Almost Home

Robert Hoge

There's an ironic contradiction about space travel that plagues me. Space is the most open and expansive environment humans have known. Free from Earth's confines, we have three dimensions open to explore almost without end. Yet to experience even a fraction of that grand freedom and beauty we are forced to rely on the most constricting and often fragile of machines.

Still. People go.

It's an irony I suspect wasn't lost on the crew of the Space Shuttle Columbia.

It was well past midnight in Australia when I heard the news. A message on a bulletin board from someone living in Florida alerted me. I checked a few websites. CNN was saying only that mission control reported it had 'lost contact' with Columbia. A frenzied check of several other websites yielded no new information. I rushed to the television with an eager dread. Station after station of Australia's free-to-air channels was filled with the usual detritus of early morning television – forty year old movies and infomercials. No news. Naively I took this as a hopeful sign, thinking that if the shuttle had crashed surely the stations would have broken with their scheduled programming. I switched on the radio and headed back to the CNN website.

This time they had pictures.

The sickening realisation too me straight back to 1986, when, at 13 years of age I woke to the news and images of the Space Shuttle Challenger exploding just minutes into its mission. I checked on my sleeping six-month-old daughter and wondered what she would make of an event when she grew up that would be to her, for all intents and purposes, pre-history. I contacted my two closest friends, both of whom – like me – keep strange hours. Then the journalist inside took over and I went searching for more information, trying to make sense of it all.

On its twenty-eighth flight, Columbia had orbited the Earth 255 times before heading for home. At 8:15am February 1, Florida time, the shuttle inverted and tail pointing first, fired its engines to begin slowing for descent. It was over Australia when it left orbit. At 8.43am it entered the atmosphere where it began feeling the full effects of the air and gravity. At this point the shuttle used its rudders and flaps to steer like a plane. Columbia performed routine banking manoeuvres to reduce speed and consequent re-entry heat. Over the next 10 minutes sensors in the landing gear and left wing reported rises in temperature. At 8.53am the shuttle lost readings from the first of several sensors in the left wing. The last contact with the crew cam at 9:00am. At 200,000 feet and travelling 20 times the speed of sound, Columbia broke up and disintegrated. It was due to land at Kennedy Space Centre in Cape Canaveral, Florida at 9:16am.

On board for scientific mission was a crew of seven:

Commander Col. Rick Husband, 45, was a US Air Force colonel and former test pilot. He was selected as an astronaut on his fourth try in 1994.

Pilot Cmdr William McCool, 41, was a Navy commander and also a test pilot. He had more than 2800 flying hours with the Navy. It was his first time in space.

Lt. Col. Michael Anderson, 43, was in charge of overseeing dozens of science experiments on Columbia. In 1998 he travelled to the Mir space station.

Engineer Dr Kalpana Chawla, 41, emigrated from India to the US in the 1980s before joining the space program in 1994. She was chosen as an astronaut after working at NASA's Ames Research Centre.

Cmdr. Dr Laurel Clark, 41, served as a medical officer aboard submarines and as a flight surgeon. She became an astronaut in 1996 and was on board Columbia to help with science experiments.

Capt. David Brown, 46, was previously a pilot and doctor for the Navy. He joined the Navy after a medical internship and went on to fly the A-6E Intruder and F-18s. Columbia's mission was his first spaceflight.

Col Ilan Ramon, 48, was the first Israeli in space. On board Columbia as a payload specialist, he served as a fighter pilot in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, flying F-16s and F-4s. He was chosen as his country's first astronaut in 1997.

They gave their lives that we might know more.

I'm writing this a week on from the tragedy and searching for words to say everything I want to express. Emotionally, I'm still distraught. Hearing it at 1am in the morning kept me awake for another three hours. Intellectually I keep returning to the contradictions of space flight – the incredible technology and the horrible explosions; the amazing achievements and the enormous costs; the conquering human spirit and the hard-learnt truths of politics. Space travel has never been easy, or cheap, or without real sacrifice. It never will be. But nor has it ever left us without tangible benefits. And that's what my mind keeps coming back to. Perhaps it is us – readers and writers of science fiction – who are most suited to grasping and expressing many of the contradictions of space travel.

There are hard facts to face about the future of human space flight. Do we need humans in space so regularly? Should the shuttles be retired? What should happen to the International Space Station? What price human safety? The budget for flying the shuttle was cut 40% in the 1990s, achieved primarily through massive reductions in staff numbers. Glitches however, fell from an average of 18 per mission in 1992 to under five in 2000. Until mission 113.

If the science fiction community can do anything to contribute to understanding it should be to embrace the contradictions of space travel. And who, if not us, is as uniquely placed to begin to reconcile those contradictions? We are well to understand the technological difficulties and political imperatives that hound space travel today. We have the intellect. But we are also uniquely placed to creatively express the potential grandeur for the future of humanity in space. It's what many of us do every day, after all – dream, evaluate, extrapolate, invent. We have the creative spirit to investigate and express some of the potency of space exploration into the future.

The history of the genre is replete with examples of that and 4examples of the harsh realities of space flight. The science fiction community need not – should not – line up behind one grand plan to take humanity to the stars. But we should engage the wider community with our ideas; with knowledge and with possibility.

I believe there are myriad reasons for people to meet the continued challenge of exploration in space: scientific, technological, economic and finally, perhaps, simply because it is there. The same reason we climb mountains and sail seas. It enriches our spirit.

That is not the only reason. But for mine, it is the best. Look at the names of the shuttles: Enterprise, Atlantis, Discovery, Endeavour, Challenger and Columbia. These are not just names of historic sea-going vessels; they are also the names of some of the strongest elements of the human spirit.

That spirit did not die when Columbia broke up. Even if the public had become complacent about the hazards of travel into space, the Columbia crew had not. They knew the risks, and they accepted them. Throughout their training, during the mission and on their way home, they embraced the contradictions. As should we.

A star fell from the sky that morning. May the spirit of a hundred more take its place.

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