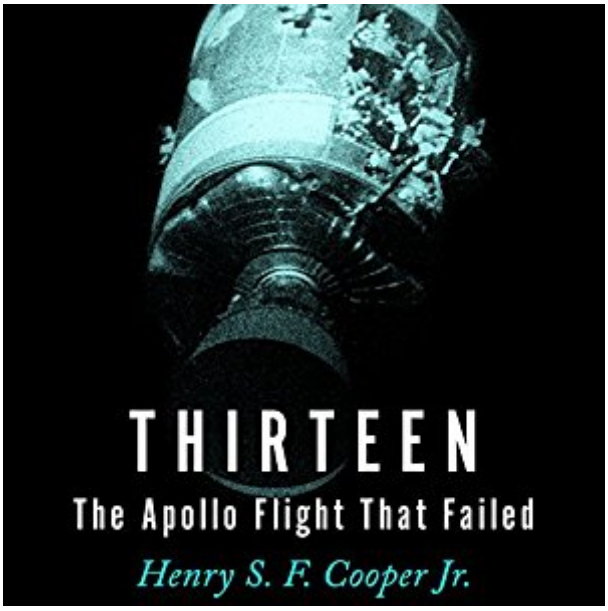
Thirteen: The Apollo Flight That Failed



Synopsis

"Houston, we’ve had a problem here." On the evening of April 13, 1970, the three astronauts aboard Apollo 13 were just hours from the third lunar landing in history. But as they soared through space, two hundred thousand miles from earth, an explosion badly damaged their spacecraft. With compromised engines and failing life-support systems, the crew was in incomparably grave danger. Faced with below-freezing temperatures, a seriously ill crew member, and a dwindling water supply, a safe return seemed unlikely. Thirteen is the shocking, miraculous, and entirely true story of how the astronauts and ground crew guided Apollo 13 to a safe landing on earth. Expanding on dispatches written for the New Yorker, Henry S. F. Cooper Jr. brings listeners unparalleled detail on the moment-by-moment developments of one of NASA’s most dramatic missions.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition
Listening Length: 5 hoursÂ andÂ 2 minutes
Program Type: Audiobook
Version: Unabridged
Publisher: Audible Studios
Audible.com Release Date: November 26, 2014
Whispersync for Voice: Ready
Language: English
ASIN: B00Q78SHCC
Best Sellers Rank: #45 inÂ Books > History > World > Expeditions & Discoveries #47 inÂ Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Reference > History #56 inÂ Books > Audible Audiobooks > Science > Technology & Engineering

Customer Reviews

The review is based on the recently-released Kindle edition. I read some of the author’s New Yorker articles at the time of Apollo 13, but not this book. Since then there have been excellent books on the subject includingÂ Failure Is Not an OptionÂ andÂ Lost Moon.My main problem with this book is the author appears to have decided on what story he was going to tell, and then didn’t let the facts get in the way. A major part of his story is that the NASA staff was inattentive, bored and sloppy. For example he writes, "After two successful lunar landings, which had been preceded by two Apollo flights around the moon, no one at the Space Center was thinking in terms of accidents," and after the explosion, "No one believed that there could be any flaw in the craft itself."Anyone who has

been around any engineering project, much less one as dramatic and difficult as a moon shot, knows that cannot be true. If it were no one would survive a day, or get a rocket off the ground. The author's evidence is things like a flight controller sending word to the astronauts that they were, "putting us to sleep down here," and idle loop comments on the number of 13's that turned up in mission data. These are not evidence of inattention or sloppiness, they're the normal tension-diffusing banter of highly-trained people performing difficult and critical work.Once people start doing things the author can understand, like issuing orders and making engineering changes, he portrays them as energetic and efficient. But most of the things he describes as frantic improvisation were actually contingency plans developed in advance of the mission. There was plenty of frantic improvisation, of course, but it could not possibly have succeeded if it were not the icing on a cake of disciplined anticipation and engineering experience.Like reviewer Brian Clegg, I found scientific inaccuracies in the book. There were only a few out-and-out errors, but there were plenty of engineering terms used inappropriately: not wrong, but not explained to be useful to a lay person, but also not used properly to communicate technical information. They might as well be dilithium crystals or Trellium-D from Star Trek, there to make things seem scientific rather than to convey information. When quoting 24-hour time or metric units, the author translates them back to "our terms" of 12-hour time and English units.I found the style overwrought. "The Mission Control Center's Operations Wing, a chunky, monolithic three-story structure as white and silent as a block of ice--the geometric representation of an intelligence brooding on far-off space. . ." I've seen it, it's a pretty ordinary, mildly ugly, functional building. It's not silent (well, I guess the building itself is, like all buildings, but its systems and the people in it make the usual amount of noise). Ice is not white. The building is white, but not dramatically so, not enough to require a simile to explain it. And why is an ordinary building shape the geometric representation of an intelligence? I have no clue. I suspect if someone told the author he had been looking at the parking garage for an airport all of his lurid associations would have vanished.He compares flight controllers to people belowdecks on a ship. I don't accept the analogy, people belowdecks on a ship have a lot of physical information about what's going on, such as the pitch and roll of the ship, and most importantly, are at physical risk if the ship goes down. But the author is not content to make the comparison, he then goes on to explain what it's like to be belowdecks on a ship. If the reader doesn't know that already, then the comparison is pointless for explaining flight controllers. This goes on for too many paragraphs.Then the author calls the Flight Director, "the real skipper of the spacecraft," because "astronauts usually did what he advised, particularly in an emergency." That's not the definition of the skipper of a ship, he is the guy you obey all the time. He orders, he doesn't advise, particularly in an emergency. Also

