

shy, sometimes reclusive genius who moved easily among royalty, the rich, and an adoring public. We learn also of the man's emotional problems, including a penchant for fact-bending, and hear of his repeated stays in a sanitarium.

Hoffman's most valuable contribution is to place Santos-Dumont in the context of his time. Without even third-hand help from the secretive Wright brothers, but with limited consultation with French aviation pioneers Louis Blériot and Henri Farman, Santos-Dumont became the first man to fly an airplane—one that he built—on the continent of Europe. —*William Jeanes lives in Pass Christian, Mississippi, and is a former editor-in-chief of Car and Driver.*

## In the Company of Heroes

by Michael Durant. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2003. 363 pp., \$24.95.

During the first week of October 1993, Michael Durant's bloody, battered face appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Unprecedented in news publishing, the concurrence showed how focused the nation was on the sole prisoner of a disastrous military operation in Somalia. Code named "Task Force Ranger," an elite mixed force was assigned to carry out a series of "snatch and grab" operations to capture Somalia's controlling warlord, Mohamed Aidid, and his henchmen, in an effort to bring peace and stability to the nation.

Mark Bowden's excellent book, made into the gripping movie *Black Hawk Down*, presents the big picture of the action, which lasted about 17 hours. Durant, the pilot of one of the two Black Hawk helicopters shot down early in the operation, writes about what he saw of the action. Badly injured and the sole survivor of his craft's crash, he is defended by two brave Delta operatives, then taken prisoner by a mob of enraged Somalis. Durant was given a bible by a Red Cross worker, and used it to record in code his daily activities, an accounting that would serve to

document his captivity if he disappeared. In this case, it was a great help in recalling the specifics of his ordeal. Between the chapters dealing with his captivity, Durant fills us in on his career leading up to the action in Mogadishu. As

a pilot for an elite "Night Stalker" special operations unit, he was no stranger to combat or tough situations; a seasoned and experienced pilot, he had proven himself in the Gulf, in Panama, and in Desert Storm, but it was as a prisoner that he faced his greatest challenge.

His treatment varied from confinement in empty darkened rooms, where he feared for his life, to having a bed, radio, and other small amenities, such as a toothbrush. He tuned the radio to the U.S. Armed Forces radio frequency and listened to news of efforts to free him, music dedicated to him by his friends, and even a taped message from his wife. Durant's captivity lasted 11 turbulent and painful days, but recovery from a broken back, a broken leg, and facial injuries took far longer. His courage, determination, and the support of his unit and his friends served as inspiration on his road to recovery. *In the Company of Heroes* is an intense, must-read book, one of the most powerful chronicles of bravery I have read in a very long time. —*U.S. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Bob Hanson (ret.) saw action as a fighter pilot in Vietnam.*

## No Visible Horizon

by Joshua Cooper Ramo. Simon & Schuster, 2003. 288 pp., \$24.

Aviation consists of many groups of pilots convinced that their specialties puts them among "the best." Some land jets at night on carriers. Others shepherd 400-ton wide-bodies to fuel-critical landings at IFR minimums. Yet others fly the Arctic bush with minimal equipment, improvising every moment. There are crop-dusters, helo medevac pilots, Society of Experimental Test Pilot members, air racers...

The very first sentence of this often-silly book—absent an incomprehensible prelude about 15th century haiku and the author heedlessly doing aerobatics amid clouds—reads "The best pilots in the world, perhaps 60 men and a dozen women, compete in Unlimited Aerobatics." One needn't read much further to understand that author Joshua Cooper Ramo says this because he feels that he, a sportsman-class national aerobatic contender, deserves something approaching that rank.

As a writer, Ramo hyperventilates so badly he needs to put his head between his knees. Firing off more four-letter words than a season's worth of



## FOR THE KIDS

### Space Dogs: Pioneers of Space Travel

by Chris Dubbs. Writer's Showcase, 2003. 90 pp., \$11.95.

Elementary schoolers will lap up Dubbs' tales of Laika and other canine trailblazers. Follow along with the "man with the thick glasses" as he trains strays for rocket flights and orbital missions in this charming yet frank dramatized account of the secret Soviet space dog program of the 1950s and 1960s.



"Sopranos" episodes, Ramo can turn even the description of a relatively routine cross-country flight into a dance with fiery death. What he does in his descriptions of world-class aerobats and serious aerobatics beggars belief. The book is filled with errors and thrice-told tales that have become pure fable.

Ramo is at times a splendid and fascinating writer. He is omnivorously knowledgeable—and he never lets you forget it, whether he's holding forth on haiku, Nietzsche, the paintings of Willem de Kooning, or post-doc risk-analysis monographs. And he's a pilot, though one still naive enough to boast, in the jacket copy, that he "holds two U.S. national point-to-point speed records." This doubtless gives non-pilot readers the impression that he has firewalled the throttle of an LAX-to-JFK Bearcat or Learjet, but those of us who have indulged in the "speed-record" sport know that the game is to

find an airport pair never before contested, pay the fee to have one's time affirmed, and thus get your name in an inconsequential record list. Ramo's records? "From Teterboro [airport, outside of New York City] to a small field in Pennsylvania and back in a Piper Arrow. I think the speed was 146 knots," he admits.

*No Visible Horizon* could have been one of those rare works written by a creative and talented individual who happens to also be a pilot. But Ramo tries too hard, so pleased with himself that he can't avoid overstating everything he experiences or imagines.

—*Stephan Wilkinson has done just enough aerobatics to know that Joshua Cooper Ramo is if nothing else a better aerobatic pilot than he is.*

