

# Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon

Author: Craig Nelson  
Penguin Publishing Group; 2009; 432 pages

## A book review by Dr. Leonard S. Momeny

Army Aviation recently celebrated the selection of one of its own to be a member of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) 2025 Astronaut Candidate Class, Chief Warrant Officer 3 (CW3), Joseph "Ben" Bailey. Mr. Bailey, an Army Warrant Officer, will no doubt contribute to NASA's bright future. There are many who would still be surprised to learn the U.S. Army had a significant role in contributing to the ultimate founding and creation of NASA. To learn more about the origins of NASA, there is no better book to explore than Craig Nelson's *Rocket Men*.

What makes this book so valuable to the modern aviator? Much of NASA's original work is focused on both aeronautical and astronautical pursuit, and this is always sure to capture an aviator's full attention. Also, there are few alive today who do not still marvel at the miracle of manned space flight and the work of NASA, whose origin can be traced to U.S. military test flight activities. After all, World War II is the moment in history when rockets really came into their own, and aircraft design was constantly turning over rapid advancements in performance and capability. Essentially, this was a remarkable period of defense capability development, and the world was shifting from tremendous conflict to global competition. That competition was really focused on command of the skies, and it played out throughout the Cold War.

The book opens with a discussion on the launch of *Apollo 11*, the mission that ultimately landed on the moon. However, by the middle of the book, the author explores the real origin of NASA and what many referred to as the Space Race. Nelson aptly notes

that it would be more appropriate to call this period "the Space and Missile Race." This race primarily takes place between the United States and Russia, and while many were focused on the feats of astronauts, the worry



of leaders across the globe was on the capability rockets offered for bringing both satellite-based observation and weapons of mass destruction to nations across the world.

Nelson takes the time to cover Operation Paper Clip, a mission executed during the closing hours of World War II that would allow U.S. Army forces to secure a critical collection of then Nazi rocket scientists and bring them back to the United States. This mission would ultimately secure America's coming future in space-based capability. Their work, the V2 rocket, the world's first real ballistic missile, was brought back to Texas and eventually Huntsville, Alabama, integrating their science across multiple agencies.

While many have looked at man's journey to the moon through the lens of astronaut experiences, Nelson explores the topic from a position of peer nations jockeying for the new strategic high ground. The book really does explore the whole period through great power competition, demonstrating the unique relationship between government agencies, American engineering, and the boldness of all involved in aerospace pursuit. In fact, I am certain that many readers are sure to note similarities between the pursuit of legitimate rocket power and today's competition in areas like drones and artificial intelligence. Nelson paints a picture of interagency and government competition that eventually learns to focus their collective efforts with tremendous synergy.

Read *Rocket Men* to learn the history of NASA and also to better understand great power competition between peer nations. The lessons for the modern aviator and Soldier abound in this short work, as we are able to see the competition continuum (refer to Joint Doctrine) play out across the stage of modern history. *Rocket Men* will also bring any aviator a deeper appreciation for the process underlying technological growth in any aerospace endeavor. Finally, read *Rocket Men* to simply look upon the stars and consider just how far an aviator can go.

One of our own, CW3 Bailey, has shown us that all of Army Aviation is quite capable of contributing to the greatest pursuits possible. I invite you all to learn a bit more about his coming adventure through the exploration of NASA's history, and consider reaching for the stars yourself.

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