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Apollo 1 Fire: Analysis of Aerospace Engineering Failure

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Table of Contents

I. Common Types of Failures in Aerospace Engineering

Aerospace Engineering is an advanced field that focuses on the design, development, and testing of aircraft, spacecraft, or other aerodynamic vehicles. This field is dominated by experts who leverage their expertise in propulsion, material science, thermodynamics, and control systems, functioning jointly to develop complex systems that are safe, reliable, and efficient. As a result of the intrinsic complexity of the systems that aerospace engineers work on, failures are imminent. Since aerospace engineers provide services to both private and public customers, safety is at utmost priority in all stages of development for a product. One essential method to ensure safety within a complex system is to perform failure analysis, a thorough process and investigation of a material, component, or structural failure. This process determines the root cause of the failure and implements corrective action to prevent similar failures from occurring again [7].

A. Types of Failure

Due to the nature of the products that aerospace engineers create (aircraft, spacecraft, etc.) system failures are highly severe and carry serious consequences, whether it be payload, passenger, or crew loss. Aerospace engineers specialize in producing solutions for complex fluid pressure, thermal, or material systems. Naturally, thermal failure is one of the more prominent forms of mechanical or structural breakdown caused when temperature changes induce stresses, strains, or degradation mechanisms. Thermal failures can lead to inconsistent instrumentation readings, and depending on this mission this can range from being a minor concern to complete mission failure if analysis is not performed thoroughly beforehand. Broadening focus to a larger concept, material failure is a very common mechanism in the field of aerospace engineering and must always be mitigated by some form of analysis on the structure. This is for the satisfaction of the customer, as well as the ethical obligations that come with designing products that must carry living organisms in a safe environment. Material failure can represent a wide array of things for the product after being discovered through analysis, and it can lead to very dangerous conditions for the system. These conditions include failures such as corrosion, torsion, or thinning and cracking of walls [2].

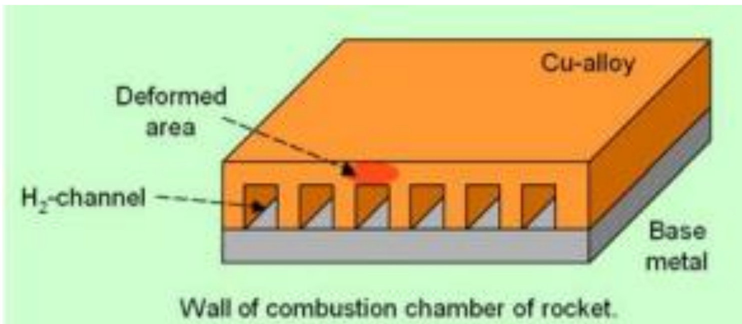

Figure 1: Example of deformation caused by a combination of thermal stresses and structural pressure [2].

As you can see in the figure above, this example of deformation occurred in the wall of a combustion chamber within a rocket and was caused by repetition of combustion gas pressure and thermal stress on the indicated area. For reference, the thickness of the indicated cross sectional area is around 1mm.

B. Causes of Failure

These crucial failures are the physical processes by which a material degrades or breaks under the stress that it experiences. The most prominent form of failure is fatigue, which is defined as the gradual weakening and fracture of a material due to cyclic (repeated) stresses that are often below the yield strength of the material. For clarification, the yield strength is commonly known as the failure point of the material for a single cycle [7]. High stress concentrations at points that are not designed to sustain these stresses for many cycles lead to imminent failure [7], and lack of design reviews or failure point testing is an important crux of aerospace product development that determines the success and safety of products created by aerospace engineers.

II. Testing Types and Methods

A. Preventative Methods

In performing failure analysis, one of the major subsections of this topic is preventative analysis. Preventative Failure Analysis (PFA) is a form of analysis that focuses on anticipating and eliminating potential roots of failure in a product before the failure ever occurs. Failure mode and maintenance analysis (FMEA / FMMA) are prime examples of preventative failure analysis, acting as proactive tools to specifically consider the consequences of a failure [7]. Ideally, FMEA is performed during the early design stages of a product or system, where changes are easy and cheap to implement. This way, real risks are never involved regarding the product or system, and severity is significantly reduced because the product is nowhere near completion.

