

Crash

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virtually ruled out terrorism as a cause of the disaster.

The tragedy, captured on videotape and replayed endlessly throughout the day, was a fresh blow for a nation still grieving over Sept. 11, 2001, and unsettled by the specter of war with Iraq.

It also was a grisly bookend to the disaster that claimed the crew of the shuttle Challenger 17 years ago. Challenger exploded on liftoff from Cape Canaveral, Fla., where Columbia was scheduled to touch down.

Relatives of Columbia's astronauts had been waiting to celebrate with officials Saturday at Florida's Kennedy Space Center.

"We couldn't wait to congratulate them for their extraordinary performance," NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe said. Instead, he found himself expressing shock, sadness and condolences.

The first hint of trouble came at 7:53 a.m. CST, when sensors in the hydraulic system in the left wing failed. Three minutes later, sensors around the left main landing gear went out. And at 7:59 a.m. CST, sensors in the structure on the left side of the shuttle quit.

"It was like the wires were cut," NASA shuttle program head Ron Dittemore said at the Johnson Space Center in Houston.

At 8 a.m. CST, mission controllers in Houston lost voice contact with the crew and tracking data. The display showing the shuttle's track froze.

"We stared at that for a long time," flight operations chief Milt Heflin said. "I reflected back on what I saw with Challenger."

Columbia was at an altitude of 207,000 feet, or about 40 miles, when it broke apart — too high for it to have been attacked by aircraft or missiles. Traveling about 12,500 mph, or 18 times the speed of sound, the aircraft was in the midst of a series of sharp turns designed to dissipate its speed.

Efforts to recover debris — including the remains of the five men and two women aboard — covered a huge



Ian McVea Fort Worth Star-Telegram (KRT)

BRONSON, TEXAS — A boot sole, apparently from a spacesuit boot belonging to a crew member of the space shuttle Columbia, was tagged Saturday.

swath of East Texas and Louisiana. NASA asked members of the public to help in the search but warned people not to touch anything that looked like shuttle debris because it might be contaminated with toxic propellants. Despite such warnings, it was only a matter of hours before a few East Texans were hospitalized and purported pieces of Columbia were listed for sale on the auction Web site eBay. They were quickly removed.

Columbia, which launched the space shuttle program when it first flew in 1981, was the oldest vehicle in NASA's shuttle fleet. This was its 28th

flight and the 113th shuttle flight overall. Risk analysis studies in recent years have suggested that a catastrophe is likely to occur once in every 145 shuttle missions.

"The American people have started to think that flying the space shuttle is like getting into a car for a Sunday afternoon drive, but it's anything but that," said Florida Sen. Bill Nelson, a former astronaut. "Space flight is risky business."

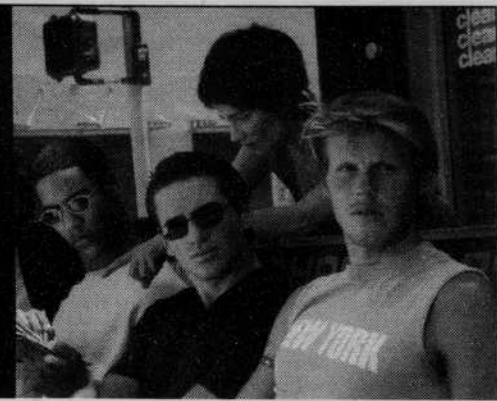
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