November 18, 1978 was the Jonestown Massacre, a notorious mass suicide that saw cult leader Reverend Jim Jones convince more than 900 men, women and children to drink Kool-Aid laced with cyanide.

The greatest single loss of American civilian life in a non-natural disaster until the events of September 11, 2001, the tragedy at Guyana also ranks among the largest mass suicides in history. One of those who died at the nearby airstrip was Leo Ryan, who became the only Congressman murdered in the line of duty in the history of the United States.

So how did Jamestown begin? The Jim Jones cult originally formed in in the 1950s under the name The People's Temple. The People's Temple formed in Indianapolis believed in a form of apostolic socialism. The temple later moved to California, where it built substantial roots in San Francisco. At first, Jim Jones and his followers seemed to stand for noble goals such as racial integration.

The dark of side of Jim Jones came out in a series of newspaper articles by journalist Lester Kinsolving. After the Kinsolving pieces and the defection of eight members, People's Temple leader Jim Jones convinced many of his most avid followers to join him in starting a commune in Northern Guyana. The commune became known as Jonestown.

Jim Jones and his followers built a commune in Guyana and seemed to be welcomed by the local Guyanese government. In 1978, California congressman Rep. Leo Ryan looked into Jonestown after being contacted by several frustrated family members of Jonestown members. Ryan and some journalists flew down to Guyana to look into Jonestown. Four days later, Jones asked his members to drink the poisoned Kool-Aid, one of the largest mass killing of US citizens in US history.

Visit by Congressman Ryan, murders

In November 1978, U.S. Congressman Leo Ryan led a fact-finding mission to Jonestown to investigate allegations of human rights abuses. Ryan's delegation included relatives of Temple members, Don Harris, an NBC network news reporter, an NBC cameraman and reporters for various newspapers. The group arrived in Georgetown on November 15. On November 17, Ryan's delegation traveled by airplane to Jonestown. The delegation left hurriedly the afternoon of November 18 after Temple member Don Sly attacked Ryan with a knife.[83] The attack was thwarted, bringing the visit to an abrupt end. Congressman Ryan and his people succeeded in taking with them fifteen People's Temple members who had expressed a wish to leave. At that time, Jones made no attempt to prevent their departure.

Port Kaituma Airstrip shootings
As members of Ryan's delegation boarded two planes at the airstrip, Jones' "Red Brigade" armed guards arrived in a tractor-pulled trailer and began shooting at the delegation. The guards killed Congressman Ryan and four others near a twin engine Otter aircraft. At the same time, one of the supposed defectors, Larry Layton, drew a weapon and began firing on members of the party that had already boarded a small Cessna. An NBC cameraman was able to capture footage of the first few seconds of the shooting at the Otter. The five killed at the airstrip were Congressman Ryan; Don Harris, a reporter from NBC; Bob Brown, a cameraman from NBC; San Francisco Examiner photographer Greg Robinson; and Temple member Patricia Parks. Surviving the attack were future Congresswoman Jackie Speier, then a staff member for Ryan; Richard Dwyer, the Deputy Chief of Mission from the U.S. Embassy at Georgetown; Bob Flick, a producer for NBC News; Steve Sung, an NBC sound engineer; Tim Reiterman, a San Francisco Examiner reporter; Ron Javers, a San Francisco Chronicle reporter; Charles Krause, a Washington Post reporter; and several defecting Temple members.

The murder of Congressman Ryan was the only murder of a Congressman in the line of duty in the history of the United States.

Deaths in Jonestown

Later that same day, 909 inhabitants of Jonestown, 276 of them children, died of apparent cyanide poisoning, mostly in and around a pavilion. This resulted in the greatest single loss of American civilian life in a non-natural disaster until the September 11, 2001 attacks. No video was taken during the mass suicide, though the FBI did recover a 45 minute audio recording of the suicide in progress.

On that tape, Jones tells Temple members that the Soviet Union, with whom the Temple had been negotiating a potential exodus for months, would not take them after the Temple had murdered Ryan and four others at a nearby airstrip. The reason given by Jones to commit suicide was consistent with his previously stated conspiracy theories of intelligence organizations allegedly conspiring against the Temple, that men would "parachute in here on us," "shoot some of our innocent babies" and "they'll torture our children, they'll torture some of our people here, they'll torture our seniors."[92] Parroting Jones' prior statements that hostile forces would convert captured children to fascism, one temple member states "the ones that they take captured, they're gonna just let them grow up and be dummies."

Given that reasoning, Jones and several members argued that the group should commit "revolutionary suicide" by drinking cyanide-laced grape flavored Flavor Aid (often misidentified as Kool-Aid) along with a sedative. One member, Christine Miller, dissents toward the beginning of the tape. When members apparently cried, Jones counseled "Stop this hysterics. This is not the way for people who are Socialists or Communists to die. No way for us to die. We must die with some dignity." Jones can be heard saying, "Don't be afraid to die," that death is "just stepping over into another plane" and that "[death is] a friend." At the end of the tape, Jones concludes: "We didn't commit suicide, we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world." According to escaping Temple members, children were given the drink first and families were told to lie down together. Mass suicide had been previously discussed in simulated events called "White Nights" on a regular basis. During at
least one such prior White Night, members drank liquid that Jones falsely told them was poison.

Jones was found dead in a deck chair with a gunshot wound to his head that Guyanese coroner Cyril Mootoo stated was consistent with a self-inflicted gun wound. An autopsy of Jones' body also showed levels of the barbiturate Pentobarbital which may have been lethal to humans who had not developed physiological tolerance. Jones' drug usage (including LSD and marijuana) was confirmed by his son, Stephan, and Jones' doctor in San Francisco.