

Hundreds honor 3 astronauts lost in Apollo fire 50 years ago

January 26 2017, by Marcia Dunn



From left, Sheryl Chaffee, daughter of Roger Chaffee; Thad Altman, president of the Astronauts Memorial Foundation; Lowell Grissom, brother of Virgil Grissom; and Bonnie Baer, daughter of Ed White, carry a wreath to the base of the Space Mirror Memorial at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Florida on Thursday, Jan. 26, 2017. Moonwalkers and dozens of others who took part in NASA's Apollo program paid tribute to the three astronauts killed in a fire 50 years ago. (Tim Shortt /Florida Today via AP)

Moonwalkers and dozens of others who took part in NASA's storied Apollo program paid tribute Thursday to the three astronauts killed in a fire 50 years ago.

On the eve of the Apollo 1 anniversary, hundreds gathered at Kennedy Space Center to honor Gus Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee. They died during a countdown rehearsal at the launch pad, inside their burning spacecraft, on Jan. 27, 1967

On Friday, NASA is opening an Apollo 1 exhibit featuring the hatch that prevented the three astronauts from escaping. It has been concealed for the past half-century along with the capsule. The families of Grissom, White and Chaffee got an early look Wednesday evening at the display at the visitor complex, and liked what they saw.

"Really awesome," said daughter Sheryl Chaffee, who just retired from NASA. "It's very fitting. We all feel like it's about time."

The Apollo 1 fire—NASA's first space tragedy—has long been overshadowed by the 1986 Challenger and 2003 Columbia accidents. The 14 lost shuttle astronauts also were recognized Thursday, along with seven other U.S. astronauts killed in plane crashes.

The anniversaries of all three big accidents fall within days: Apollo 1 on Jan. 27, Challenger on Jan. 28 and Columbia on Feb. 1.



This undated photo made available by NASA shows the Apollo 1 crew, from left, Edward H. White II, Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom, and Roger B. Chaffee. On Jan. 27, 1967, a flash fire erupted inside their capsule during a countdown rehearsal, with the astronauts atop the rocket at Cape Canaveral's Launch Complex 34. All three were killed. (NASA via AP)

Among the many astronauts attending Thursday's ceremony were the two surviving crew members of Apollo 11, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins, as well as Apollo 16 moonwalker Charlie Duke and Apollo 10's Thomas Stafford.

Collins, who orbited the moon in 1969 while Aldrin and Neil Armstrong landed on it, said Apollo 1 never launched, but in many ways was as important as later flights.

"Without Apollo 1 and the lessons learned from it," he noted, a fire probably would have occurred on a flight in space and seriously stalled the moon program.

"Yes, Apollo 1 did cause three deaths, but I believe it saved more than three later," Collins said. "It slowed things down for a year or so," but spacecraft improvements enabled Apollo missions to get going by the fall of 1968, pick up speed, and land on the moon on July 20, 1969.



This Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2017 photo provided by NASA shows part of the Apollo 1 exhibit at the Kennedy Space Center in Titusville, Fla. On Jan. 27, 1967, a fire during a test on the launch pad killed three astronauts at the start of the Apollo moon program. (Kim Shiflett/NASA via AP)

NASA was able to meet the end-of-decade deadline set by President

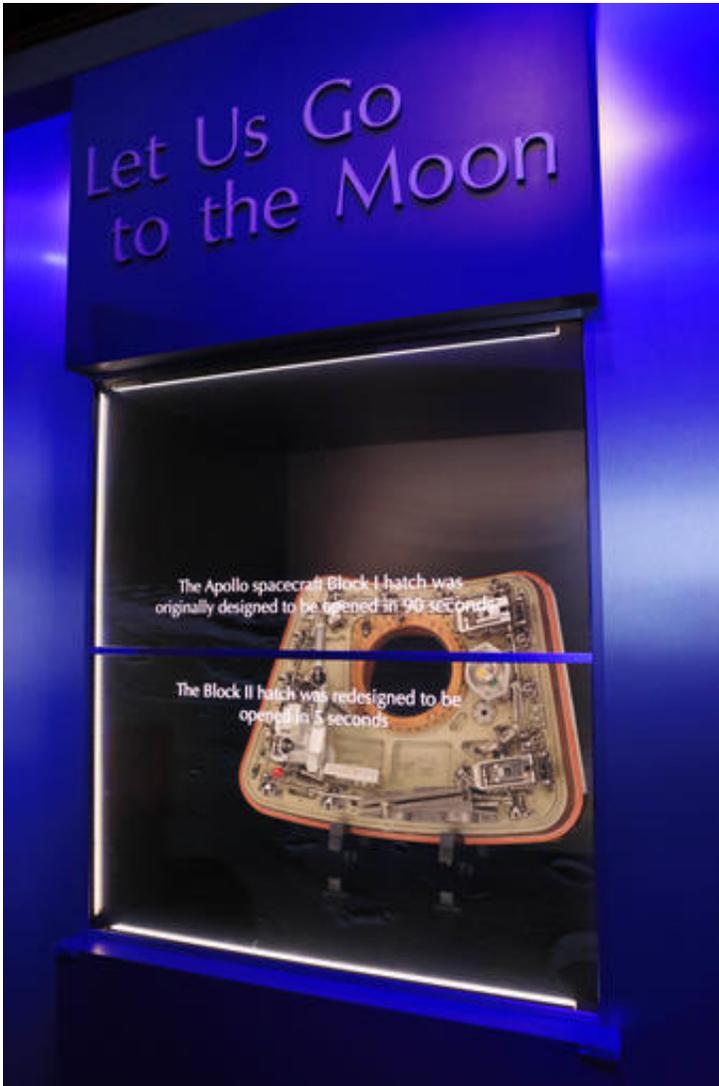
John F. Kennedy, to land a man on the moon and return him home safely.

