

# Damaged o-ring in second shuttle

By **MARCIA DUNN**  
AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) - For the second space shuttle flight in a row, NASA has found heat damage on a critical O-ring seal in a rocket booster used by Discovery this month.

It's the same nozzle joint in which the problem occurred on Atlantis, only this time it's in the right booster, NASA said today.

Hot gas from burning rocket fuel singed the primary rubber seal in the joint but did not pass beyond the seal. Neither of the shuttles nor crews were in any danger, NASA officials said.

Discovery returned safely from a nine-day science mission Saturday.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration spokeswoman Lisa Malone said the damage to Discovery's O-ring seal was less than on the Atlantis booster seal.

Engineers will evaluate all the data before recommending whether it's safe to fly Endeavour next week.

A leak in a joint in a solid rocket booster caused Challenger to explode shortly after liftoff in 1986. A nozzle failure in this case could cause the shuttle to veer dangerously off course during the first two minutes of flight.

Atlantis blasted off June 27 on the first shuttle docking mission with Russia's space station Mir and returned July 7. Discovery was launched July 13 - at six days the shortest gap ever between U.S. human space flights.

NASA did not learn of the problem with Atlantis' booster until four days into Discovery's flight, prompting questions about whether the space agency should allow more time between missions.

Shuttle Director Bryan O'Connor said managers will decide by early next week whether it's safe to fly the

shuttles while investigating the O-ring problem, or whether the fleet should be grounded until the problem is resolved. That could take months, he said.

Seymour Himmel, a Cleveland-based propulsion expert and member of NASA's Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel, said the problem could be serious now that it's been discovered in back-to-back flights.

"Now that they have two of these things, it would lead me to say this is not a statistical fluke but a true anomaly, that there is something potentially systemic about this," Himmel told the Houston Chronicle.

During a launch, the twin 15-story booster rockets burn for two of the 8 1/2 minutes it takes the shuttles to reach orbit. The boosters then peel away and fall by parachute into the Atlantic Ocean, where they are recovered and refurbished for future flights.

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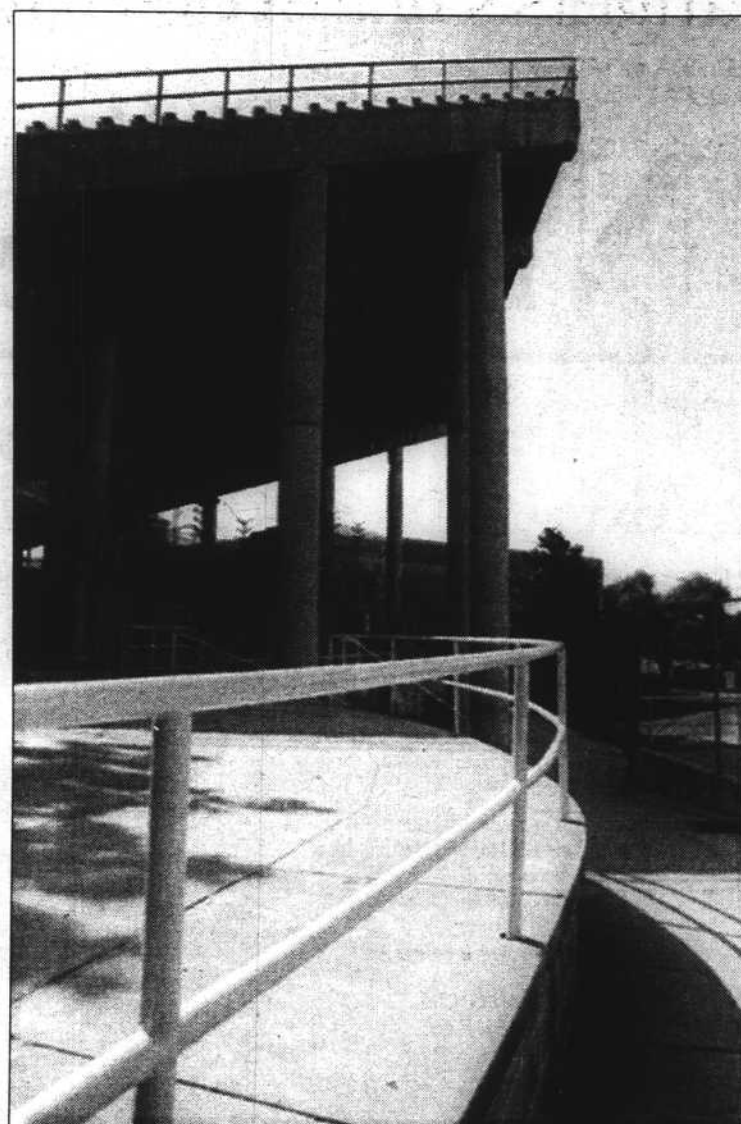


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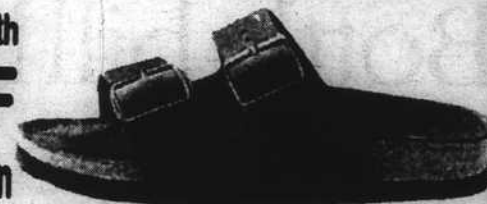
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