the captain of a ship is physically at risk. It’s true that the Mission Commander (Jim Lovell) relies more on the Flight Director than the captain of a naval ship would rely on headquarters specialists, but only because it’s cost-effective to staff an ocean ship but not a space ship with all the technical people necessary for the mission. Getting advice by radio doesn’t make the Mission Commander any less of a skipper.If you’re willing to overlook all of this, the book does tell a good story that fits reasonably well with the physical facts of the mission. The author misunderstands the people and physics involved, which happen to be my main concerns, but may not be yours. If you like a good story about an exciting and dramatic space adventure, this book delivers. But if you are interested in the people and science of space flight, you should look elsewhere.

The first detailed account of the Apollo 13 accident (this book originally came out in the early 70’s) and one of the best (second only to Lovell’s "Lost Moon"). Cooper tells the entire mission story and uses many of the Mission Control transcripts that (in my opinion) are the difference between a third person telling of a mission story or a feeling of actually being there. This book has been re-printed, so it’s availability isn’t an issue. Read this along with Lost Moon and you’ll see the blatant errors in the movie "Apollo 13". Highly recommended.

This is the Apollo 13 story almost exclusively from the Mission Control perspective. It very thorougly and completely details what went on in Houston from the moment of the "accident" to the recovery of the astronauts. This book helped me to understand how critical Mission Control is to space flights, how the astronauts are not necessarily piloting their spacecraft but that it is a joint effort. I was surpised by many facts given here such as that Mission Control had more information about the status of the spacecraft than the astronauts themselves. The author does an outstanding job of expalining the technicalities of what happened and why without making you feel like a dummy.Through the lens of 25 years, it is very interesting to read this account and feel some of the respect and almost naivete the author and the public felt for NASA and the government at large that has long since been lost. I also enjoyed how the book was divided into three sections "Out" "Around" "Home".I did feel the book suffered from its narrow focus on Mission Control only during the duration of the "event," and no pictures -- none and only one line diagram. These are small complaints, however. The book makes a wonderful companion to Jim Lovell’s account.

As a boy, I found this book in the public library and readall about the ill-fated Apollo 13 spaceflight of April 1970.I had lived through the experience as an 11-year-old, and I remembered the drama of the

real-life explosion aboard the Apollo spacecraft as it made its way to the moon. But it was not until I read this remarkable story, that I gained true insights into what had happened and how NASA flight crews and engineers were able to bring the crippled ship home safely. I read this book about 20 times as a kid, finding it again in the libary and checking it out regularly. I loved it so much that I always checked for it in used bookstores, because it went out of print quickly. Author Henry S.F. Cooper is a gifted science writer, making complex matters simple and understandable, yet he never underexplained what was happening. I finally located it in the summer of 1991, in a used book store in Cooperstown, N.Y., while on a visit to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Remarkably, I had stumbled into a bookshop in the very town where Henry S.F. Cooper's family lived, and the store had used copies of several of his science books. I bought one of each, including my beloved hardback copy of ''13: The Flight That Failed'' (that was the original title). I still re-read it from time to time, with the same awe and love that I have had for it since I was little. The film, ''Apollo 13,'' was a fine film narrative, but Cooper's classic book should not be missed. Give it to a 10-year-old you love. :)