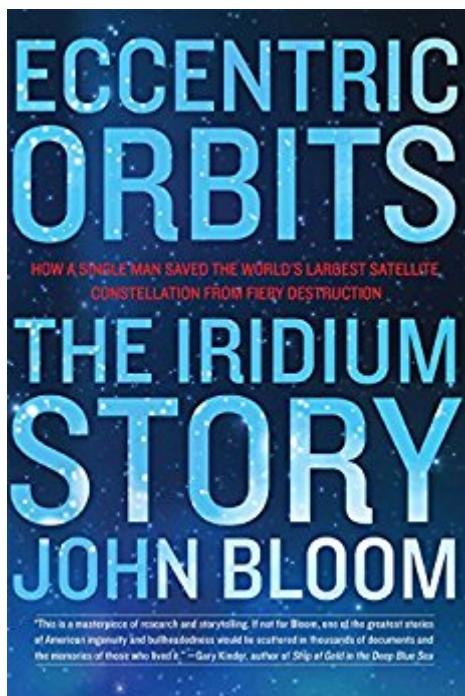


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Eccentric Orbits: The Iridium Story



Synopsis

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, to the Pentagon, to 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

If the story ofÂ The Making of the Atomic Bomb: 25th Anniversary EditionÂ had been written by the NY Post page 6 gossip columnist rather than Richard Rhodes youÃƒÂ¢Ã ¸Ã ll get a feeling of what youÃƒÂ¢Ã ¸Ã ¸re about to read. The good: Iridium is probably the most interesting corporate death and resurrection story of the last 25 years. Engineering and finance driven, and sucked financially dry by Motorola, Iridium simply put its head in the sand about whether customers would actually want their product. They were literally stunned when customers didnÃƒÂ¢Ã ¸Ã ¸t behave as their business plan said they should. The book tells the unbelievable rescue of Iridium by Dan Colussy and an unlikely set of allies. If even half of it is true Dan deserves a business medal of honor. (And Motorola management deserved everything that happened to them in the 21st century.) The bad: As per the authors note, ÃƒÂ¢Ã ¸Ã ¸ I researched the book with face-to-face interviews, letting people tell their own stories, and then filled in the rest of the narrative with archival material. Therein lies the problem. This really isnÃƒÂ¢Ã ¸Ã ¸t a business book. ItÃƒÂ¢Ã ¸Ã ¸s a bunch of guys sitting around (primarily Dan Colussy) telling business war stories to a writer - who never figured out how to make sense of it all.¹) Imagine a technical and business story written by a gossip columnist and youÃƒÂ¢Ã ¸Ã ¸ll understand the constant stream of long drawn-out biographies, anecdotes that sounded like they came after a few drinks, bizarre suppositions, and missed insights. Individually they're stories you might throw out as one-offs, but reading them page after page for no discernible purpose in the narrative made them exhausting.²) The story would have been much better told if an editor would have insisted that the book be half or maybe 2/3rds its length. But that would have required understanding which of the stories were important and what were the lessons

to be learned. Instead we get an almost daily diary of Dan Colussy’s meetings, phone calls, plane flights etc.3) Iridium was an engineering marvel, but other than stringing together boilerplate phrases and paraphrases from his sources the result is “technology word hash” words that strung together appear to mean something but don’t. The Iridium system was brilliant. The satellites were worthy of something more than the cursory description. Instead the author gets sidetracked into a content-free discussion of the choice of rocket suppliers. Unfortunately, Dan Colossi and most of the cast of characters interviewed came after the satellites were designed and built.4) Iridium failed when the original business case for the phone didn’t match the market (cellular adoption was growing rapidly, the phone wouldn’t work indoors, the phone looked like a brick and was unlikely to be a status symbol,) no one seemed to blow the whistle and say, “let’s pivot to a different set of customers and stop hemorrhaging money on this one.” Or, instead of complaining about the enormous cash-drain Motorola was extorting from the company, why any of their CEOs didn’t have the guts to threaten chapter 11 to slash that burn rate. Spending more than a few paragraphs on that would have actually made this a business book. Unfortunately, Dan Colussy and most of the cast of characters interviewed came after that debacle.5) After 500 pages you would think there would be some insight or lessons learned from the author or any of the participants. Nope. Summary If you’re interested in the death and rebirth of Iridium this is barely worth the very painful read.

What a bizarre, true story! The fact that Iridium continues to exist to this day is a testament to the blood and sweat of tenacious people whose belief in the essential soundness of a basic idea allows it to endure through all sorts of trials until it can finally be proven over time to be viable. This book requires close attention be paid throughout, but the rewards are worth it: a fantastic morality story of our times, showing once again how much hubris at the corporate level can undermine instead of promote the development of ideas, and how tenacity in the form of an individual’s devotion to a cause can truly make a difference if given the chance to.

Reading through this book has been an absolute treat. It’s full of details and drama and brings to life the story of the most interesting, sophisticated satellite constellation in the sky. John Bloom had done a fantastic job on the research end of things and the book paces itself in a way that isn’t often achieved in nonfiction material. If you’re a fan of technology and the people who focus their efforts

towards doing good in the world, this book will inspire you and fill you with an overwhelming feeling of kinship and pride towards Dan Colussy and co, who poured years of their lives into keeping these birds in the sky, overcoming a seemingly endless series of unimaginable bureaucratic and political obstacles. When you cast an eye out at the modern world, it's hard to overstate how important these satellites are to our global infrastructure and how many lives they have helped save. Today there still does not exist another system with the capabilities of the Iridium constellation. The story of the people who fought to keep such a technical marvel alive in our world is worthy of reading and celebrating.

In *Eccentric Orbits*, John Bloom has written one of the best business books of our times. I first bought it because of my interest in satellites, as I was preparing a broad analysis of the present satellite industry for a client of my company, TechPolis. But soon I realized how useful the book is for understanding bankruptcy restructuring in the United States. It brings a new perspective on Iridium, explaining why its satellites are still up in the sky and the company is thriving today. That being said, the author gets a little bit carried away by the idea that satellites could replace terrestrial communications. This is a dangerous idea that led to the bankruptcy of the company in the first place. Reading the story is a tale of caution. Elon Musk would do well to read this book. Business insights aside, you should buy this book because it is a great read. The writing is outstanding, making the book read like a novel. I have bought more copies and given them to friends.

Eccentric Orbits cleanly lays out the difficult path of one of the world's leading satellite telecommunications providers, Iridium. From the details of its birth at Motorola's labs in Arizona to its plans for the future, the author layers dogged research with interviews from engineers, corporate, and government officials to give a real sense of how impressive the company has been. Iridium faced a difficult birth, decline, and successful re-birth, and *Eccentric Orbits* chronicles the whole adventure.

Technical details in this story are not there. That's not what this story is about. This story is about the finance side of Iridium -- how it was funded in the first place, a bit about what went wrong, and then the incredible story of the outnumbered few who wanted to buy the assets instead of deorbiting them, and the incredible obstacles they had to overcome. Honestly, when I really needed my Iridium phone in Iraq in 2003 (thanks, everyone who made it happen!) I really had no idea the long, winding

road it took to get there. Recommended.

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