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From left: Command Module Pilot Roger Chaffee; Lunar Module Pilot Ed White; and Commander Gus Grissom in their Apollo 1 Command Module. The three astronauts died when they were unable to exit their burning Command Module during routine testing on January 27, 1967. Online courtesy NASA.

Project Mercury was a huge success. After 14 flights (6 manned, 8 unmanned), America's space team had all kinds of new data.

Learning from past mistakes and miscalculations, and with increasing confidence in the growing strength and sophistication of America's space program, NASA was ready to implement the next phase of President Kennedy's charge.

Expanding on what had been learned - and achieved - by the Mercury-Atlas flights, NASA needed more powerful rockets. Astronauts needed bigger space capsules so they could take longer flights. (It remained unclear how long a person could stay in space and not sustain physical/psychological damage.) And what if the space capsule needed repairs while in orbit?

Could an American do what Aleksei Leonov had done: walk in space? Project Gemini, with its two-man space capsules, was established to answer some of those questions.

Ed White and James McDivitt left earth on a 4-day mission (known as Gemini 4) beginning June 3, 1965. Launched by a Titan-II rocket, they orbited the earth 62 times.

Using a hand-held jet thruster (a kind of personal equivalent of a rocket thruster) Ed White achieved another American first: He walked in space for about 20 minutes.

Preserving the moment, he took incredible photographs, including a magnificent one of himself. Reluctant to come back into the space capsule, the world heard him sigh and say:

It's the saddest moment of my life.

The saddest moment in the life of Ed's family happened less than two years later, on the 27th of January, 1967. During an Apollo 1 training mission, Ed and his two crewmembers, Gus Grissom (one of the original *Mercury 7*) and Roger Chaffee, were killed in a terrible fire (scroll down fifty percent to review the voice transcript) in their command module. What caused their deaths was the inability to get out of their burning space capsule. Taped recordings of the three crew members, who were conducting routine tests inside the Command Module,

reveal that they tried to get out, via the hatch, immediately upon realizing there was a fire. However, a flaw in the Command Module's hatch design prevented them from exiting their crippled capsule.

From their positions on their couches, they could not pull against the increasing pressure inside the crew cabin.

NASA's photographs depict what the interior of the capsule (with the men in it) looked like before the fire, and what it looked like after. (Follow this link to view the exterior damage.)

Just when it seemed America was on the cusp of true space achievement, the country realized there was still much to learn before NASA could send a crew to the moon.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/DEATH-IN-THE-COMMAND-MODULE-History-of-Flight>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/DEATH-IN-THE-COMMAND-MODULE-History-of-Flight>

Media Stream



Ed White - American Astronaut

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Ed-White-American-Astronaut>



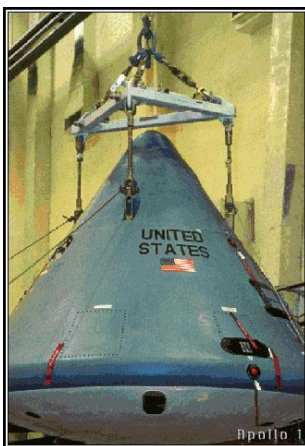
Apollo 1 Crewmembers: Ed White, Gus Grissom and Roger Chaffee

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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Apollo 1 - Command Module

Image online, courtesy the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

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Apollo 1 - Inside the Module

NASA Image, online courtesy the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

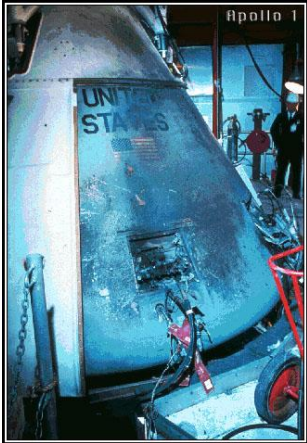
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Apollo 1 - Command Module After the Fire

NASA image, online courtesy the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

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Apollo 1 - Exterior Fire Damage

NASA image, online courtesy the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

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DEATH IN THE COMMAND MODULE

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Titan II - Launch of an Unmanned Spacecraft

14 November 1963, Universal Newsreel.

Public Domain, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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