

very delicate lock mechanism...Just get the feeling that it's hot and swelled in there or something. It doesn't want to come out...Come out of there, rascal."⁴⁹

Pitrolo felt the real trouble was that after the removal of the cover, the unit had not cooled down as quickly as had been anticipated and was not at the temperature it had been during training for removal.⁵⁰ Finally, with a few taps from a hammer on the tool to give it a better grip, the fuel capsule came out and the RTG activated. SNAP-27 began to produce the power for the ALSEP as planned and predicted.

The quiet technology was not highly noticed by the general public in its lunar surface supportive role, but nevertheless it had shared in a truly spectacular space triumph. This was clear in the reaction of scientists to the ALSEP:

Significance of the successful deployment and operation of ALSEP, in relation to the smaller experiment package left on the moon during the pioneer Apollo 11 landing mission, was expressed by one scientist this way:

"It's really an enormous jump, probably the biggest jump we will ever take in understanding the moon. Not that we won't do more and better things, but this is the first enormous step."⁵¹

Reports on the ALSEP and the RTGs continued to appear in the news as the days went by.

Pitrolo was present at Cape Kennedy for the launch of Apollo 13 in April 1970—"A beautiful day; a beautiful, perfect launch." Back home in bed some nights later, this mood changed abruptly when he received a phone call at 3:00 in the morning from Carpenter. "I answered immediately," he said, "because I was lying there awake. So Carpenter says: 'Oh, you've heard.' I said 'Heard what?' Then he explained about the explosion on Apollo 13 and said 'They might be coming back at higher velocity than normal.'" As all America was learning, the astronauts were riding home using the Lunar Module and its life support systems and engine as a lifeboat. Plans were being made for them to re-enter the command module and to separate the Lunar Module from it before atmospheric re-entry. Pitrolo got his people together preparatory to calculating problems of a higher-than-normal-velocity re-entry. However, normal re-entry trajectory and velocity were achieved, as had been calculated