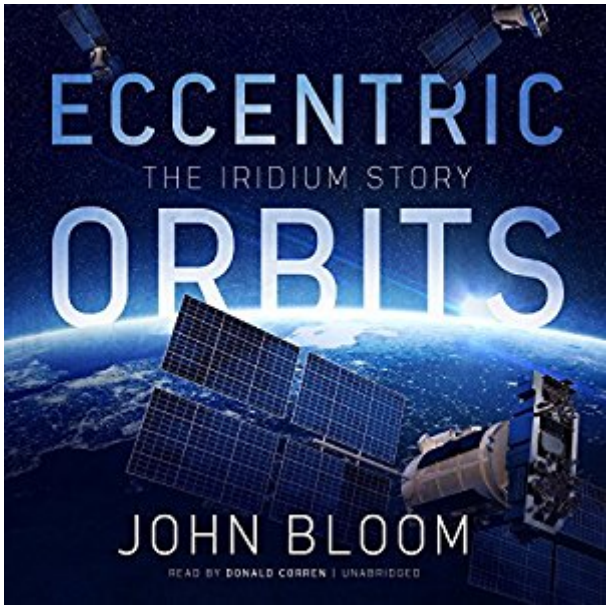
Eccentric Orbits: The Iridium Story



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Synopsis

The incredible story of Iridium - the most complex satellite system ever built, the cell phone of the future, and one of the largest corporate bankruptcies in American history - and one man’s desperate race to save it. In the early 1990s, Motorola, the legendary American technology company, developed a revolutionary satellite system called Iridium that promised to be its crowning achievement. Light-years ahead of anything previously put into space, and built on technology developed for Ronald Reagan’s "Star Wars", Iridium’s constellation of 66 satellites in polar orbit meant that no matter where you were on Earth, at least one satellite was always overhead, and you could call Tibet from Fiji without a delay and without your call ever touching a wire. Iridium the satellite system was a mind-boggling technical accomplishment, surely the future of communication. The only problem was that Iridium the company was a commercial disaster. Only months after launching service, it was $11 billion in debt, burning through $100 million a month, and crippled by baroque rate plans and agreements that forced calls through Moscow; Beijing; Fucino, Italy; and elsewhere. Bankruptcy was inevitable - the largest to that point in American history. And when no real buyers seemed to materialize, it looked like Iridium would go down as just a "science experiment". That is, until Dan Colussy got a wild idea. Colussy, a former head of Pan Am now retired and working on his golf game in Palm Beach, heard about Motorola’s plans to "de-orbit" the system and decided he would buy Iridium and somehow turn around one of the biggest blunders in the history of business. In Eccentric Orbits, John Bloom masterfully traces the conception, development, and launching of Iridium and Colussy’s tireless efforts to stop it from being destroyed, from meetings with his motley investor group to the Clinton White House, the Pentagon, and the hunt for customers in special ops, shipping, aviation, mining, search and rescue - anyone who would need a durable phone at the end of the Earth. Impeccably researched and wonderfully told, Eccentric Orbits is a rollicking, unforgettable tale of technological achievement, business failure, the military-industrial complex, and one of the greatest deals of all time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

John Bloomâ ™s Eccentric Orbits: The Iridium Story is a good book. Alas, for the reasons indicated below, this could have been a much better book.Iridium was and is an engineering marvel, a constellation of communications satellites providing phone service to any location anywhere in the world. It covers not just major metropolitan areas possessing a standard modern communications infrastructure but remote locations such as central Africa, mid-ocean islands, and the Arctic and Antarctic. Via one handheld device a person is never be out of telephone reach. Designed and built by Motorola, it was a commercial venture driven by a profit motive.Bloom recounts the story of the Iridium satellite communications system from its initial conception and development in the 1980s and early 1990s, its bankruptcy and near total collapse in the late 1990s, its being saved in 1998 / 2000 by the narrowest of margins, and its survival and current status. It is the dramatic tale of how a system costing somewhere between $3.6B and $11B to build came close to being destroyed with a complete investment write off. Bloomâ ™s description of Iridiumâ ™s commercial failure and later salvation via some farsighted speculative investors and government customers is fascinating. These sections might well become the basis of a movie script.Still, the book has issues:(1) The book is long (over 500 pages) and could have benefited from additional editing. In preparation Bloom conducted extensive research and interviews and he seems to want to share all of it. He overwhelms the reader with biographical sketches, anecdotes, and interesting asides. Some might find his writing style to be attractive. Sadly I did not. I constantly felt as if I was missing the forest for the trees.

The book by Bloom on Iridium, Eccentric Orbits, is an amazing tale of individual persistence and corporate bumbling. This review is somewhat personal because I had direct contact with Motorola over this period and specifically with many of the principals noted. As to the author’s characterization of many of those I knew personally, they were in my opinion "spot on".To preface my review of Bloom’s book it is worthwhile to briefly lay out my experience in this area with

satellites, mobile systems and Motorola. I had a thirty-year relationship with Motorola, as a joint venture partner, as a consultant to the Chairman, as a customer when COO of NYNEX Mobile now Verizon, and as the CEO of a company in which they had invested. The relationship allowed me to see most of the principals in the book first hand and further to see the company in a broad context. I also spent time in the satellite world, actually architecting one of the first mobile systems in the 70s. I also had a parallel experience to Colussy, albeit an order of magnitude smaller.Thus I approach Bloom's book with a somewhat multiple exposure experience set. I also approach it with a firsthand knowledge of many of the principals and moreover of the technical and business facts as I was exposed to. Bloom tells a fantastic story. I have no knowledge of his principal, his Odysseus, and his sailing through Scylla and Charybdis. But I can commiserate with him and his frustrations. I dealt with only 20 countries and an order of magnitude less in scale of the financing. But the trials and tribulations all ring true. It is told with a sense of being there and having to deal with the many characters thrown in the way. One wonders how anything gets accomplished given what the entrepreneur goes through in today's world.

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