

Apollo Children Grew Up with Moon always Looming; Kids 'Born into Space Program' Then Unaware of How Special Dads Were



Children of Apollo-era astronauts, including Amy Bean, Tracy Cernan Woolie, and siblings Jeff and Barbara Lovell along with moderator Gwen Griffin, laugh as they recount childhood stories during a panel discussion at Space Center Houston, Thursday, July 18, 2019. Photo: Mark Mulligan, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

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Jeff Lovell tiptoed past his mom watching TV in the living room and, quiet as a mouse, turned the handle to the front door of their Houston home.

Outside, the hundreds of reporters crowded on the lawn saw movement and started snapping photos. Lovell waved and posed before going back inside, sneakily opening the garage a few minutes later to pose for more pictures.

It was April 1970 and Lovell was just 4. He didn't understand the danger his father, Jim Lovell, faced aboard Apollo 13 after an oxygen tank explosion forced the crew to abort their trip to the moon.

"I was born into the space program," Jeff Lovell said Thursday during a panel at Space Center Houston, the visitor's center for NASA's Johnson Space Center. "So, my dad being an astronaut was just like anything else other parents did. It was their normal job."

Jeff Lovell was joined at the visitor's center Thursday by his sister, Barbara Lovell Harrison; Amy Bean, the daughter of fourth man on the moon Alan Bean; and Tracy Cernan Woolie, the daughter of last man on the moon Gene Cernan. The Thursday event was held in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 lunar mission, which landed on the moon July 20, 1969. Apollo 11 launched on July 16, 1969, and splashed down on Earth on July 24, 1969. The Houston area, home of the nation's astronaut corps, has been holding events all week in celebration of what arguably is the 20th century's greatest achievement.

Thirty miles north at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, 10 Apollo-era mission controllers helped their grandchildren "land" on the moon - virtually, of course.

The kids were set up in a separate room, complete with consoles and monitors that blared alarms alerting them to problems such as "major malfunction with life support systems."

The room was enormous compared to the Apollo 11 spacecraft - and it certainly held more people - but the mission controllers calmly walked their loved ones through the steps necessary to fix the problem just the same.

It was dramatic and chaotic. And when the crisis was averted, the grandparents cheered and clapped from their makeshift mission control room located just next door.

"We did it! All right!" one cheered.

'Confidence in NASA'

Thursday's event was just a simulation - easy, fun work for men who were in the real Mission Control room at Johnson Space Center when missions went haywire. These men saved astronauts' lives on a daily basis - something their children never forget.

"We had a lot of confidence in NASA and knew they would take care of our dads," Amy Bean said Thursday. "I look back now and say they helped save my dad's life on the launch of Apollo 12."

Apollo 12 - with Alan Bean, Pete Conrad and Richard Gordon on board - was struck by lightning about 35 seconds into liftoff on Nov. 24, 1969. But a quick-thinking Mission Control manager guided Bean to switch to a backup power supply. The mission went on to become the second to land astronauts on the moon, and Bean and Conrad performed two moonwalks.

Some of those in the room Thursday were also present during the problem-plagued Apollo 13 mission in 1970. The dramatic return to Earth of the three-person crew - Jim Lovell, Jack Swigert and Fred Haise - was detailed in the movie, "Apollo 13."

Missing their fathers

Barbara Lovell Harrison was 16 during that mission and remembers the night the oxygen tank exploded. Her mother came to her room and told her there was a problem on the flight and that her daddy wouldn't make it to the moon.

"I was worried about my dad not being able to step on the moon. I knew that was his lifelong goal," she said. "My mom told me not to worry, but it was harrowing at that age, to understand how serious it was."

She and the three others on the panel Thursday admitted that it was hard to be the child of an Apollo astronaut - they often didn't see their fathers until the weekend, and never knew if they were in Houston, in Florida or in space.

But for the most part, it was normal, they said. Dad was dad, and being an astronaut wasn't special.

"I remember finding a baseball trophy in the basement," Jeff Lovell said, "and thinking I was going to take it to school and tell everyone my dad was a professional baseball player. I remember thinking that would be really cool."

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