

mathematicians were now working around the clock trying to find a way to rescue the crew. When the explosion occurred, the spacecraft was still heading away from Earth. Now it was decided that the crew's only hope of survival was to use the rocket's last remaining engine to travel round the Moon and then get back on course for Earth. Nothing like this had ever been tried before, and no one knew whether or not it would work.

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Back on Earth the job of the engineers and mathematicians was to calculate precisely how and when to fire the little rocket to give the astronauts the best possible chance of getting back. The maths involved was incredibly complex and even the tiniest calculation had to be done with 100 per cent accuracy. Everyone knew they had only one opportunity to get it right. If they got it wrong the rocket would have no more fuel left for a second attempt.

For several days and nights no one went home or managed to get more than a few minutes' sleep. When they did take a break they lay down on the floor beneath their desks. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of miles away, in the darkness of space, conditions for the three astronauts were even more uncomfortable.

With the rocket's main computer switched off to save power, it quickly got damp and extremely cold inside the 'lifeboat'. The astronauts felt they could cope with the discomfort, but with three of them instead of two they were using up much more oxygen than the Lunar Module was designed for. Before long, their air supply began to turn poisonous as the level of deadly carbon dioxide rose higher and higher.