"Grissom, White, Chaffee, Kennedy. I think these four names are appropriately mentioned in the same breath," Collins told the crowd.

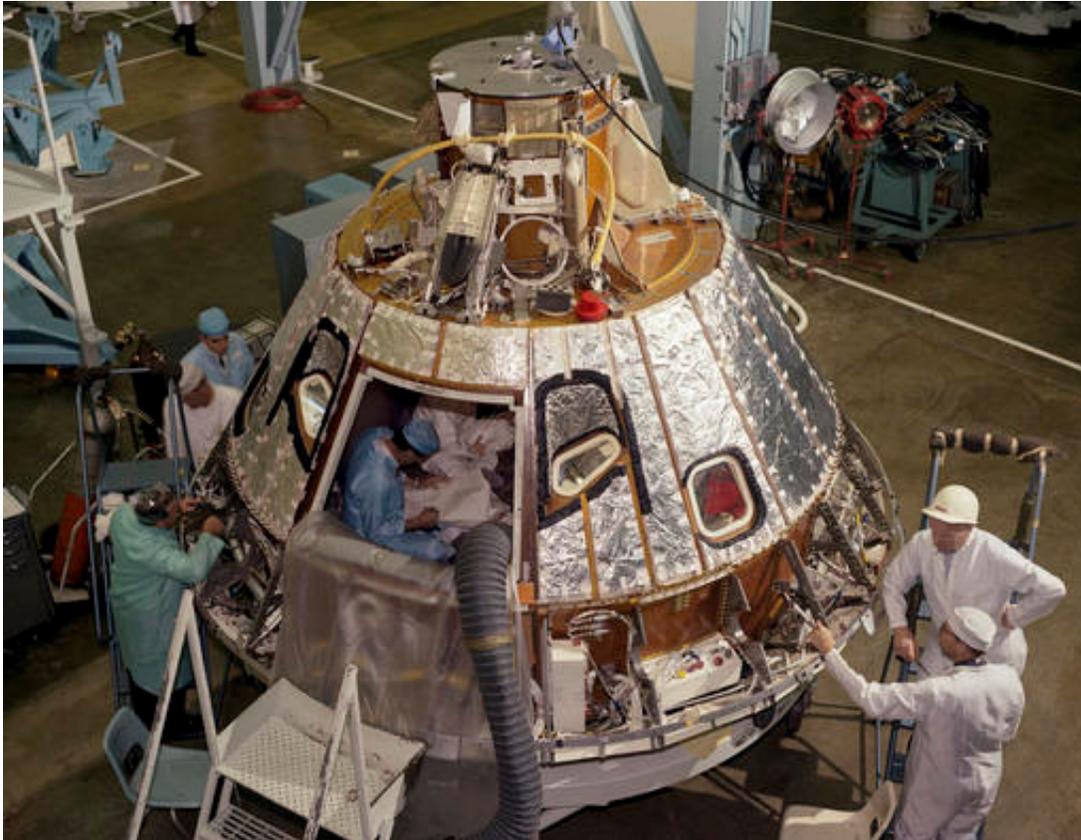
More than 100 fifth-graders from Apollo Elementary School, just across the Indian River in Titusville, packed the ceremony hall. Afterward, they posed in front of the massive granite Space Memorial Mirror. To student Noah Duncan, 50 years ago seems like 100. "10 years is a long time. I'm only 10!" added classmate Lyzara Figueroa.

It was an emotional day for all the families; Chaffee's widow, Martha, dabbed her eyes during throughout the tribute. They will gather again Friday evening at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station's abandoned Launch Complex 34 to mark the exact time of the accident, 6:31 p.m.

"To each of you who knew these three men so well, thank you for your sacrifices," Collins said. "The Apollo crew was magnificent."



This Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2017 photo provided by NASA shows the Apollo 1 capsule hatch on display in an exhibit at the Kennedy Space Center in Titusville, Fla. On Jan. 27, 1967, a fire during a test on the launch pad killed three astronauts at the start of the Apollo moon program. (Kim Shiflett/NASA via AP)



In this 1966 photo made available by NASA, technicians work on the Spacecraft 012 Command Module at Cape Kennedy, Fla., for the Apollo/Saturn 204 mission. During a launch pad test on Jan. 27, 1967, a flash fire erupted inside the capsule killing three Apollo crew members. (NASA via AP)

More information: NASA: www.nasa.gov/
 Astronauts Memorial Foundation: www.astronautsmemorial.org/

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Citation: Hundreds honor 3 astronauts lost in Apollo fire 50 years ago (2017, January 26)
 retrieved 19 September 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2017-01-hundreds-honor-astronauts-lost-apollo.html>

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