



The Depths of Space: The Story of the Pioneer Planetary Probes

Mark Wolverton

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The first spacecraft to explore the secrets of the Sun, Jupiter, Saturn, and the void beyond Pluto, the Pioneer space probes have been the trailblazers of the space age, truly going where no man has gone before.

Emblazoned with the nude figures of a man and a woman, etched representations of our human form, the Pioneer generation of probes were aptly named. Launched into the inky depths of space, they were more than mere machines, they were humanity's first emissaries into deep space. And the pictorial inscriptions that adorned the crafts embodied the hopes and dreams of everyone involved in the Pioneer program. They were our humble attempt to communicate with the extraterrestrial intelligent life we imagined the probes might encounter -- they were our message in a bottle.

Perhaps the most efficient, reliable, and cost effective program to come out of NASA, the Pioneer missions are a shining example of how a small and talented group of people can, against all odds, pull something off that has never been done before. Indeed, more than thirty years after its launch in 1972, Pioneer 10 is still cruising into interstellar space, sending back data as it courses through the galaxy while Pioneer 6, in solar orbit, is more than 35 years old and humankind's oldest functioning spacecraft. But despite their enduring contributions, the Pioneer project remains a footnote in space history, little more than a humble prologue to its inheritors.

The Depths of Space recounts the long overdue history of Pioneer both as a scientific and technological achievement and as the story of the exceptional people who made the program possible. This tight narrative captures the black-coffee buzz of full-throttle, deadline-driven production, the sharp, intense thrill of discovery, the pang of anxiety that accompanies looming danger and ultimate loss, and the satisfaction and pride of creating an enduring legacy.

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