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Fallen Apollo crew remembered

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. - It was supposed to be a routine launchpad test.

But from the Apollo 1 command module at Pad 34 came a panicked voice saying, "Fire in the cockpit."

Exactly 40 years later, the three Apollo astronauts who were killed in that flash fire were remembered Saturday for paving the way for later astronauts to be able to travel to the moon.

The deaths of Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee forced NASA to take pause in its space race with the Soviet Union and make design and safety changes that were critical to the agency's later successes.

"I can assure you if we had not had that fire and rebuilt the command module . . . we could not have done the Apollo program successfully," said retired astronaut John Young, who flew in Gemini 3 with Grissom in 1965. "So we owe a lot to Gus, and Rog and Ed. They made it possible for the rest of us to do the almost impossible."

The memorial service at the Kennedy Space Center Visitors Complex marked the start of a solemn week for NASA, today is the 21st anniversary of the space shuttle Challenger accident, and Thursday makes four years since the space shuttle Columbia disaster.

Chaffee's widow, Martha, and White's son, Edward III, along with NASA associate administrator Bill Gerstenmaier, laid a wreath at the base of the Space Mirror Memorial, a tall granite-finished wall engraved with the names of the Apollo 1, Challenger and Columbia astronauts and seven other astronauts killed in accidents.

NASA hadn't considered the countdown drill hazardous, anticipating accidents only in space. Fire rescue and medical teams were not at the launchpad.

No procedures had been developed for the type of emergency the Apollo 1 crew faced. The work levels around the spacecraft contained steps, sliding doors and sharp turns that hindered emergency responses.

The astronauts died from inhaling toxic gases.

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