

Betty Grissom, Who Sued in Astronaut Husband's Death, Dies at 91

By **Katharine Q. Seelye**

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Betty Grissom, the widow of the astronaut Virgil Grissom, whose death in a launchpad fire in 1967 led her to sue a NASA contractor, died on Saturday at her home in Houston. She was 91.

Her son Mark confirmed the death. He said neighbors had noticed that Ms. Grissom had picked up her morning newspaper but not her afternoon mail and went to check on her. She had died while sorting the laundry, he said, and the cause of death was not known.

Virgil Grissom, known as Gus, one of the seven original Mercury astronauts immortalized by Tom Wolfe in his book “The Right Stuff,” was the second American in space, after Alan Shepard. He was also the command pilot of Apollo 1, which was intended to test the Apollo capsule for flights to the moon.

But during a routine test at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, an electrical fire swept through the command module, killing all three astronauts aboard — Mr. Grissom, Edward H. White II and Roger B. Chaffee.

It was the first fatal accident in the history of the United States space program. Mr. Grissom was 40.

Multiple investigations followed. While they never pinpointed the source of the fire, they concluded that several design flaws, including a pure oxygen atmosphere inside the cabin, had exacerbated it. In addition, the hatch door was difficult to open,

preventing the crew from escaping.

NASA subsequently undertook major modifications in design, materials and procedures, including making nonflammable spacesuits. Combustible materials in the cabin were replaced with self-extinguishing versions.



Mr. Grissom, Edward H. White II and Roger B. Chaffee posed for a photograph at Launch Complex 34 at Cape Kennedy, 10 days before they were killed there when the space module they were in caught fire. NASA

Nearly four years after the fire, Mr. Grissom's widow, who was raising two sons on her own, filed a multimillion-dollar wrongful death suit against the Apollo program's primary contractor, North American Rockwell. (The government itself cannot be sued.)

The statute of limitations for wrongful death for survivors was two years and had expired, said Ronald D. Krist, the Houston lawyer who represented Ms. Grissom. But the general negligence statute was four years and had not expired, allowing her to sue for Mr. Grissom's pain and suffering. She settled for \$350,000, or about \$2.2 million in today's dollars.

Her action brought Ms. Grissom considerable grief, with strangers accusing her of being unpatriotic and the close-knit space community shunning her.

The experience embittered the family, said Mark Grissom, who was 13 when his father died.

"We got the dark side of NASA," he said in a telephone interview on Thursday. "People who were my friends were no longer my friends. A lot of people turned their back on us, and Mom got a lot of hate mail. They were like, 'How dare you sue NASA?' We were no longer part of the NASA family."

Mr. Krist said that NASA had forwarded her a note from one critic who said that Ms. Grissom should not be filing a suit because her husband had assumed a certain amount of risk by being an astronaut.

But Mr. Krist, a product-liability lawyer, said the astronauts had a right to expect that their capsule would be properly designed and that all prudent precautions would be taken to protect them. "The capsule was anything but fireproof," he said.

In any case, Mr. Krist said, the suit made it easier for the families of the other two astronauts who were killed to receive compensation without having to go to court.

“Despite the criticism, she never flinched,” Mr. Krist said of Ms. Grissom. “She never regretted the lawsuit and never hesitated in her commitment to see it through.”

Betty Lavonne Moore was born on Aug. 8, 1927, in Mitchell, Ind., to Claude and Pauline (Sutherlin) Moore. Her father worked at a cement plant. She grew up in Mitchell and met Mr. Grissom in high school. They soon married, and she got a job as a late-night telephone operator for Indiana Bell while he studied mechanical engineering at Purdue University on the G.I. Bill.

Ms. Grissom spoke with friends and guests at a memorial event at Cape Canaveral on Jan. 27, 2017, the 50th anniversary of the Apollo disaster. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

In addition to her son Mark, Ms. Grissom is survived by another son, Scott; two grandchildren; and one great-grandchild. Her sister, Mary Lou Fosbrink, is deceased.

In the 1983 movie adaptation of “The Right Stuff,” Ms. Grissom was portrayed by Veronica Cartwright and Mr. Grissom by Fred Ward.

When she received news of her husband's death in 1967, Ms. Grissom was at a friend's house for their weekly poker game. She said at the time that she had “already died 100,000 deaths” being married to an astronaut.

An early scare came in July 1961 after Mr. Grissom, as the second American in space, had successfully completed a 15-minute suborbital flight under the Mercury program. He nearly drowned when his capsule landed in the Atlantic Ocean and sank after the hatch blew off prematurely.

On Jan. 27, 2017, on the 50th anniversary of the Apollo disaster, Ms. Grissom and her family attended a small memorial ceremony at Cape Canaveral on Launch Complex 34, the now-crumbling concrete site where her husband's capsule had been engulfed in flames.

The site was decorated with three red, white and blue floral wreaths provided by the Grissom family to honor all three men who had perished. She and her family had come annually on the anniversary of the fire, but she said she sensed that this would be her last time.

In contrast to the way she had been shunned in earlier days, Ms. Grissom was the center of attention, according to an account in The New York Times.

She told an interviewer that her husband's sacrifice had helped pave the way for future missions in which other astronauts made it to the moon.

Still, she said, “I'm pretty sure he got to the moon before they did.”

“Of course he didn't make it,” she added, “but in spirit I think he was already there.”

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