

Challenger

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Col. John Shults, director of Defense Department contingency operations here, said a search armada of helicopters, ships and planes had spotted several pieces of debris floating in the Atlantic.

"We have seen several pieces, what looked to be about five or 10 feet long and a couple feet wide," he said. The debris will be recovered and brought to a hangar at nearby Patrick Air Force Base.

NASA said most of the debris being found consisted of the thermal tiles that coat the outside of the orbiter to protect it from the heat of re-entering the atmosphere.

Shults said the debris from the shattered shuttle fell into the ocean in an area between 50 and 130 miles southeast of the launch site. He said the water there was 70 to 200 feet deep.

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

"It's a terrible thing," Reagan told reporters. "I just can't get out of my mind her (McAuliffe's) husband, her

children, as well as the families of the others on board."

"Oh, my God, no!" exclaimed first lady Nancy Reagan, who was watching the launch in the White House family quarters.

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."

"I guess we always knew there would be a day like this," said Glenn. A congressional investigation was immediately announced, but many

lawmakers were quick to express support for the nation's manned space effort.

"Today, our shock turns to sadness," said House speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. "We salute those who risked and gave their lives to serve our country at the last great frontiers. We salute those who died performing exploits that the people of my age grew up reading about in comic books or in fiction."

Lost along with the \$1.2 billion spacecraft were a \$100-million satellite that was to have become an important part of NASA's space-based shuttle communications network and a smaller \$10 million payload that was to have studied Halley's comet.

It was the second disaster to strike NASA's pioneering space program. In January 1967 astronauts Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Edward White and Roger Chaffee burned to death while preparing for an Apollo flight when a fire destroyed their capsule during a training drill.

Four Soviet cosmonauts have died in space accidents — one in 1967 and three in 1971.

Said Bush, after his arrival at Kennedy Space Center: "Today's trage-

dy reminds us that danger awaits all who push back the frontier of space. It reminds us that the great adventure of space travel requires men and women of spirit and bravery."

Ironically, in the years since, launches had become so routine that the major TV networks did not show this one live, and had to break into regular programming once the dimension of the tragedy was clear. Cable News Network and many public television stations did broadcast live, and viewers saw the routine turn into disaster.

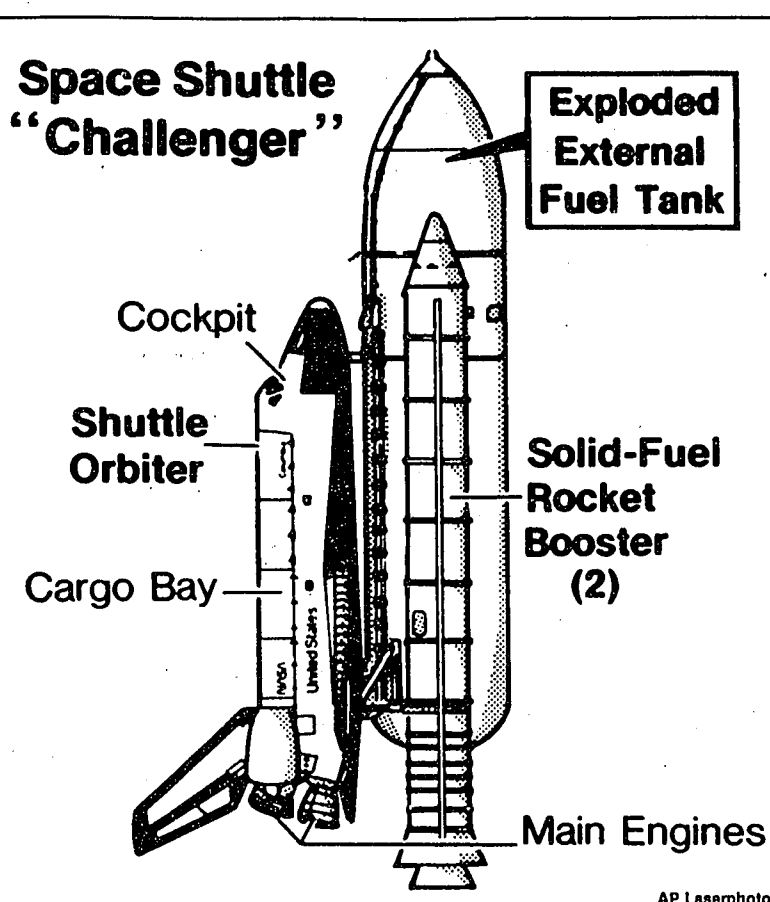
The final seconds went like this: "Go at throttle up," flight directors told Challenger's crew, noting the ship had achieved full engine power. "Roger, go at throttle up," said Mike Smith, the pilot.

Seconds later, an explosion followed by the devastating space age fireball.

At Mission Control, there was silence.

"Obviously a major malfunction," was the first word from NASA, following seconds of agonized silence.

As Challenger fell in pieces, debris was so heavy that for several minutes NASA directed rescue craft to stay out of the area.



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