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Apollo 7 – The Unsung Heroes

First Apollo Flight Crew, Last to be Honored

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NASA dignitaries and guest at the 40th Anniversary Ceremony (left to right) Walt Cunningham, Alan Bean, Bill Anders, Gene Kranz, Mark Davis (WBAP), Neil Armstrong, Farris Rookstool (Powerhouse), John Healey (NAA engineer).

After the tragic Apollo 1 fire that killed the Apollo astronauts Gus Grissom, Ed White, and Roger Chaffee, the American space program came to a standstill for almost twenty-one months. The Apollo Command Module was extensively re-engineered to correct numerous design and construction defects during the hiatus.

Then forty-five years ago, in 1968, the United States re-entered the world of manned spaceflights with the Apollo 7 mission. The original backup crew of the three colleagues who perished in the Apollo 1 fire would take their place. The prestigious assignment of commanding the first Apollo mission was given to Captain Walter M. Schirra, a veteran of America's Mercury and Gemini programs, becoming the only astronaut who flew in all three programs to the Moon. Accompanying him were Major Donn Eisele, Command Module Pilot, and Walter Cunningham, physicist-civilian Lunar Module Pilot – both taking their first ride into space.

Apollo 7 was an essential step in getting NASA back on track towards achieving the goal, set by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, of "Landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to Earth by the end of the decade."

One of the goals of the mission was to "restore the nation's confidence in its space program and help pave the way for the moon landing", as President George W. Bush declared during a 40th anniversary ceremony held at

The Frontiers of Flight Museum in Dallas, Texas in 2008. Bush continued, "And what a mission it was: after 11 days and 163 orbits, Apollo 7 is the longest and most successful first test flight ever, as a testament of the remarkable skill of the crew and the can do attitude of the thousands of engineers, flight controllers, scientists and support personnel on the ground."

Your author and the AS.IT.AF. Board raised a glass in toast of the legendary success of Apollo 7 mission during the ceremony to our friend, astronaut Walt Cunningham, the last living member of the Apollo 7 crew, and now Honorary Member of AS.IT.AF.

Remember, in 1968 there were a only few months remaining before the end of the decade, and the time lost due to the fire was considerable. Plus the Russians were intensifying their launches of successful lunar probes. This was one of the most tense moments of the race.

"By the summer of 1968," recalled Walt Cunningham during that dinner, "We still believed the Russians were ahead in the US-proclaimed race to the Moon, and we were trying like hell to close the gap. The Russians had upstaged us so often that the agency was scared silly they would attempt their own manned circumlunar mission prior to our first lunar landing."

Walt acknowledged the role John Healey, North American Rockwell's Project Manager, had in directing the complete revision of the Apollo spacecraft with over

1300 modification made, "[Healey] took the inadequate junk, represented by the blackened pyre on Pad 34, and transformed it into the brilliant machine that carried the 'Man to the Moon' in five giant steps."

"It isn't stretching the truth," Walt adds, "or over-dramatizing to say we carried the Nation's hopes with us."

"Apollo 7 was planned as an open-ended mission, lasting up to eleven days. Most of the critical tests of the spacecraft systems took place in the first couple of days because no one really expected the mission to last the full eleven days. There were simply too many opportunities for a system to fail, causing us to come home early."

Apollo 7 had been the only Apollo crew not granted the NASA's Distinguished Service Medal award. After four decades NASA Administrator Michael Griffin, also present at the ceremony, acknowledged his predecessors' decision but said that the crew's achievements merited reconsideration: "That was all a long time ago, at a very different time, and I think, really should not be allowed to obscure the contributions which the Apollo 7 flight crew made to the accomplishments that... Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made just months later."

Griffin then presented Apollo 7 pilot, Walter Cunningham, the NASA Distinguished Service Medal with the citation: "For the exemplary performance in meeting all the Apollo 7 mission objectives and more on the first manned Apollo mission, paving the way for the first flight to the Moon on Apollo 8 and

the first manned lunar landing on Apollo 11."


