

News Digest

Shuttle blast 'defies explanation' NASA organizes investigation; fuel tank may be cause

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A catastrophic explosion blew apart the space shuttle Challenger 75 seconds after liftoff Tuesday, sending schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe and six NASA astronauts to a fiery death in the sky 8 miles out from Kennedy Space Center.

"We mourn seven heroes," said President Reagan.

The accident defied quick explanation, though a slow-motion replay seemed to show an initial explosion in one of two peel-away rocket boosters igniting the shuttle's huge external fuel tank. The tank burst into a fireball that destroyed Challenger high above the Atlantic while crew families and NASA officials watched in despair from the Cape.

Other observers noted that the boosters continued to fly crazily through the sky after the explosion, apparently under full power, indicating that the fatal explosion might have originated in the giant tank itself.

"We will not speculate as to the specific cause of the explosion based on that footage," said Jesse Moore, NASA's top shuttle administrator. National Aeronautics and Space Administration officials are organizing an investigating board and Moore said it will take a "careful review" of all data "before we can reach any conclusions."

Never before in 56 manned space missions had Americans died in flight. John Glenn, the former astronaut, recalled that three astronauts died in a launch-pad training accident 19 years ago and said the history of pioneers is often one "of triumph and tragedy."

The explosion followed an apparently flawless launch, delayed two hours as officials analyzed the danger from icicles that formed in the frosty Florida morning along the shuttle's new launch pad.

"There were no signs of abnormalities on the screens" as flight controllers monitored Challenger's liftoff and ascent, a source said. The source, at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, said the blast occurred "unexpectedly and with absolutely no warning."

"We have a report from the flight dynamics officer that the vehicle has exploded. Flight director confirms that," said NASA's Steve Nesbitt.

Mission control reported that there had been no indication of any problem with the

three shuttle engines, its twin solid boosters or any other system and that the shuttle just suddenly blew apart 10 miles high and 8 miles downrange of Cape Canaveral. Ninety minutes after the accident, controllers were still at their consoles solemnly examining flight data.

Reagan, in an Oval Office address after he postponed his State of the Union message because of the tragedy, reaffirmed his commitment to the shuttle program and said, "The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted, it belongs to the brave."

ducted search-and-rescue efforts. Even before Moore's statement, it seemed impossible anyone could have survived such a cataclysm.

The crew included McAuliffe and six NASA astronauts: commander Francis R. Scobee, 46; pilot Michael J. Smith, 40; Judith Resnik, 36; Ronald E. McNair, 35; Ellison S. Onizuka, 39; and Gregory B. Jarvis, 41.

"I regret that I have to report that based on very preliminary searches of the ocean where the Challenger impacted this morning, these searches have not revealed any evidence that

New Hampshire schoolchildren, drawn to this launch because of the presence of McAuliffe, the first "common citizen" chosen to make a space flight, screamed and fought back tears. Americans everywhere watched in disbelief as television networks replayed the shuttle explosion.

Addressing schoolchildren who watched this flight more closely than others because a teacher was aboard and many special projects were planned for them, Reagan said:

"I know it's hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happen. It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons." Earlier he had said, "You have to be out there on the frontier taking risks. Make it plain to them that life must go on."

Lost along with the \$1.2 billion spacecraft was a \$10-million payload that was to have studied Halley's comet.

Challenger fell in pieces about 18 miles from the launch pad. Debris was so heavy that for several minutes NASA directed rescue craft to stay out of the area.

Launch, scheduled for 8:38 a.m. CST, had been delayed two hours while officials analyzed the possibility that foot-long launch-pad icicles might cause problems. But after liftoff, at 10:38 a.m. CST, the NASA commentator, Nesbitt, reported systems were normal.

NASA cameras were trained on the spaceship. While slow-speed replays did not pinpoint the source of the explosion, from one angle it seemed it might have come at one of the boosters, the two rockets that provide the ship its initial boost to space before peeling away to earth.

Among those who witnessed the explosion were McAuliffe's attorney-husband Steve and their two children, Scott, 9, and Caroline, 6. Also on hand were members of Scott's third grade class from Concord, N.H., displaying a large "Go Christa" banner.

