

Officials seek answers in deadly plane crash

HIBBING, Minn. — Wrapped Christmas packages were strewn Thursday in the wreckage of a commuter plane that crashed into a snowy hillside in freezing drizzle, killing all 18 people on board.

Pieces of the fuselage rested upside down as bodies were removed, and the relatives of victims gathered at churches in this mining town about 200 miles north of Minneapolis.

It was the deadliest plane crash in the United States since March 22, 1992, when a USAir Fokker F28 crashed on takeoff in a snowstorm at LaGuardia Airport in New York, killing 27 people.

In Hibbing, the twin-engine Jetstream 31 slammed into a mound of mining waste 1 1/2 miles short of the airport Wednesday night. The Northwest Airlink turboprop operated by Express Airlines II Inc. didn't make a distress call.

The weather before the crash was conducive to wing icing that can impair flying, but such conditions are common this time of year in northern Minnesota.

The performance of the Jetstream 31 in icy conditions has been at the center of a debate between the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board since a United Express plane crash four years ago in which icing played a role.

The safety board has been pressing the FAA to require modifications that would make the Jetstream 31 safer in icy conditions. As late as October, the FAA still had not done so, according to correspondence between the agencies.

However, the plane that crashed at Hibbing was equipped with a device the NTSB has been pushing for all Jetstream 31s. The plane also had all required de-icing equipment and a

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Hibbing minister

heated propeller, said Peter Black, a spokesman for Jetstream Aircraft Ltd., a subsidiary of British Aerospace.

Other airplanes had landed at the Hibbing airport earlier Wednesday with no problems.

Alan Pollock, an NTSB spokesman, said it was too early to speculate on the cause of the crash. A cockpit recorder was recovered and will be sent to Washington for examination.

Christmas decorations adorned the main street in Hibbing, which has a

population of about 18,000, but townspeople were somber as news of the crash spread through cafes and stores.

“The shock is severe,” said the Rev. Francis Zeigler of Immaculate Conception Church. “You're living in an environment that's not frequented by too many disasters.”

Neither police nor the airline has released the identities of the 16 passengers and two crew members killed. Reports from airport officials, friends and relatives showed the victims



included business travelers, vacationers and people visiting friends in Minnesota.

Astronauts attempt to repair telescope

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Space shuttle Endeavour roared through the predawn darkness into orbit Thursday after a day's delay of the mission to restore the Hubble Space Telescope's vision and vitality.

The 4.5 million-pound shuttle, carrying seven astronauts, lighted up the sky for miles around as it rose from its seaside pad and streaked over the Atlantic Ocean.

The critical, long-awaited repair mission features more spacewalks than any American mission to date — five, maybe more. Endeavour is carrying 11 new parts for Hubble to be installed by the spacewalking astronauts.

It was the second launch attempt for the mission. The first on Wednesday was thwarted by high wind.

“It's a beautiful sunrise,” Richard Covey said moments after reaching orbit.

Covey maneuvered Endeavour into a 355-mile-high orbit. At that point, the shuttle was trailing Hubble by 6,800 miles. The shuttle gradually will close the gap and rendezvous with the telescope some 360 miles high early Saturday.

Hubble program scientist Edward Weiler was ecstatic about liftoff but still anxious about the rendezvous and spacewalk days that lie ahead.

“It's going to be an intense period. This was the first step in a very

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NASA scientist

long journey,” Weiler said.

“I'm glad we finally got to this point, because I cannot wait to vindicate this program.”

The \$1.6 billion telescope, launched in April 1990, has a primary mirror that's too flat along the edge because of a manufacturing error. The defect blurs Hubble's view of extremely remote objects in the universe and prevents the orbiting observatory from peering back with precision to the beginning of time.

Hubble also has three failed gyroscopes, two quirky magnetometers, trembling solar panels, bad solar-panel drive electronics, reduced computer memory and a balky power supply for an ultraviolet light detector.

It's up to Endeavour's four spacewalkers to fix all that or at least as much as they can. Story Musgrave, Jeffrey Hoffman, Tom Akers and Kathryn Thornton hope to install corrective mirrors, a new wide-field planetary camera, new solar panels, new gyroscopes and

more once Hubble is captured by the shuttle robot arm and anchored in the cargo bay.

A record five spacewalks are planned on five consecutive days during Endeavour's 11-day flight, beginning around midnight Saturday. The astronauts could go out as many as seven times to work on Hubble if necessary. Any major jobs left undone would require another repair mission in five months to a year.

NASA puts the cost of this mission at \$629 million: \$251 million for Hubble parts and related activities and \$378 million for the shuttle flight.

The space agency has spent \$3 billion to date on the Hubble program, including operating and maintenance costs. The telescope has a 15-year lifetime.

Space officials consider this the most complicated flight in shuttle history and quite possibly NASA's greatest challenge in space since the Apollo moon landings. Astronauts have made satellite service calls before, but none as demanding or as crucial as this one.

