



“Houston, we’ve had a problem.”

It got lost in the shuffle of current events, but this past April marked the 50th anniversary of one of the most compelling dramas in recent history: the events of Apollo 13.

It was April 14, 1970. What would have been the third mission to land on the moon was going swimmingly. The astronauts – Jim Lovell, Fred Haise, and Jack Swigert – had just filmed a televised tour of their spacecraft. Music played, jokes were swapped, and Haise even played a prank on Lovell by hitting a button that caused a startlingly loud bang.

Two minutes later, another bang resounded throughout the spacecraft. But this one was no joke. It was an explosion. Here’s a transcript of what happened next.¹

Swigert: “Okay, Houston...we’ve had a problem here.”
MISSION CONTROL: “This is Houston. Say again, please.”
Lovell: “Ah, Houston, we’ve had a problem.”
MISSION CONTROL: “Okay, stand by, 13. We’re looking at it.”

No one knew it yet, but at that moment, the astronauts were flying a dying spacecraft. Over the next several days, they would have to manage with limited food and less sleep. They’d contend with falling temperatures and rising carbon dioxide levels, with dehydration and urinary tract infections. Back on Earth, hundreds of flight controllers, engineers, scientists, and other astronauts worked around the clock, trying to improvise an entirely new mission than the one they planned for: Bringing the crew home alive.

If you had never heard of Apollo 13 before, and you looked at the transcript of the incident, you would never guess there was any real danger at all. Despite the crew being 178,000 nautical miles from Earth, and despite the spate of alarms and warnings confronting both the astronauts and flight controllers in Mission Control, there was no panic. No cursing. No shouting. No finger-pointing. Instead, there was only one thing: teamwork.

“When bad things happened, we just calmly laid out all the options, and failure was not one of them. We never panicked, and we never gave up on finding a solution.”² – Jerry Bostick, Flight Controller

Between the fateful explosion that crippled Apollo 13’s spacecraft and the time the astronauts landed in the Pacific Ocean, this amazing team of professionals had to work together to figure out:

- How to use the craft’s Lunar Module (the section that was supposed to physically land on the moon) as a lifeboat
- How to conserve desperately-needed power to keep the astronauts alive while still leaving enough to return home
- How to filter carbon dioxide out of the Lunar Module (famously devising a way to “fit a square peg in a round hole” using plastic, paper, duct tape, and a sock)

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- Because there wasn't enough power, how to keep the spacecraft on a proper course despite not being able to use their guidance computer (they figured out how to use the line between night and day on Earth as a reference point)
- How to power up the Command Module from full shutdown in order to re-enter the atmosphere, even though it had never been done before and getting it wrong would have been disastrous.

It was a laundry list of seemingly insurmountable problems. In many cases, NASA had only hours to solve them. At a glance, it may seem like the astronauts survived due to sheer good fortune. In reality, they survived thanks to their training, preparation, discipline, foresight, attitude, and values. These values were summed up three years earlier by Gene Kranz, the legendary flight director who helped guide Apollo 13 back home. In a speech to his flight control team, Kranz said:

From this day forward, Mission Control will be known by two words: 'Tough' and 'Competent'. Tough means we are forever accountable for what we do or what we fail to do. We will never compromise our responsibilities. Every time we walk into Mission Control we will know what we stand for. Competent means we will never take anything for granted. We will never be found short in our knowledge and our skills. Mission Control will be perfect. When you leave this meeting today, you will go to your office and the first thing you will do there is write, 'Tough and Competent' on your blackboards. It will never be erased. These words are the price of admission to the ranks of Mission Control.³

Fifty years later, I think there's a lot for us to learn from Apollo 13. You see, we will all face crises in our lives. Some will be physical, some emotional, some professional, and some financial. We are facing a crisis right now due to the coronavirus pandemic. The question is, how should we deal with these crises? Will we panic and point fingers – or will we be tough and competent?

I think the answer can be found by remembering Apollo 13. When crises happen, we deal with them the same way they did: Through planning and preparation. Through discipline and attention to detail. By finding ways to take responsibility instead of assigning blame. And most of all, through teamwork. Like the three astronauts, we don't have to deal with crises alone. We have people all around us – friends, family, neighbors, and even trusted professionals – who can help us solve even the most difficult of problems. When we find ways to work together with others, there's no challenge that can't be overcome.

Despite never reaching the moon, Apollo 13 has frequently been described as “NASA's finest hour.” Fifty years later, if we apply the lessons those heroic astronauts, controllers, and engineers taught us, I know we can turn adversity into our finest hour, too.

Sincerely,



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Sources:

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 2. “Failure is not an option,” <http://www.spaceacts.com/notanoption.htm>
 3. “Gene Kranz,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gene_Kranz
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