Apollo 13: “Houston, We’ve Had a Problem”

Sample script written for portfolio purposes; not client work.

Author: KW Studios
Format: YouTube documentary narration
Estimated runtime: about 4 min 25 sec (663 narration words at 150 wpm)

Hook (0:00–0:15)

> [B-ROLL: NASA photo of Mission Control during the Apollo 13 TV broadcast, minutes before the accident (NASA S70-35136). Slow push-in on the consoles.]

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: April 13, 1970 — about 200,000 miles from Earth]

Nine minutes after a TV broadcast from space, three astronauts heard a bang. Then came a radio call that the world would remember, and often misquote: “Okay, Houston, we’ve had a problem here.”

Setup

> [B-ROLL: NASA launch footage of the Saturn V from Pad 39A, Kennedy Space Center, April 11, 1970. Then NASA crew portraits.]

Apollo 13 lifted off from Kennedy Space Center on April 11th, 1970, at 1:13 p.m. Central time. It was meant to be the third Moon landing.

On board were commander Jim Lovell, lunar module pilot Fred Haise, and command module pilot Jack Swigert. Swigert was a late swap. Days before launch, the crew was exposed to German measles, and the original command module pilot, Ken Mattingly, had no immunity.

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: Command module “Odyssey” · Lunar module “Aquarius”]

The crew flew in two linked spacecraft: the command module, Odyssey, and the lunar module, Aquarius. For two days, things went so smoothly that Mission Control told the crew, “We’re bored to tears down here.”

Rising tension

> [B-ROLL: NASA diagram of the service module tanks and fuel cells. Then NASA photos of flight director Gene Kranz at his console.]

On the evening of April 13th, Houston asked the crew to stir the cryogenic tanks, a routine chore. Then, at about 9:08 p.m. Houston time, came the bang.

Swigert radioed: “Okay, Houston, we’ve had a problem here.”

Capcom Jack Lousma answered: “This is Houston. Say again, please.”

And Lovell said: “Houston, we’ve had a problem. We’ve had a main B bus undervolt.”

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: Actual words: “Houston, we’ve had a problem.” The 1995 film: “Houston, we have a problem.”]

The line “we have a problem” came later, from the 1995 movie.

Warning lights spread. Two of the three fuel cells, the ship’s main power source, went dead. Lovell looked out a window and saw something venting into space. “It’s a gas of some sort,” he reported.

It was oxygen. Oxygen tank No. 2 had blown up, and tank No. 1 was failing too.

In Mission Control, flight director Gene Kranz told his team: “Let’s solve the problem but let’s not make it any worse by guessing.”

Turning point

> [B-ROLL: NASA photos of the darkened command module and of the crew inside Aquarius. NASA trajectory diagram of the free-return loop around the Moon.]

The landing was off. Now the goal was getting home. With about 15 minutes of power left in Odyssey, the crew moved into Aquarius and used it as a lifeboat. It was built to support two men for two days. Now it had to keep three alive for about four.

A burn of about half a minute on the lander’s descent engine put them back on a path that would swing around the Moon and fall toward Earth.

Behind the Moon, they reached 248,655 miles from Earth, the farthest humans had ever gone. That record stood until NASA’s Artemis II crew passed it in April 2026.

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: 248,655 miles — distance record, 1970–2026]

The next threat was carbon dioxide. The lunar module’s scrubbers used round canisters. The command module’s spares were square. Engineers in Houston, led by Ed Smylie, designed an adapter from things the crew had on board: plastic bags, a

cardboard cue card, a spacesuit hose, and duct tape. It became known as “the mailbox.” Once it was hooked up, carbon dioxide levels dropped.

> [B-ROLL: NASA photo of Deke Slayton demonstrating the canister setup in Mission Control (S70-35013); NASA photo of the “mailbox” inside Aquarius.]

Resolution

> [B-ROLL: NASA photos of the damaged service module after jettison, Aquarius drifting away, parachutes, splashdown, and the crew aboard USS Iwo Jima (S70-35614).]

The trip home was cold. To save power, almost everything was switched off. The temperature fell to 38 degrees Fahrenheit. The crew cut their water to six ounces each per day. Lovell lost 14 pounds.

On April 17th, they began powering Odyssey back up and cast off the damaged service module. Seeing it for the first time, Lovell said, “There’s one whole side of that spacecraft missing.”

Then they let go of Aquarius. Kerwin radioed, “Farewell, Aquarius, and we thank you.”

Odyssey hit the atmosphere, and the radio went silent for several minutes. Then the parachutes opened. At about 12:07 p.m. Central time, Apollo 13 splashed down in the South Pacific, about four miles from the recovery ship USS Iwo Jima.

> [ON-SCREEN TEXT: Mission time: 142 hours, 54 minutes, 41 seconds]

Investigators later traced the explosion to that oxygen tank. Its heater’s thermostatic switches had not been upgraded for a higher voltage. During a long heating in a ground test before launch, wiring inside overheated, leaving what NASA calls “a potential bomb.”

Outro/CTA

> [B-ROLL: NASA photo of flight directors cheering in Mission Control after splashdown. Fade on the Apollo 13 mission insignia.]

NASA calls Apollo 13 a “successful failure.” The crew came home because people in space and on the ground kept solving the problem in front of them.

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SOURCES

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