

an *Encyclopedia Britannica*—with more than 550 photos, many in color. All you have to do is turn to a random chapter and start reading to get a story.

The X-15, of course, was nothing less than the fastest, highest-flying airplane ever to leap off the drawing board. After the barrier-breaking X-1 and its ilk, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NASA's predecessor) called for a rocket-powered craft that could eventually reach 250,000 feet above Earth's surface—almost 50 miles. The NACA invited nine manufacturers to submit designs, but only a few stepped up to the plate: Republic, veteran X-plane builders Bell and Douglas, and X-newbie North American. According to the authors, the organization settled on North American's design when teams of NACA advisors graded it superior in "performance, technical design, research suitability, development capability, and cost" to the plans put forth by other companies.

Eventually three X-15s were built. Pete Knight reached a top speed of Mach 6.70—4,520 mph—in the modified X-15A-2 on October 3, 1967. This came four years after NASA's Joseph Walker reached the program's peak altitude of 354,200 feet, or 67 miles, on August 22, 1963, in X-15-3. Walker and 11 other X-15 pilots were eventually awarded astronaut wings for their forays past the edge of space, and though every Mercury flight

bested the altitude, flying the X-15 could be considered just as dangerous—if not more deadly. In the rocketplane's decade-long history two pilots died; by contrast, there were no casualties in the Mercury and Gemini programs.

This is a no-nonsense book that leans toward the technical. If it had been available 30 years ago in a small Kansas town's library, maybe I wouldn't have as much trivia about movies and farming rumbling around in my head.

—Phil Scott, author of five books, lives in Manhattan.

In the Shadows of War: An American Pilot's Odyssey Through Occupied France and the Camps of Nazi Germany

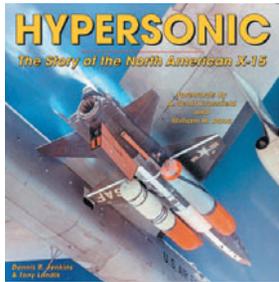
by Thomas Childers. Henry Holt, 2003. 443 pp., \$27.50.

As the Second World War slips deeper into the past, personal accounts become more infrequent, increasingly leaving the war to the professional historian. And then there is this wonderful book.

Childers is himself a historian, but he is also a superb writer. Witness this sketch of a French agent being spirited to England for training: "Pierre sat in the blackness of the plane, numb with cold and lost in thought, as the engines droned and everything he loved slid away beneath him." (Childers' earlier history, *Wings of Morning*, so impressed the late Stephen Ambrose that Ambrose borrowed some of it without credit to plump up his lame best-seller, *The Wild Blue*.)

Shadows tells the story of U.S. pilot Roy Allen, shot down over France in June 1944. In his attempts to evade capture, he meets up with a brave young teacher in a girls' school, chain-smoking *résistants* in a Paris safe house, and a Belgian betrayer; finally he ends up in the stinking hell of the Buchenwald concentration camp.

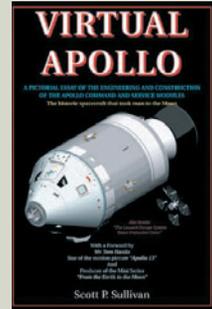
In a postscript, Childers argues that his book is "a work of historical nonfiction," but in truth it's a nonfiction novel—re-created fact with a bit of poetic license—in a style that makes us privy to thoughts, conversations, and



BRIEFLY NOTED

Virtual Apollo: A Pictorial Essay of the Engineering and Construction of the Apollo Command and Service Modules by Scott P. Sullivan; foreword by Tom Hanks. Apogee Books, 2002. 128 pp., \$17.95.

Meant for hardcore Apollo buffs, this impressive display of down-to-the-washer draftsmanship is quite a departure from its encyclopedic series predecessors. Colorful if awkwardly laid out, *Virtual Apollo*

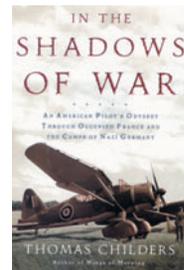


reveals the intricate, multi-layered design of the spacecraft (but not the lunar lander) and explores the functional relationships of some of its three million components. Photos and factoids supplement spotty text, but it's really the hundreds of computer-rendered schematics that tell the story.

scenes that were never written down.

Pierre, the French agent, also takes the hard road to Buchenwald: "Even now, shivering in the clammy barracks, to think of [Mimi] and their nights in the room in Nangis brought a fleeting smile to his face." Perhaps. But unlike Allen, Pierre dies in the camp. "Vive la France!" he shouts at the end—a cry I doubt was reported by the men who shot him.

Though these be inventions, they're also the product of 10 years of research. The story rings true and should be read. —Daniel Ford writes history and fiction, and is the author of *Remains*, a novel about the Flying Tigers of World War II.



FOR THE KIDS

The Noisy Airplane Ride by Mike Downs; illustrations by David Gordon. Tricycle Press, 2003. 30 pp., \$14.95.

A picture book that does a surprisingly good job of acquainting children with the causes of inflight thumps and rattles—or soothing the nerves of older, more anxious travelers. Downs' uninspired rhymes seem at times disconnected from the *wusshhhhs* (the air vents), *ker-ooshhs* (a flushing toilet), and *ert-erts* (wheels touching down) found in Gordon's smoggy, subdued illustrations. Youngsters, however, will delight in sharing this onboard listening—and noise making—experience with parents.

