

News Digest

By The Associated Press

'Accident rooted in history' Rogers Commission submits Shuttle report

WASHINGTON — The Rogers Commission said Monday a breached booster rocket joint, whose weaknesses were known, but ignored, destroyed the space shuttle Challenger, and that NASA must return to the safety-first policy of the Apollo moonflight days.

James C. Fletcher, a former head of NASA only five weeks into his second stint at the helm, promised to respond to the conclusions "with an open mind and without reservations."

The commission called the Jan. 28 Challenger tragedy, which claimed seven lives, "an accident rooted in history."

William P. Rogers, chairman of the presidential investigative panel, said, "We know exactly how this accident occurred. I certainly hope there will be no nagging questions."

The commission was not asked to assess blame "and we have not assessed blame," Rogers told a news conference.

President Reagan, formally accepting the report, said that because of the commission's work "our shuttle program will be safer and better prepared for the challenges that lie ahead."

Because Americans "don't hide our mistakes, we are not condemned to repeat them," Reagan told members of the commission and others gathered in the Rose Garden.

"There's enough blame to go around," he said. "The fault was not with any single person or group. It was NASA's fault. I don't think we should be assigning blame. We should be assigning

people to fix what went wrong, and make sure it doesn't happen again."

Fletcher told a late afternoon news conference that the space agency regards July 1987 as a realistic goal — "not an optimistic one" — for resumption of shuttle flights, based on all the recommendations made by the commission.

One of the commission's recommendations, the appointment of an independent committee of experts to review any new booster designs, came into fruition Monday, when the National Research Council announced formation of a panel of experts in the fields of propulsion, materials, reliability and aerospace engineering.

"The unrelenting pressure to meet the demands of an accelerating flight schedule might have been adequately handled by NASA if it had insisted upon the exactly thorough procedures that were its hallmark during the Apollo program," the report said in a chapter titled "The Silent Safety Program."

The commission said the rocket joints' problems came to be regarded an "unavoidable and an acceptable flight risk," showing that safety had taken a back seat at NASA.

Five men and two women, including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe, perished in the accident — the first during a space mission after 55 successes.

On Capitol Hill, the commission's report generally was well received, although some lawmakers said they

felt it was up to Congress to answer any lingering questions about space safety.

The Rogers panel insisted that the rocket must be changed, no matter how long it takes or what the cost. And, conceding there was no way the Challenger crew could have survived, the commission said that NASA should "make all efforts to provide a crew escape system for use during controlled gliding flight."

The report cited a long history of problems with the booster joint seal, which it said was badly designed.

Instead, it said, "both NASA and contractor management first failed to recognize it as a problem, then failed to fix it and finally treated it as an acceptable flight risk ... (Morton) Thiokol Jr. NASA management came to accept erosion and blow-by as an avoidable and acceptable flight risk."

The report pinned the cause of the explosion last Jan. 28 squarely on the seal between the bottom two segments of the shuttle's right booster which failed to contain the white hot flames and gases generated when the 149-foot rocket ignited.

The shuttle would not have been launched, the commission said, had top launch managers been aware of opposition from rocket engineers who feared the effects of cold temperatures on the ability of O-ring seals to work.

Although the commission called for many changes in NASA's practices, the final report singled out the Marshall Space Flight Center, the facility in Huntsville, Ala., which oversees the booster rocket program.

NASA's highly successful safety program — a "hallmark during the Apollo program" — was allowed to lapse, and nowhere more than at Marshall, the commission said.

Rendering its verdict on the nation's worst space disaster after a 120-day probe, the commission demanded that NASA change the design on the solid rocket boosters.

In Brief

Smith agrees to plead guilty to Belushi death

LOS ANGELES — Cathy Evelyn Smith has agreed to plead guilty to involuntary manslaughter and three drug charges in the cocaine-heroin death of comedian John Belushi, prosecutors announced Monday.

Prosecution spokesman Al Albergate said Smith, a former backup rock singer, will enter the pleas to the manslaughter count and three counts of administering and furnishing a controlled substance.

The pleas will be entered Wednesday at Smith's scheduled court appearance, Albergate said.

"This is the same plea offer that was made to her a year and a half ago when she returned from Canada," he said, adding there had been "no agreement on sentence. It's open to the judge."

The earlier agreement fell apart when prosecutors refused to rule out jail time for Smith, 38, a companion and backup singer to such entertainers as Hoyt Axton and Gordon Lightfoot.

Injured runner now 'stable'

INDIANAPOLIS — The condition of North Carolina State distance runner Kathy Ormsby, permanently paralyzed from injuries she sustained after jumping from a bridge, was upgraded to stable from serious Monday, a spokeswoman for Wishard Memorial Hospital said.

The 21-year-old pre-med student from Rockingham, N.C., suffered multiple spinal fractures, a punctured lung and a broken rib when she jumped from a bridge

last Wednesday night, minutes after dropping out with 8½ laps remaining in the women's 10,000-meter race at the NCAA Track and Field Championships.

Her father, Dale Ormsby, said his daughter had been sedated during her hospitalization and was unable to discuss fully the incident or events leading up to it.

"I believe, though, that it has something to do with the pressure that is put on young people to succeed," Ormsby said.

Ormsby was the collegiate record-holder in the women's 10,000 entering the championship race when she bolted from the track, ran toward a bridge about two blocks away and apparently jumped, police said.

Columnist helps reunite crewmen

ST. LOUIS — Columnist Abigail Van Buren helped reunite 35 former crewmen of a Navy minesweeper that sank during World War II and in the process helped a man learn about his brother who died when the ship went down.

The gathering Sunday was instituted by Wayne Shafer, of Sheperdsville, Ky., who wanted to learn more about his older brother Ralph, who died when the USS Salute exploded and sank June 8, 1945, off Borneo, killing nine.

Shafer, now 48, decided to seek his brother's crewmates after reading one of Van Buren's "Dear Abby" columns last year. In it, she told a man who held possessions of a dead German soldier that he should return the materials to the soldier's family.

"She was absolutely right. The family never forgets," Shafer said. He then wrote to Van Buren, asking for help.

Five found guilty for trespassing in Daub's office

OMAHA — Five people were found guilty Monday of trespassing and refusing to leave U.S. Rep. Hal Daub's Omaha office. Douglas County Judge William Ryan fined each of the defendants \$10 and \$21 in court costs.

Three of the people were arrested March 17 after refusing to leave Daub's office at the federal building. The others were arrested after a sit-in at the office the following day.

Assistant City Prosecutor J. Michael Tesar said the protesters ignored warnings to leave the office from Daub's office manager, the building's security manager and police.

The defendants are all members of the Omaha chapter of the Pledge of Resistance. They are Marilyn Felion, Jane Juffer, Michael Carrick, Kendall Anderson and Thomas Cordaro.

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