1. Non-destructive & Destructive

Non-destructive analysis is a form of analysis that inspects and evaluates the properties of materials without permanently damaging or destroying the part. One of the most widely used preventative non-destructive analysis methods within the field of aerospace engineering is ultrasonic testing (UT). UT uses high frequency sound waves to penetrate materials and locate internal discontinuities that are invisible from the surface, when they are microscopic and before they reach a critical phase [2]. It is contactless and utilizes weak pulsed-laser scanners to reconstruct an accurate microscopic image of a surface. On the other hand, destructive analysis is a form of analysis that *does* damage the part, and it leaves permanent alteration to the sample, rendering it unsuitable for continued use. A good example of a preventative destructive form of analysis is thermal vacuum testing [1]. Thermal vacuum testing exposes a component or assembly to extreme temperatures within a vacuum chamber, seeking to determine the thermal extremes that the component can survive, and where it's failure points are for the expected mission [1]. The sample is usually not in the same condition after the test that it was before the test occurred.

B. Forensic Methods

The secondary form of failure analysis that opposes preventative methods is forensic methods. This form of failure analysis seeks to identify and investigate a failed product or structure to determine the root cause and sequence of its failure. Systematically, this method focuses on establishing causation and deciphering the evidence that is provided by the failure [3].

2. Non-destructive & Destructive

Given the nature of non-destructive testing, while it is primarily used as a form of preventative analysis, it can certainly also be performed forensically, as it does not interfere with the integrity of the material, and it still provides crucial information on the cause of the failure at a microscopic level and helps to determine why it may have occurred. This means that ultrasonic testing can be both preventative *and* forensic, fitting into the category here as well. When it comes to destructive forensic testing, physical fractography is one of the primary forms of this [4], and it differs from destructive preventative testing. This form of fractography involves cutting the component to gain access to the fracture origin, and certainly permanently renders the sample as an unusable product. However, this form of analysis is usually the most rigorous and yields the most results, as physical fractography can test hardness, strengths, or ductility [1].

III. Case Description

The Apollo 1 cabin disaster was one of the most significant failures in early aerospace history [4], and the event shaped many of the standards and guidelines that we use today. NASA's Apollo missions in the late 1960s served to beat the Soviet Union in the space race and eventually become the first men to ever walk on the moon. Apollo 1 was the first set of manned missions towards this goal, and on Jan. 27th, 1967, NASA was conducting flight tests on their launchpad in Cape Canaveral [4]. The mission for the day was to perform a "plugs out" test, creating a simulated countdown disconnected from external cables using the capsule's internal systems. The 3 astronauts who would be manning the capsule in orbit were all inside of this capsule. As part of the prelaunch procedure, the cabin was pressurized with pure oxygen at 16.7 psi, which is significantly higher than the standard atmospheric pressure at sea level (14.7 psi). The interior of the spacecraft contained numerous combustible materials, which included nylon, Velcro, and plastic foam [3]. These fabric materials are slow to burn under standard atmospheric conditions, but the cockpit was in a pressurized oxygen-rich state. Flight controllers were troubleshooting some communication problems when the astronauts communicated a fire had started in the cockpit and seven seconds later, the communications went silent. After five minutes, the ground crew was able to get inside the scorched interior, where it immediately became clear that the three astronauts had passed, and the structure on the inside was engulfed completely in flames.

IV. Case Investigation

After this tragedy occurred, NASA opened up the Apollo 204 Review Board to investigate the disaster. This review board was designated with creating a reconstruction of events to determine the cause of the fire and understand the series of errors that lead to the fire [3]. Engineers recounted that they detected a power surge accompanied by an electrical short. The likely cause was determined to be a chafed wire, somewhere in the lower left area of the command module, in close proximity to the environmental control unit below one of the astronaut's seats. This was the ignition source [3]. It was determined that the polyethylene tubing on the wires initially fueled the fire, and then VELCRO hooks attached to the various components within the spacecraft were the next materials to ignite. In the highly flammable atmosphere provided by the highly pressurized abundance of oxygen, the flame jumped from component to component, reaching the astronaut's suits less than 30 seconds after the first spark lit up the cabin. The Apollo 204 Review Board utilized various forms of forensic failure analysis, but disastrously did not perform enough preventative failure analysis. Forensic engineers performed numerous destructive and non-destructive analysis techniques to investigate the cause of this failure. One of the most significant destructive forensic analysis techniques they performed was flammability tests on every non-metallic material within the cabin, confirming that in a 16.7 psi environment of pure oxygen the flammability rapidly increased. Through non-destructive forensic analysis (visual inspection and documentation) engineers discovered evidence of electrical arcing from wiring components [4] which further supported the findings of a complete and utter lack of protection from electrical fire and a significant lack of crew protection. In addition, the hatch mechanism was found to be poorly designed for escape in emergency situations. The door opened inwardly, which when paired with the highly pressurized (and increasingly pressurized flame-engulfed) interior, made it nearly impossible to pull open.

