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Building The H Bomb: A Personal History



Synopsis

In this engaging scientific memoir, Kenneth Ford recounts the time when, in his mid-twenties, he was a member of the team that designed and built the first hydrogen bomb. He worked with and relaxed with scientific giants of that time such as Edward Teller, Enrico Fermi, Stan Ulam, John von Neumann, and John Wheeler, and here offers illuminating insights into the personalities, the strengths, and the quirks of these men. Well known for his ability to explain physics to nonspecialists, Ford also brings to life the physics of fission and fusion and provides a brief history of nuclear science from the discovery of radioactivity in 1896 to the ten-megaton explosion of "Mike" that obliterated a Pacific Island in 1952. Ford worked at both Los Alamos and Princeton's Project Matterhorn, and brings out Matterhorn's major, but previously unheralded contribution to the development of the H bomb. Outside the lab, he drove a battered Chevrolet around New Mexico, a bantam motorcycle across the country, and a British roadster around New Jersey. Part of the charm of Ford's book is the way in which he leavens his well-researched descriptions of the scientific work with brief tales of his life away from weapons. Readership: A memoir for general readership in the history of science.

Book Information

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: World Scientific Publishing Co (March 27, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 9814618799

ISBN-13: 978-9814618793

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.5 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 100 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #321,128 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #68 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Military Technology #159 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Military Sciences #162 in Books > Science & Math > Physics > Nuclear Physics

Customer Reviews

In this engaging scientific memoir, Kenneth Ford recounts the time when, in his mid-twenties, he was a member of the team that designed and built the first hydrogen bomb. He worked with and relaxed with scientific giants of that time such as Edward Teller, Enrico Fermi, Stan Ulam, John von Neumann, and John Wheeler, and here offers illuminating insights into the personalities, the

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In 1950-1952 Kenneth Ford took a two-year break from his graduate studies in physics at Princeton University to work on the H bomb, returning to earn his Ph.D. in 1953. Since then he has conducted research in nuclear physics, taught at several universities, and served as a college president and as the head of a nonprofit organization. After retirement, he taught high-school physics. In addition to his scientific papers, he has written textbooks and books explaining quantum physics to nonscientists as well as a memoir on flying small planes. His books have won two writing awards and some have been translated into other languages. In 2006, he was recognized by the American Association of Physics Teachers with that organization's Oersted medal for contributions to teaching. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife Joanne. They have seven children and thirteen grandchildren.

I deeply enjoyed this book, and I recommend it. Ford writes about the many people who worked on the H-Bomb project, and tells very ... *human* ... stories about them. Edward Teller, Stan Ulam, Carson Mark, Richard Garwin, John Wheeler and on and on. I know the names but not much about them, and this book fills in the gaps nicely. Ford is a kind man. He documents in detail who came up with what in the Teller-Ulam H-bomb design invention. There has been a long debate about the origins of this invention. Teller too often tried to minimize Stan Ulam's contribution, which was an entire new way of doing things. Instead of raking Teller over the coals for trying to take full credit for the design, Ford instead writes with compassion about Teller, saying that "Oh, Edward, your human frailty is so much on display." The DOE is apparently trying to remove 5,000 words from this book, which deals with events from 1950, which is (counting on my fingers) about 65 years ago. The online e-book version has the 5,000 words. I recommend this book to anyone who wants a view of the people and the project, at this point in history.-- David

Ken Ford's book is a comfortable and friendly trip into history and the development of the fusion bomb during the Cold War. It is written from the intimate perspective of one of the members of the development team, and presents a personal account of who was who, who did what, and why things happened in the developmental process. He provides a first hand account of the interactions between team members, including some of the heavy hitters in the nuclear physics community, but falls short of dishing any dirt on any of the prime subjects he encountered. His treatment of the characters we are introduced to is balanced, moderately subjective and insightful. The technical information provided is obviously unclassified, very basic and readily available in a multitude of open sources. Still, he does a good job of bringing the reader up to speed on nuclear basics, including providing an excellent primer on the difference between the fission and fusion processes. Mr. Ford's style is easy, often humorous, non-technical, and enjoyable. I would recommend it for anyone interested in expanding their knowledge of nuclear weapons development during the Cold War, the workings of the military, Atomic Energy Commission, associated American research universities, and the prime movers involved in championing and making the American nuclear weapons program. Overall, a good read and recommended for the novice and informed reader alike.

This is a normally very dry subject but this author makes the reading extremely enjoyable. My only caution is you **MUST** know a moderate amount about basic nuclear physics to get the most out of this book. At least know your basic atomic structure, The Nucleus, The Electron, The Proton and the Neutron and how they relate to the A & H Bombs. It would help if you also had a basic understanding of the Nuclear Chain Reaction and the difference between fusion (as in the process of atomic joining) and fission the (process of atomic separation). That said if you have the very basics I outline above well understood and you love reading about such things then reading this book will be both fun and insightful. Building the H Bomb: A Personal History can at times get very technical. While the author does try to make this subject very accessible to the layman there is little this or any author can do to Nuclear science painfully easy to understand to those who lack a love and understanding of basic nuclear physics. Building the H Bomb: A Personal History does a great job of blending his own personal story and those he worked with \ around in a fascinating narrative that kept me reading to the point I lost track of time. I read Building the H Bomb: A Personal History on buses and in my doctors waiting rooms and when reality demanded my attention it was always at the expense of the pleasures I had reading this book. I was engrossed in this subject matter quite unlike I have been in many books of this type. I really enjoyed the backgrounds that gave

humanizing insights to such luminaries as Edward Teller, Enrico Fermi to name just a few. Hearing about the old primitive computers with all their tubes, wires and gears also gave me many chuckles. I am a computer guy so I know about the early systems. The enjoyable thing while reading Building the H Bomb: A Personal History, I never had the insight provided by a scientist that actually used one of these tube driven, hot cable laden ancient computing beasts. On so many levels this is a well written and fun to read book if you really love nuclear physics and the guys who made atoms for war and peace a reality. Nuclear weapons are an ugly reality but I must say I am SOOOO happy the USA got the Super \ H Bomb in time to effectively counter the then Soviet Union. As for their being a Moral Nation I don't think there is such a thing. Man fouls everything he touches simply because; he is not perfect and never will be. I believe in the USA not because; our nation is perfect for we are far from perfect. I just happen to believe that our form of government allows us evolve as a nation that strives for a more perfect union or society. The H Bomb is an awesome responsibility. I simply pray that we as a country and a world continue to be worthy stewards of the atom whose power we have collectively unlocked. This book speaks also about the demands the atom made on the moral fiber of those scientists charged with first unlocking then putting to use its secrets in weapons of mass destruction. This book hits all the high points of the development of super weapons from one who was inside that highly select and secret circle. I have seldom read a book more spellbinding than Building the H Bomb: A Personal History so yes if you love all the things I share herein you will also love this book. Building the H Bomb: A Personal History earns my highest rating.

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