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WEST MICHIGAN SKIES

Astronaut corps carried on through tragedy

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GRAND RAPIDS — I remember that Sunday evening phone call well, although it occurred a half century ago.

It was from my boss, Grand Rapids Public Museum Director W.D. Frankforter.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked.

Unfortunately, I had.

I had been in Muskegon for most of that late January weekend, attending a family event, when I casually picked up a copy of the Muskegon Chronicle with its shocking headline. Grand Rapids native and astronaut-in-training Roger B. Chaffee, whom many expected to be one of the first humans to walk on the moon, had died in a flash fire aboard the Apollo 1 space capsule during a ground test.

Veteran astronauts Gus Grissom and Edward White also perished.

Chaffee had left Grand Rapids in the mid-1950s, first for Purdue University and then to the U.S. Navy, where he piloted critical surveillance missions over Cuba and tested new aircraft. When I came to the Grand Rapids Public Museum in 1964 as curator of its new planetarium, one of my early goals was to contact Chaffee and see if he could take time out of his training schedule to do a presentation for a hometown audience.

I was aware that he was among the 14 men selected to the third group of astronauts a year earlier, and I had heard plenty about him: his exceptional character (he was an Eagle Scout), his ambition, his strong interest in pushing the frontier of human exploration beyond the grips of Earth's gravity.

I was eager to meet him, but that was not to be.

The tragic fire occurred late afternoon on a Friday, Jan. 27, 1967. Over the weekend, Frankforter already had heard or seen media stories in the accident's wake about a local memorial: perhaps the new airport in Cascade Township, or a major street.

"Wouldn't the planetarium be most appropriate?" he asked. Responding enthusiastically, I mentioned there

already were planetariums around the country carrying names honoring pioneering Mercury and Gemini astronauts.

Frankforter approached Chaffee's parents and area officials with the idea. Most thought the planetarium should be considered, along with an extension of Madison Avenue into Wyoming. It ran partially through property that once was part of the original Kent County Airport, where a young Chaffee had watched planes take off with his father. Eventually, it was decided that both would take on the name of Roger B. Chaffee.

The dedication of the planetarium was in May. Fellow rookie astronaut and close Chaffee friend Eugene Cernan delivered the dedication address. Cernan and Chaffee both were Purdue graduates and Navy men. They also were neighbors raising young families during the rigorous early days of astronaut training.

PLANETARIUM'S NEW IDENTITY

Cernan became emotional delivering that address, recalling Chaffee's incredible technical skills and reasoning ability, factors that contributed to his being named to the first Apollo orbital test flight. He emphasized Chaffee's virtues as a person, with clearly defined goals and a passion to achieve them.

A new sign over the entryway changing the designation from "Planetarium" to "Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium" was unveiled. Through unfortunate circumstances, the facility, which had been added to the Grand Rapids Public Museum complex at Jefferson Avenue and State Street in 1964, now had a special identity. It would call attention to an ambitious graduate of Central High School who had set his sights on the moon.

That identity was maintained when, in 1994, a new state-of-the-art Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium opened as part of the Public Museum's Van Andel Museum Center.

Giving rededication remarks was another astronaut with strong Grand Rapids connections, Jack



Roger B. Chaffee's parents, Don and Blanco Chaffee, and astronaut Eugene Cernan, right, take part in the May 1967 dedication of the Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium. MLive.com/files

Lousma. Lousma had flown aboard the Earth's first orbiting space station, Skylab, in the 1970s and took part in the third space shuttle flight in 1982.

Incidentally, Lousma will be returning to Grand Rapids for a public presentation about his experiences at 7:30 p.m. May 3 at the museum.

The 1967 spacecraft fire resulted in a temporary halt to the Apollo program. A

space could be made that a case could be made that the Russians to reach the moon resulted in design compromises and insufficient testing of vital components for the Apollo spacecraft.

Revised safety and procedural measures were implemented. Ten successful flights followed, first into Earth's orbit, then to the vicinity of the moon, and beginning with the dramatic

Apollo 11 touchdown of July 1969, six lunar landings.

The final landing came in December 1972. As commander of Apollo 17, Cernan became the last person to lift his foot from the lunar surface. No human has set foot on the moon since.

Before Apollo 17, Cernan participated in two high-profile missions. In 1966, on the Gemini 9 mission, he became the third human to float in space. In mid-May 1969, Cernan piloted the Apollo 10 landing craft as it grazed the moon's surface in a final test flight before the historic first landing mission two months later.

After retirement, Cernan became a successful businessman and was an informative commentator in the 1980s for ABC's coverage of the early space shuttle launches and other space-related broadcasts.

On Jan. 16, 11 days before the 50th anniversary of Chaffee's tragic death and two months before his 83rd birthday, Cernan died.

Cernan and Chaffee leave us a rich legacy as committed space pioneers. Could

some local student, inspired by their ambition and resolve, or perhaps a visit to the Chaffee Planetarium, be among the first humans to set foot on Mars?

— David L. DeBruyn is curator emeritus of the Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium at the Grand Rapids Public Museum.

IF YOU GO

What: "Roger That," a two-day commemoration of the life and legacy of Roger B. Chaffee, with displays, events to introduce students and the public to accomplishments in space, and presentations by Chaffee family members, Vatican Observatory director Brother Guy Consolmagno and other specialists.

When: Friday and Saturday

Where: Friday at Grand Valley State University Eberhard Center downtown; details and banquet reservations: gvsu.edu/rogerthat. Saturday at Grand Rapids Public Museum; details and tickets to the 11 a.m. Consolmagno presentation: gpm.org/rogerthat



The entrance to the old Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium opens to show the mechanical Goto star and planet projector that dominated the room as visitors walked in. Submitted by David DeBruyn