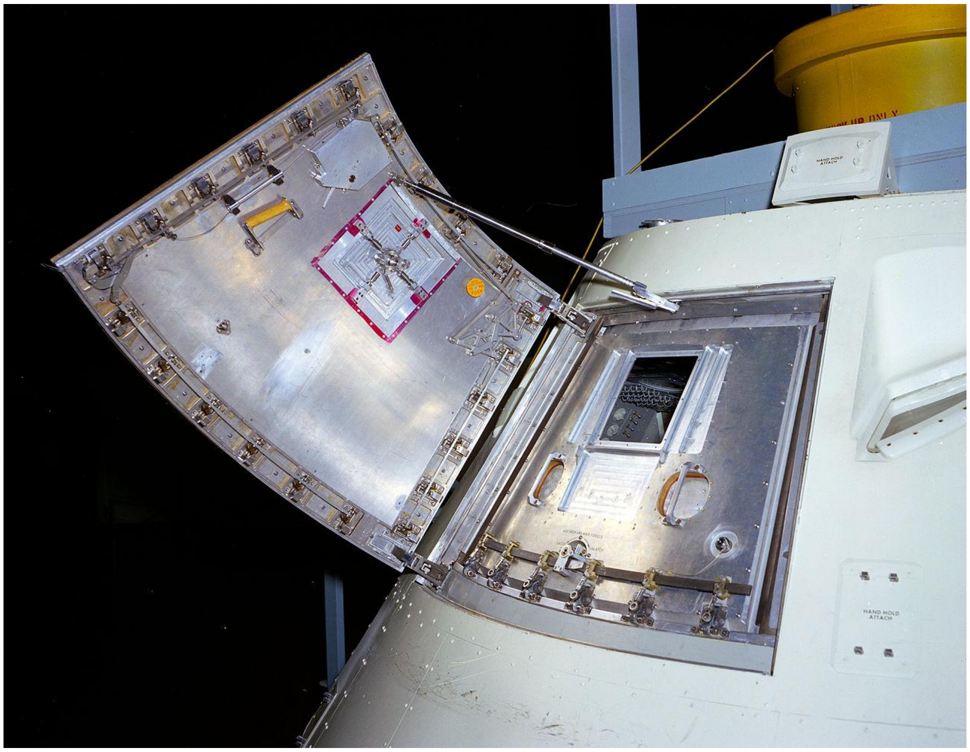

Figure 2: Image of the Internal/External hatch mechanism, preventing astronaut escape from the pressurized interior (Google Images)

V. Recommendations

The historical failure that occurred with the Apollo 1 capsule was an important wake-up call for the engineers at NASA, and led to many important changes with standardization of processes, and more safety procedures within the industry. A stark reality of this tragedy was that without it occurring, the unsafe practices and lack of standards would have likely continued until another worse mistake occurred to the program. This failure represented a multi-level failure within the program, from crew complacency to, inadequate quality control within the command module, and failure to even classify the test as hazardous. Mitigating this problem is an important process that must occur, and can happen in a few easy steps.

The most significant mechanical failure that 'sparked' this event was the faulty electronic power equipment. Adherence to IEEE 1100 would mitigate this risk and ensure a significantly higher factor of safety for the system and crew. IEEE 1100 standardizes practices for design, installation, and maintenance that ensures effective grounding and electrical power control for sensitive electronic processing equipment for commercial and industrial applications [6]. Following the recommendations of IEEE 1100 would have prevented any electrical shorting from occurring, or wire chafing against other nearby materials. Standard G94-22 [5] is another important standard that should be followed in all future applications, providing recommendations and guidance for evaluating metals for oxygen service. Particularly, G94-22 is concerned primarily with the properties of a metallic material associated with its relative susceptibility to ignition and propagation of combustion [5]. A quick skim of this document provides useful information on materials and layering techniques that minimize the ease of ignition, and which processes to avoid ensuring ignition and combustion do not occur. Adhering to these standards is an important way to prevent failure and ensure preservation of the system and its safety. After the flame, it was clear that the spacecraft was not prepared to survive intense thermal environmental changes. These changes could have been mitigated with thermal vacuum tasting [1], which specifically subjects the environment to combustible conditions. Some other important non-destructive techniques for preventative analysis would be ultrasonic testing [2], which is an important simulation testing technique to prevent material stress failure. If ultrasonic testing had been performed on the Apollo 1 capsule beforehand, it would have been realized that intense internal pressures would have led to the collapse of the housing structure and failure of the system.

VI.

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