Neil Armstrong, the reserved 'First Man on the Moon', honored the event with a short speech: "It was now the autumn of 1968, the United States was committed to reaching the surface of the Moon by the end of the decade and we hadn't flown yet. In order to have any chance of meeting the deadline, each successive flight would be obliged to take the largest possible jumps.

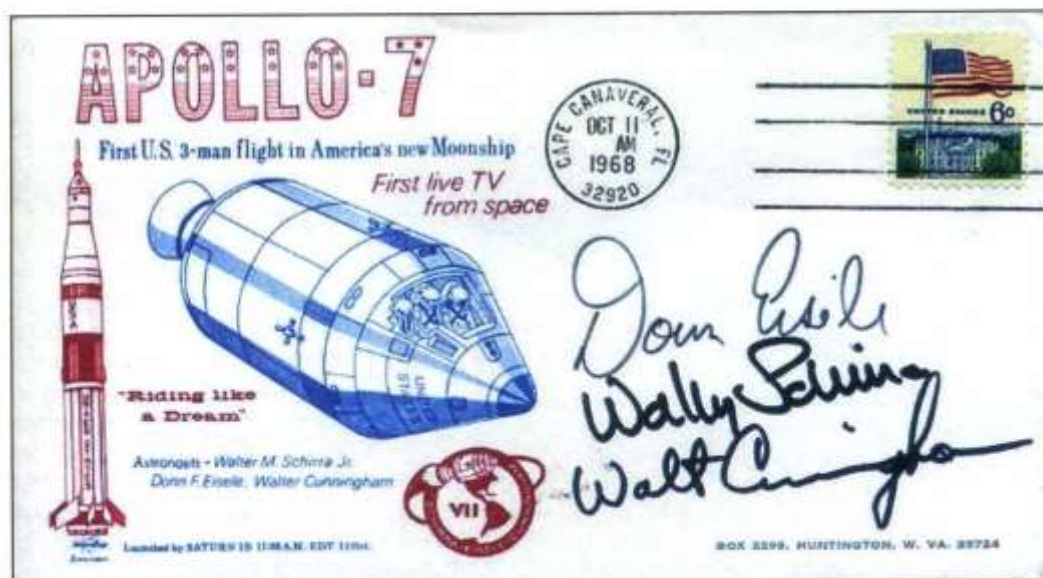
One step at a time would not do the job. But with any new flying machine, the biggest jump of all is the first flight. Among test pilots that first flight is the big one.

The one when any design flaw and overlooked consequence is likely to reveal itself and cause major problems.

The crew is spring loaded to observe, to identify, to diagnose and to suggest corrective action for any unexpected abnormality. But while a well-executed flight is exciting and the proof of good work, it is those many months of design, development and pre-flight preparation that are part of the crew's responsibilities and are their actual principal contribution to the project.

All those flights that followed were dependent on the Apollo 7 crew doing their job, a great job. And they delivered. They delivered in the design, in the development, in the testing and in flight -- making it possible for the eventual Apollo goals to be achieved by the end of the decade. Thanks Walt, and Wally and Donn."

Our congratulation, Walt. This really is a second flight of the Phoenix! 