Several cried after the explosion, friends hugged one another and parents quickly cleared children off the viewing bleachers and aboard buses.

McAuliffe, 37, had been selected from 11,146 teacher applicants to be the first to fly in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's citizen-in-space program.

All 1,200 students at McAuliffe's Concord High School were cheering the televised launch when a teacher yelled for them to be silent because something appeared to be wrong.

Final Words . . .

Words from space shuttle Challenger were all routine through the 60 seconds of flight. There was silence after the spacecraft erupted into a fireball.

Here is a transcript of those seconds:

Mission Control Commentator: 10-9-87-6, we have main engine start, 4-3-2-1, and liftoff. Liftoff of the 25th space shuttle mission. And it has cleared the tower.

Pilot Mike Smith: Roll program.

Mission Control: Roger, roll, Challenger.

Mission Control: Roll program confirmed. Challenger now heading down range. The engines are throttling down now at 94 percent. Normal throttle for most of the flight is 104 percent. We'll throttle down to 65 percent shortly. Engines at 65 percent. Three engines running normally. Three good fuel cells. Three good APUs (auxiliary power units). Velocity 22,057 feet per second (1400 miles per hour), altitude 4.3 nautical (4.9 statute miles), downrange distance 3 nautical miles (3.4 statute miles). Engines throttling up, three engines now 104 percent.

Mission Control: Challenger, go at throttle up.

Smith: Roger, go at throttle up. (Fireball occurs).

Mission Control: We're at a minute 15 seconds, velocity 29,000 feet per second (1977 mph) altitude 9 nautical miles (10.35 statute miles), range distance 7 nautical miles (8.05 statute miles).

There was a long silence.

Mission Control: Flight controllers are looking very carefully at the situation. Obviously a major malfunction. We have no downlink (communications).

Weather:

Partly sunny today with light and variable winds, becoming southerly and increasing toward evening. High 39. Tonight, partly cloudy and mild with a low of 22. High in the low 40s Thursday.

"We will continue our quest in space," he said. "There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews and, yes, more volunteers, more civilians, more teachers in space."

He added: "Nothing stops here."

NASA delayed its announcement that there appeared to be no survivors until it had con-

the crew of Challenger survived,' Moore, NASA associate administrator, told a midafternoon news conference.

The president watched video replays in "s2 and sent Vice President George Bush here to convey his sympathies to the families of the crew.

Daily Nebraskan

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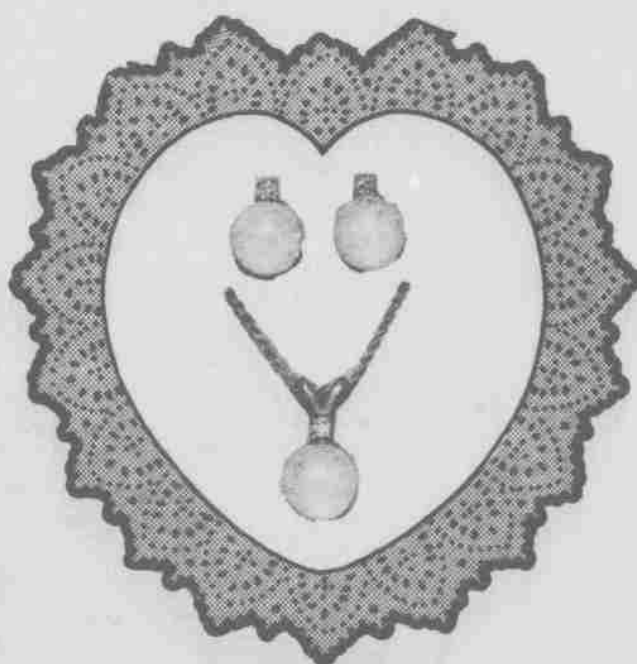
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The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board Monday through Friday in the fall and spring semesters and Tuesdays and Fridays in the summer sessions, except during vacations. Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by phoning 472-1763 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The public also has access to the Publications Board. For information, contact Mike Honerman, 475-5610.

Subscription price is \$35 for one year. Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, Neb. 68588-0448. Second-class postage paid at Lincoln, NE 68510.

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