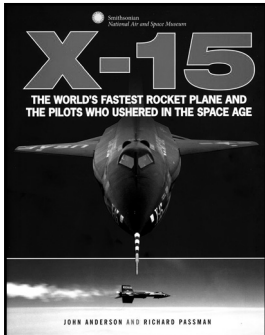


## BOOK REVIEW

# X-15: THE WORLD'S FASTEST ROCKET PLANE AND THE PILOTS WHO USHERED IN THE SPACE AGE



By John Anderson and Richard Passman

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Most readers of this journal are familiar with the X-15, the rocket-powered research aircraft that set records for speed and altitude during a series of 199 test flights from 1959 through 1968. Many readers already own one or more excellent books about the X-15. The authors acknowledge these works, which they have consulted in writing this volume. They say in the Preface: “This book is written from a different perspective from these previous titles. It is intended to be a concise biography of the X-15, its mission, and its undaunted pilots and engineers, and will be a companion to the airplane that hangs in the National Air and Space Museum.”

The authors have succeeded in that goal, and readers who already own one or more of the works cited will find much of interest in this book. The authors begin their narrative with a brief overview of the notion of research aircraft: why NASA, and its predecessor the NACA, found it neces-

sary to build and fly them, and what kinds of data they hoped to gain from such programs. The X-planes were not production aircraft; at most only a few of each model were built and tested. Yet they contributed to the design of subsequent flying machines, some of which were produced in large numbers, while others, like the Space Shuttle, pushed the boundaries of space exploration.

Following chapters discuss the unique design of the X-15 itself, with its wedge-shaped tail, “Q-ball” nose, Inconel X alloy, rocket propulsion, and hybrid aerodynamic/reaction control system. A chapter deals with the flights themselves and what they accomplished, beyond setting altitude and speed records that stand to this day. And the book profiles the 12 pilots who flew the vehicles. The chapters are accompanied by numerous color and black-and-white photographs, many of which I had never seen before, and numerous sidebars that give historical and technical context to the X-15 program.

This book is much more than a coffee-table picture book. It is packed with technical, historical, and biographical information that one would have a hard time finding anywhere else. I highly recommend it.

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