They were ready, after a manic changeover of modules the astronauts were now back safely strapped into the limping, damp, sick Odyssey module. The astronauts silently contemplated the final leg of their horrendous journey. All too well they knew the chance of success was slim as they had no real idea of what damage had actually been caused to the delicate spacecraft. Re-entry to Earth was tricky at the best of times but in this case it was near impossible. However failure was not an option success was a must.

“Buckle-up, let’s do this!” commanded Jim, although he looked and sounded calm he was fully aware of the risks involved, a small bead of sweat slowly trickled down his pale tired face.

“All controls have been checked commander,” reported Jack. You could hear the radio crackling in the background as mission control acknowledged the report.

As the rocket fired forward the crew looked serious, Freddo was hugging himself to keep warm, rocking slightly in his chair.

“Hang in their buddy, you’ll be home before you know it,” Jim spoke kindly as he knew Fred was on his last legs; he was struggling to manage the pain.

Fred smiled weakly at Jim and said

“At least we will feel some heat for the first time to 5 days if we hit re-entry right!”

“Not too much I hope- I don’t want to land looking like fried chicken” Jim grimly stated.

Silence once again shrouded the module.

“We have a go on re-entry,” crackled the radio, “communication blackout commencing in 5,4,3,2,1- see you on the other side boys….”

During the communication blackout everyone was watching and waiting mission control froze in time as the countdown clock ran down. The Lovell family sat in the front room of their house huddled together for strength, the room was cramped: Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldridge, NASA representatives and families from the base were all there waiting for a sign, a noise, an image to let them know that splashdown had successfully occurred. Murmuring and a quiet, almost white noise, hummed in the background as people tried to decided what they might say if the worse should happen, faces had signs of absolute exhaustion etched on them. The clock ran; seconds felt like hours it was excruciating for everyone involved.

Marilyn Lovell tried to not let the fear show on her face but the constant smile on her face was starting to drop, she felt sick to the pit of her stomach; she knew however she must stay strong and brave for her children.

“Mum you are squeezing my shoulder real hard” Marilyn briefly looked down not even realising she had hold of her youngest child.

“Sorry poppet,” she whispered and gently let go of the young girl.

“It’s ok Mum, we are all nervous, he will come back won’t he?” Her quiet voice shaking as she uttered these words.

“ Has your Dad ever let us down? “ Marilyn boomed, everyone quickly glanced in her direction, her outburst pulling them away from the constant TV news stream.

The Odyssey re-entry was reported thoroughly by the newsrooms a constant buzz from the TV informed the family and the thousands of people that had gathered across the globe about the stricken spaceships every move.

The module shook, vibrated, rolled and moaned as if it were in pain as the ship pushed through the Earth’s harsh atmosphere. As Jim looked out the small window he could see the Earth coming closer and closer through the flames that licked at the sides of the ship.

“I sure hope that heat shield holds, it is mighty warm in here” Jim whispered. Fred and Jack starred out at the window their thoughts echoing Jim’s. Water poured from the command controls as condensation which had formed finally broke free covering the pilots with a fine sheen of liquid. Panic bubbled within all of them but they fought hard to keep calm, praying silently for the ship to stay together.

Never had Jim felt more alone or more frightened as the countdown clock continued to run.

As the clock hit the 3 minute mark mission control desperately searched the screens for signs that the ship had re-appeared.

“Odyssey this is mission control, do you copy over” Ken Mattingly had spent the last few seconds constantly repeating this phrase over and over, Mission Control echoed as everyone sat still and silently waiting for a response. The staff were well aware that the life-saving parachutes might fail to open in which case all their efforts would be in vain. Pens tapped and the smell of cigarette smoke became overwhelming as frustration in not hearing anything began to leak from the technicians who were exhausted.

As seconds felt like hours the clock began to run well past the 3 minute mark

“ We have never gone beyond the 3 minute 23 seconds in a radio blackout before” whispered the doctor to himself, “this does not look good.”

“Odyssey this is Mission Control, do you copy over” This phrase was starting to feel like a ghost call, hope was ebbing away after each repetition the air was almost blue with smoke and the mood was becoming more and more desperate.

“4 minutes and counting” reported the scientist in the corner, Ken smashed his fist on the top of the console

“Dammit Odyssey, this is Mission control do you copy over” Ken almost screamed, the anger in his voice evident as the realisation that time had probably run out for the disaster stricken crew….

“Houston this is Odyssey it is good to be home” simultaneously the screens filled with the capsule hurtling towards the sea, parachutes clearly visible, slowing it’s descent.

The exterior of the Odyssey was scorched as a result of the extreme temperatures it had suffered when entering Earth’s atmosphere, but it was in one piece now bobbing on top of the South China sea.

The noise that erupted at Mission Control was unbelievable, tears poured down grown men’s faces as relief swept the room like a tidal wave, cigars were lit and hands were shook that the impossible had been made possible.

“Our biggest failure but our greatest success” roared Commander Kranz.

“Hisssssss” the door of the capsule was pulled open the fresh air was the sweetest smell that Fred Haise had ever breathed, “ I was not sure I would ever breath fresh air again” Fred stammered to his fellow astronauts.

“It has been a pleasure to fly with you fellows” Jim Lovell exclaimed emotionally, shaking hands with his co-pilots.

The divers worked carefully and precisely to remove the harnesses that had kept the astronauts in place during re-entry and then slowly lifted then into the safety of the naval helicopters. The battered Odyssey capsule was also pulled out and loaded on board the aircraft carrier; later this would be sent away to discover the truth about what really happened on board during that fateful mission. As the crew finally touched down on the aircraft carrier they were bombarded with camera flashes and what felt like a million questions, the crew smiled and relief was obvious on their tired worn faces.

“We would like to thank the American people for their support during this difficult mission, and we are here today only as a result of many great minds believing in us and the spacecraft. This goes to show that no mission to explore such extremes are routine and we are all looking forward to be re-united with our families and friends” As Commander of Apollo 13 - Jim Lovell read this feeling proud of what they had achieved but desperate to sleep!