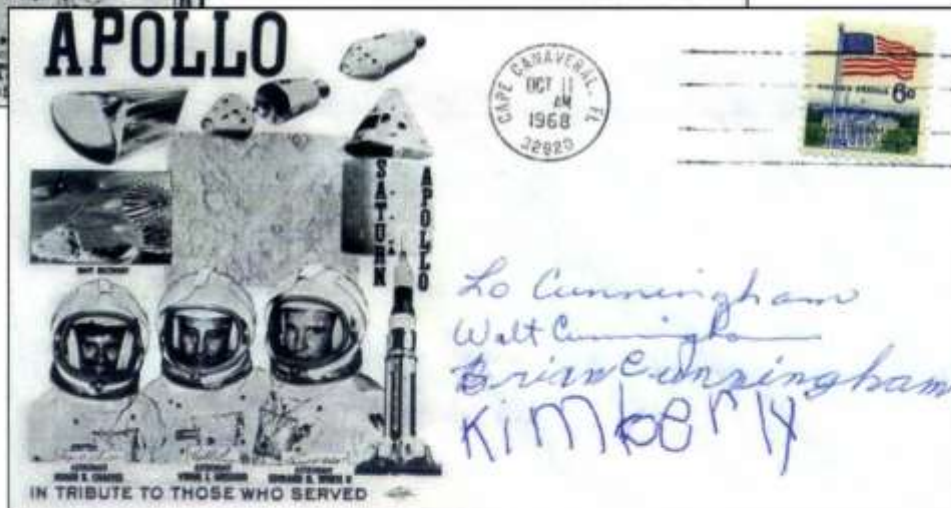
The entire Apollo 7 crew signed this red, white and blue Space Craft Cover, from the personal collection of Walt Cunningham, commemorating the launch of the Apollo 7 mission on October 11, 1968. This first Apollo flight in "America's new Moonship" established new procedures that would be the standard for all future Apollo missions.

More covers on next page

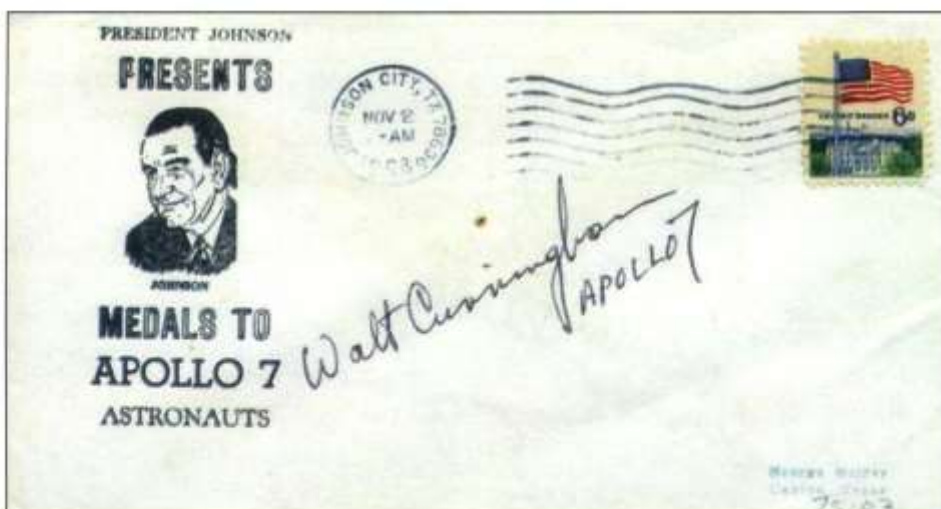
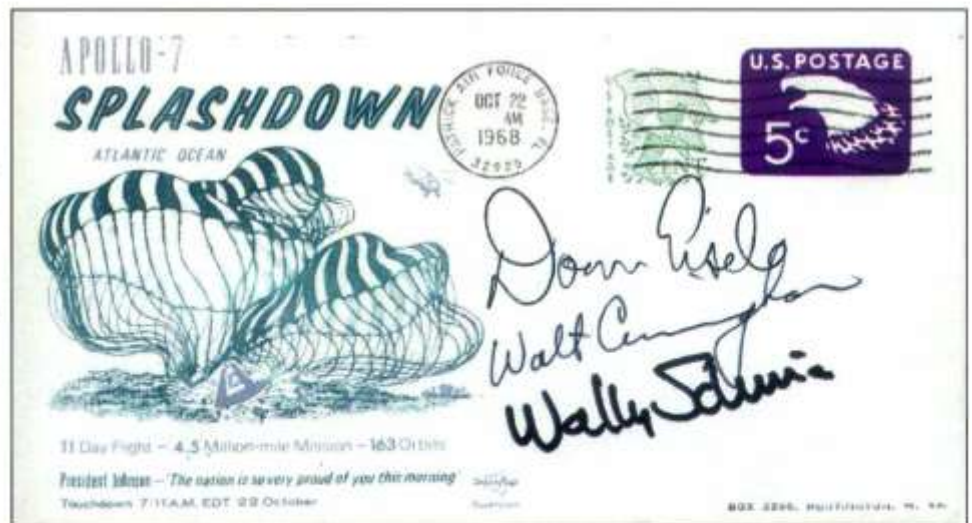


