

BBC THE NEW WAY TO WINTER-PROOF YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

Science Focus

LOST IN SPACE

THE HUNT FOR THE UNIVERSE'S FIRST STARS



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I survived the worst fire in the history of space exploration and had to keep it a secret

Astronaut Jerry Linenger opens up about one of the worst accidents in space, and the cover-up that followed

On 24 February 1997, Jerry Linenger and his five crewmates aboard the Mir space station faced a danger they hoped they'd never encounter: a fire. It remains the worst fire to have ever broken out inside a crewed vessel in orbit.

The story unfolds in the new BBC docu-series *Once Upon a Time in Space*. It reveals how disaster struck when a solid-fuel oxygen generator, built to enhance the air supply for the Russian station, which was hosting more crew than usual, sparked a devastating blaze. The generator clicked on, ignited and blasted out a jet of flame almost a metre long (3ft). The station quickly filled with thick, dark smoke and the only evacuation route was blocked by the flame.

Immediately, the crew sprang into action, donning oxygen masks and fighting the flames. A tense 14 minutes later, the fire was finally out and the crew was safe.

"It's a nightmare scenario," Linenger told *BBC Science Focus*. "I've never seen smoke spread like that before... you feel you have to keep talking to yourself to stay calm."

Despite having only a water-based fire extinguisher to hand and an air filtration system that didn't live up to its reputation, the crew were able to douse the fire and clear the smoke. But as Mir's orbit took it around Earth and away from the Sun's heat, the smoke-filled droplets of water vapour began to condense on the walls of the hull, endangering the station's electronics.

"If there was any negative news about the space station, they wanted to suppress it"

It took the crew 24 hours to mop up the black water using sweaty clothing. But it was even longer before people on the ground learned the full extent of what had happened.

"I think it was the Russians," said Linenger. "If there was any negative news about the space station, they wanted to suppress it."

"It was a major fire," he added, contrary to the official tale that –

ABOVE Former astronaut Jerry Linenger

other than a small fire caused by a cigarette – everything was fine. "We survived by the skin of our teeth."

"If that flame had pointed toward the hull, we'd have had rapid decompression, quick suffocation and we'd all be dead."

This is part of a longer article that appears on sciencefocus.com. Read the full conversation at bit.ly/MirFire

