

Apollo boilerplate BP-1227 was a Block 2 capsule and allocated to the Atlantic Recovery Force CTF-140 in 1967 at the Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Virginia. Here it joined possibly another six boilerplates with CTF-140. These were –

- BP-1204 which was used for sea retrieval tests and based at Rota, Spain
- BP-1206 based at RAF Woodbridge in the UK
- BP-1207 based at Patrick AFB in Florida
- BP-1220 based at Norfolk, Virginia
- BP-1223 based at Lajes in the Azores
- BP-1233 based in Bermuda. This capsule might be the one used for the only exercise listed in the official NASA Chronology, it taking place January 26-29th 1969. ^[1]

Once allocated, the capsules came under the direct control of CTF-140 and it was they who would organise exercises and collaborate with other units needing a capsule to practice recovery techniques for a returning Apollo mission.

A recovery exercise would need a ship to place the boilerplate in the selected location and then stand-off at about twenty miles distance whilst an ARRS unit homed in on the capsule using a SARAH unit. There was also an optical system to aid visibility. If it was an "all-up" exercise to fully simulate an actual recovery the Pararescuemen would be riding in the ARRS search airplane and parachute to the BP. This was a complicated procedure taking into consideration the rapidly drifting BP and dropping men and equipment (smoke pots, rafts, collar etc) to the target.

Most of the support personnel - air crews and PJs - would have gone through this training once or several times. With that level of training behind them they probably could have gone through a less full exercise jumping to the located BP from a helicopter rather than parachuting from a fixed wing aircraft. Once found, the helicopter would drop divers to attach a floatation collar on the capsule and then wait for the ship to return and pick up the capsule. The boilerplates had a high drift rate because of their shape and this could cause difficulties when the divers were deployed. For periodic training they sometimes practiced in a local body of water placing a collar around a BP.

At some point BP-1227 was assigned by CTF-140 to an ARRS unit for such an exercise when, according to a 1976 letter from the Department of the Navy, it was lost off “.. the coast of England”. Dates for this mishap in other sources range from February 1969 off the Azores ^[2] to January 1970 in the North Sea ^[3] and January/April in the Bay of Biscay. The most quoted location for the loss is the Bay of Biscay in both American and Russian references. It is interesting to note a couple of coincidences that may or may not have a bearing on the loss. The January 1970 date is roughly the same as when the 67th ARRS moved from Moron, Spain to RAF Woodbridge in the UK and April 1970 coincides with an incident involving a Soviet nuclear submarine in this area.

The CTF-140 ships allocated to the recovery force during the time frame when BP-1227 was lost were –

Apollo 10 – USS Rich (DD820)	Apollo 11 – USS New (DD818)
Apollo 12 – USS Austin (LPH38)	Apollo 13 – USS New (DD818)
USS Hawkins (DD873)	USS Bordelon (881)
	USS Forest Royal (DD872)
	USS William C. Lane (DD763)

During or after the exercise when the capsule was lost, whenever it took place, BP-1227 was picked up by a Soviet vessel described as a fishing vessel (trawler or spy ship?). The next firm information we have about this particular boilerplate is on 7/8th September 1970 when it was handed to the USCG cutter 'Southwind' whilst this ship was on a visit to Murmansk, having been in the care of officials from the US Embassy for up to three weeks prior to the handover. A Soviet report by the says that the capsule showed little signs of corrosion but that according to experts from the CDBMB (the Soviet Central Design Bureau of Machine Building) who examined BP-1227 after its recovery, it had pieces missing, notably an optical glass lantern and its associated search light beacon. The 'Southwind' docked at Baltimore on 17th November 1970 having first called in at Norfolk, Virginia to deliver the boilerplate into the care of the Port Services Department.

The Port Services Department at Norfolk was responsible for the maintenance of the boilerplates assigned to CTF-140. They would have been the unit that carried out any repairs necessary to BP-1227 before it was returned to service with the recovery force. These are likely to have been replacement of the location aids and possibly repairing the hatch. It is highly likely that the Russians opened it just to see if anything was hidden inside. ^[4]

Following the end of the Apollo flights (ASTP in July 1975), BP-1227 was returned to the Port Services Department where it was stored at the Naval Air Station. On 4th November 1976 title to the capsule was transferred from NASA to the National Air and Space Museum. The NASM almost immediately loaned the boilerplate to Grand Rapids, Michigan to serve as a time capsule. The boilerplate went straight from Norfolk, Virginia to its new home. Ownership of the capsule was transferred from NASM to the Grand Rapids Public Museum on 28th March 1986.

Much is known about the history of Apollo boilerplate capsule BP-1227 except the important bit. To date repeated FOIA requests to the Royal Navy, NASA, NARA, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defence and the Department of State have failed to provide any answers. So for the moment, who, when, where and how it was lost remain a mystery.

[1] 1978 NASA disposition of spacecraft document. Unfortunately, for purposes of solving the loss of BP-1227, it places this capsule at Grand Rapids, Michigan.

[2] *Also, the Soviets returned an Apollo training capsule (BP-1227) that they had recovered at sea. Apparently the U.S. Air Force Aerospace Rescue and Recovery personnel who were using the 9,500 pound capsule for training but lost it at sea near the Azores in February, 1969. It was recovered by a Soviet fishing trawler.* [From USCG history site – note use of the word “Apparently”]

[3] *In early 1970, UK-based naval units were training in recovery of an Apollo boilerplate capsule (BP-1227) as part of their assigned mission of rescuing Apollo spacecraft in the case of an emergency abort or return to earth. The capsule disappeared at sea. The circumstances of the loss of the capsule are still not clear. It is not known whether a Soviet 'fishing vessel' nearby was in fact a spy trawler and if the capsule was taken as part of an intelligence operation.* [From Encyclopaedia Astronautix]
The boilerplate CM lost by the Royal Navy and recovered by the Soviet Union was SN BP-1227. [This bit, listed as being ‘final confirmation’ by Dwayne Day appears to have been edited out of the latest version of the entry in Encyclopaedia Astronautix. A FOIA request to the Royal Navy Archives failed to find any involvement with this episode. The only reference to the Apollo programme was an offer of help at the time of the Apollo 13 flight. Also, a link that was claimed to give more details no longer functions.]

[4] Things did get left inside boilerplate capsules that weren't supposed to be there. Boilerplate CM009 was used in a sub-orbital test in February 1966. When opened, rolling around on the floor was a 12" clinical thermometer. Somehow it had survived unbroken for the duration of the flight.