Left: John Healey, the manager of the Apollo Command Module rebuild, signed this Orbit Cover Apollo 1 memorial cachet with its Cape Canaveral postmark dated on the day of Apollo 7's launch.

Below: An identical Orbit launch cover was autographed by Walt Cunningham's family. A true gentleman, Walt has let his wife sign first, with his two children signing below.



Another Space Craft Cover postmarked on the date of the Apollo 7 splashdown. General Sam Phillips, the headquarters chief of the Apollo programme, hailed the mission of Apollo 7 as "a 101 percent success." The media picked up the phrase, and the headlines and stories over the next several days spread the word. The crew signed this cover from the personal collection of Walt Cunningham.



"After the flight," recalls Walt Cunningham in his book 'The All-American Boys', "It was routine for each crew member to be decorated for their contributions to manned spaceflight with either the Distinguished Service Medal (the highest) or the Exceptional Service Medal (second highest). When it was all sorted out, the Apollo 7 crew was to receive its medals from President Johnson at the LBJ Ranch during the first week of November 1968We were each presented the Exceptional Service Medal, "NASA hero, second class."

Flight of the Phoenix

Apollo 7 Mission Patch That Could Have Been

Walter Cunningham - Apollo 7 Lunar Module Pilot

When Gus, Ed and Roger perished in the fire on Pad 34, the Apollo 1 back-up crew of Wally, Donn, and I inherited the mission. NASA was focused on recovering from the fire and getting back on schedule with Apollo VII. Our original patch concept was to depict a Saturn 1B rising from the ashes of its predecessor, much like the mythical Phoenix. Al Stevens, of North American Rockwell, gave us a couple of nice sketches of the concept. When NASA discouraged us from using the Phoenix analogy, Wally asked me to give Stevens a new idea. After discussion with Donn Eisele, I focused on the Earth orbital nature of our mission and sketched out the round Earth with our command module passing over it in an inclined elliptical orbit. From my sketches, Al Stevens did the final artwork and Wally approved the final design.



Over the years I have wondered what it would have been like had we been able to use our original concept. Apollo VII, rising from the ashes of the Apollo 1 fire that took the lives of three friends, was NASA's first "Return to Flight." This "Flight of the Phoenix" placed America firmly on the path to "Land a man on the Moon and return him safely to Earth in this decade." This commemorative design beautifully illustrates that accomplishment. Our Apollo spacecraft, sitting atop the Saturn 1B, rising from the Pad 34, is emulating the Phoenix and its renewed life. The flaming wings ready to take flight. In tribute to Apollo I, their spacecraft points toward the Moon. The six stars represent Gus, Ed, and Roger, along with our crew. Trimmed in red, white and blue; it pays tribute to our country for daring to dream the impossible.

Unique Launch Cover for Apollo 7

While a half million Americans lined the roads and beaches of Florida to watch the United States restart the space race, the Rocket Research Institute was busy launching three rockets in Nixon, Nevada,



one for each Apollo 7 astronaut, with special commemorative covers in the payload. Walt's signature appears on this visually packed cover, with two stamps, a souvenir sheet, and a triangular Rocket Mail stamp; a rubber stamp identifies this as #23 of the 250 flown covers.