

= 1966 NASA T @-@ 38 crash =

The 1966 NASA T @-@ 38 crash occurred when a NASA Northrop T @-@ 38 Talon crashed at Lambert Field in St. Louis , Missouri , on February 28 , 1966 , killing two Project Gemini astronauts , Elliot See and Charles Bassett . The aircraft , piloted by See , crashed into the McDonnell Aircraft building where their Gemini 9 spacecraft was being assembled . The weather was poor with rain , snow , fog , and low clouds . A NASA panel , headed by the Chief of the Astronaut Office , Alan Shepard , investigated the crash . While the panel considered possible medical issues or aircraft maintenance problems , in addition to the weather and air traffic control factors , the end verdict was that the crash was caused by pilot error .

In the aftermath of the crash , the backup crew of Thomas Stafford and Eugene Cernan were moved up to the primary position for the Gemini 9 mission , scheduled for early June . Jim Lovell and Buzz Aldrin , who had formerly been the backup for Gemini 10 , became the mission 's backup crew , and through the normal rotation were assigned as prime crew for Gemini 12 . Without the Gemini experience , it is unlikely that Aldrin would have been assigned to the Apollo 11 mission , during which he became the second man to walk on the moon .

= = The accident = =

See and Bassett were the prime crew assigned to the Gemini 9 mission . They and the backup crew for the mission , Tom Stafford and Gene Cernan , were flying to St. Louis from their normal training base in Houston , Texas , for two weeks of simulator training for rendezvous and docking procedures at McDonnell Aircraft , the prime contractor for the Gemini spacecraft . It was a routine flight they had made many times previously .

See and Bassett flew in one Northrop T @-@ 38A Talon jet trainer , tail number NASA 901 (Air Force serial number 63 @-@ 8181) , with See at the controls and Bassett in the rear seat . A second T @-@ 38 , NASA 907 , carried Stafford and Cernan in the same configuration . The two aircraft took off from Ellington Air Force Base in Texas at 7 : 35 a.m. CST , with See in the lead and Stafford in wing position . Weather at Lambert Field in St. Louis was poor , with rain , snow , and fog , broken clouds at 800 feet (240 m) and a flight ceiling of 1 @, @ 500 feet (460 m) , requiring an instrument approach . When the two aircraft emerged below the clouds shortly before 9 am , both pilots realized they had missed the outer marker and overshot the runway .

See then elected to perform a visual circling approach , a simplified landing procedure allowing flight under instrument rules , as long as the pilot can keep the airfield and any preceding aircraft in sight . The reported weather conditions at the airport were adequate for this type of approach , but visibility was irregular and deteriorating rapidly . Stafford began to follow See 's plane , but when he lost sight of it in the clouds he instead followed the standard procedure for a missed approach and pulled his aircraft up , back into the clouds for another attempt at an instrument landing .

See completed a full circle to the left at an altitude of 500 to 600 feet (150 to 180 m) , and announced his intention to land on the southwest runway (24) . With landing gear down and full flaps , the plane dropped quickly but too far left of the runway . See turned on his afterburner to increase power while pulling up and turning hard right . Seconds later , at 8 : 58 a.m. CST , the plane struck the roof of McDonnell Building 101 on the northeast side of the airport . It lost its right wing and landing gear on impact , then cartwheeled and crashed in a parking lot beyond the building which was in use as a construction staging area .

Both astronauts instantly succumbed to trauma sustained in the crash . Inside Building 101 , 17 McDonnell employees and contractors received mostly minor injuries from falling debris . The crash set off several small fires inside the building , and caused minor flooding from a number of broken pipes and sprinklers . By coincidence , See and Bassett died within 500 feet (150 m) of the very spacecraft that they were to have flown in orbit , which was in the final stages of assembly in another part of Building 101 . Spacecraft S / C9 was undamaged , but a piece of debris from the T @-@ 38 's wing struck the unfinished S / C10 spacecraft .

Meanwhile , Stafford and Cernan , still circling in the clouds in the second T @-@ 38 , had no idea

what had happened to their flight partners . Air traffic controllers were confused by the two planes in flight attempting different abort actions after the initial missed approach , and moreover no one on the ground knew who was in the crashed plane . After some delay , Stafford and Cernan were asked to identify themselves and given permission to land , but they were not informed of the crash until on the ground . Although personally distraught over the loss of his close colleagues and friends , Stafford acted as NASA 's chief contact on the scene until other personnel arrived to relieve him later in the day .

= = Investigation and aftermath = =

NASA immediately appointed a 7 @-@ member panel to investigate the crash , headed by their Chief of the Astronaut Office , Alan Shepard . While the panel weighed possible medical issues , aircraft maintenance problems , weather conditions , and air traffic control factors , their end verdict was pilot error , citing See 's inability " to maintain visual reference for a landing " as the primary cause of the crash . See was described as a " cautious and conservative " pilot in the accident report . In his memoir , chief astronaut Deke Slayton was less diplomatic , calling See 's piloting skills " old @-@ womanish . " Others , including Neil Armstrong , who had worked with See on the backup crew for Gemini 5 , have since defended See 's piloting ability .

Since the crash did not affect space flight operations and the spacecraft itself was undamaged ? it was shipped to NASA two days after the crash ? the accident caused neither delays nor engineering changes in the U.S. space program . However , the loss of the Gemini 9 crew did cause NASA to reshuffle the crew assignments for subsequent Gemini and Apollo missions ; Stafford and Cernan were moved up to the primary position for Gemini 9 , re @-@ designated Gemini 9A . Jim Lovell and Buzz Aldrin , who had formerly been the backup for Gemini 10 , became the back @-@ up crew for Gemini 9A , and through the normal rotation were then assigned as prime crew for Gemini 12 . Without experience during the Gemini mission , Buzz Aldrin would have been an unlikely choice for the Apollo 11 mission , during which he became the second man to walk on the moon .