Many believe NASA's reputation rests on this mission. The space agency has suffered numerous blows over the past several years, including perpetual shuttle trouble, a mangled space station project and a vanished Mars Observer, not to mention the Hubble mirror fiasco.

Columbian drug lord killed after search

BOGOTA, Colombia — Security forces killed drug lord Pablo Escobar in Medellin on Thursday, ending a 16-month hunt for one of the most wanted men in the world.

Police and soldiers shot Escobar dead at a shopping mall in the heart of the city that served as the base for his cocaine empire, according to local radio reports. The death was confirmed by the country's prosecutor general.

Just three days ago, the drug lord's wife and two children fled to Germany seeking political asylum, but Bonn rejected their application. The family, which has been targeted by a vigilante group, returned to Bogota and were staying in a luxury hotel under army protection.

The vigilante group is believed to be composed of members of the rival Cali drug cartel, disenchanting former Medellin cartel members and police avenging the deaths of officers slain by the cartel.



Escobar was one of the most wanted men in the world. At one time, his drug trafficking gang had been the world's biggest exporter of cocaine.

SPORTS WIRE

Houston ties NBA record with victory

NEW YORK — The Houston Rockets went into Madison Square Garden and beat the New York Knicks at their own game Thursday night, tying the record for the best start in NBA history at 15-0.

The Rockets, with a 94-85 victory, matched the start of the 1948-49 Washington Capitols. Hakeem Olajuwon outplayed fellow All-Star

center Patrick Ewing and outscored him 37-12, including 16-0 in the third quarter when Ewing missed seven consecutive shots.

The Knicks, who won 41 of their previous 46 home games and had the best defense in the NBA last season, were held to 13 points in the second period and got blown out in the third.

Panel requested in Bjorklund case

From Staff Reports

Roger Bjorklund should be sentenced by a three-judge panel, not a lone district judge, his attorney said Wednesday in a motion.

Lancaster County Chief Deputy Public Defender Scott Helvie filed a motion saying Bjorklund was constitutionally entitled to a three-judge sentencing panel.

Bjorklund was convicted on Nov. 17 of first-degree murder and use of a weapon in commission of a felony in

the 1992 death of University of Nebraska-Lincoln student Candice Harms.

Lancaster County District Judge Donald Endacott ruled that he alone would sentence Bjorklund on Jan. 24. The ruling surprised prosecutors after the trial.

Helvie said Bjorklund was entitled to a panel under the U.S. and Nebraska constitutions.

Endacott will hear the motion on Dec. 17. A new trial motion, filed last week, is scheduled for the same day.

STATE WIRE

Offutt defies Clinton, discharges gay airman

OMAHA — Saying a 1984 regulation banning gays in the U.S. Air Force remains in force despite a change signed by President Clinton, the service moved Thursday to discharge a gay airman.

“Despite what you've heard in the media, despite what you've seen on television, the 1984 regulation is still valid,” Air Force attorney Capt. Michael Guillory said during the discharge proceedings against Capt. Rich Richenberg.

The action came just days after Tuesday's White House announcement that President Clinton had signed into law a new policy on gays in the military.

The revision allows gays to serve as long as they don't disclose their homosexuality or engage in homosexual activity.

But Air Force officials said the new law does not take effect until February, and the case against Richenberg deals only with the 1984 regulation.

Richenberg disclosed that he was gay in a private letter to his commander last May.

“I'm hopeful that they will give me a fair and partial hearing ... and I'm also hopeful that I'll be retained,” he said prior to going before a three-member discharge panel Thursday afternoon.

Richenberg, 35, said that he revealed his homosexuality because, as a military officer, he had to be honest. He said he had only recently become aware that he was gay.

The two-hour morning hearing was to decide what sort of evidence could be presented in the case. Throughout the hearing, Richenberg sat straight in his chair.

Richenberg's attorneys wanted to try to show that the ban on gays is unconstitutional, violating Richenberg's right of free speech.

“We're trying to kick a person out based on his thoughts and not his conduct,” said James Bitzes, area defense counsel for Offutt Air Force Base, where Richenberg is based.

“What I would suggest is the place to attack the lawfulness of that is somewhere else,” military judge Lt. Col. Terence Curtin said.

He said such a defense would not

be allowed.

“Your client is free to file a suit in federal court,” Curtin said.

Michelle Benecke of the Washington, D.C.-based Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, said such a suit would be filed if Richenberg is discharged.

Benecke declined to comment on whether the revised policy signed by Clinton would protect her client.

“That's not an issue in this case,” she said.

The network was formed to provide legal service to men and women who have been affected by the U.S. military's ban on homosexuals.

Richenberg is in a squadron that flies RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft. He said others in the squadron had limited knowledge of his homosexuality.

“To them, it's a non-issue, as well it should be,” he said.

Richenberg, of San Antonio, Texas, has served in the Air Force for about 8 1/2 years. He has been assigned to Offutt, south of Omaha, for the past four years.

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