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JANUARY 28, 1986

# The *Challenger* Space Shuttle Explosion

by William Caper







# **The *Challenger* Space Shuttle Explosion**



**by William Caper**

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Adler Planetarium & Astronomy Museum  
Chicago, Illinois**

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# Shuttle nightmare

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From Herald news services

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Confused and stunned nation waits for answers to what caused the catastrophic explosion of the space shuttle Challenger that sent schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe and six other teachers to a fiery death 74 seconds after liftoff Tuesday.

President Reagan postponed a week Tuesday night's State of the Union address and in a brief television statement told the country that day is a day for mourning and remembering the crew.

"We share this pain with all people of our country," Reagan said.

The accident defied quick explanation, though a slow-motion videotape seemed to show an ice problem with one of two solid rocket boosters followed by the rupture of the shuttle's huge external tank, which carried half-a-million gallons of supercold, super-toxic liquid oxygen and hydrogen.

The explosion occurred about 14 seconds after Challenger was to enter a period of maximum aerodynamic pressure when wind and other atmospheric conditions would place the maximum force on the outside of the vehicle. Challenger, startled by the tank, burst into pieces, which rained into the Atlantic 19 miles below the next 45 minutes.

OTHER OBSERVERS noted the boosters continued to fly on through the sky after the explosion, indicating that the fatal explosion might have originated in the external tank itself.

"We will not speculate on the specific cause of the explosion because that footage," said James H. Baker, NASA's top shuttle administrator. National Aeronautics and Space Administration officials had ordered a five-member investigation board by late Tuesday, and Baker said it will take a "careful review" of all data "before we can reach conclusions."

A formal board is to be announced later by NASA Administrator James Graham.

MOORE SAID the shuttle program, which had hoped to have removed 15 missions in 1986, had suspended until NASA determines what caused the tragedy.

He declined to speculate about how long an investigation might take, saying only that flight safety was

(Continued on Page 6)

## More coverage

- McAuliffe's students write tragedy — Page 7
- Remembering Judy — Page 8
- The last day of Challenger — Section 4, Page 7
- President's words of grief — Section 4, Page 8

## WEDNESDAY IN THE HERALD

Knicks 11  
Bulls 11  
Sting  
Wings

Smuggling rap  
Arthur Novell, the former president of the Erie County

## wers



William Christa  
35, mission specialist



### Firestorm — then grief

The high hopes for the crew of the space shuttle Challenger ends in disaster as massive fireball from fuel tank consumes the ship and the seven people aboard. What began as a happy moment for the family of Christa McAuliffe, left, turned quickly to horror as the shuttle disintegrated before their eyes. McAuliffe's sister and her parents, Ed and Grace Corrigan, clutch each other as the awful event unfolds.

## oolkids t became horror

between Earth Project that was to be a short teacher Christa McAuliffe's mission to students nationwide, ended quickly, with tears filling her eyes. How do you teach about tragedy?

Lower. Realism would be to honestly tell them that the shuttle was to be a tragedy about the 1986-87.

MY FOR now, the and Dorothy report came. And they talked about the shuttle's safety record. They talked about the history of the program. They talked about the mission. It takes to be an astronaut and they responded to their questions.

"I don't want to be an astronaut," one of the girls had said. "I want to be something else."

"There can't be a girl," another student said, "or this wouldn't be a boy."

"What will happen to the children?" another asked, referring to

# Ready to Launch

It was the morning of January 28, 1986. The space **shuttle** *Challenger* stood on the launch pad at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. The day was very cold. Despite the weather, a large crowd had gathered to see the launch.

*Challenger's* crew walked to the launch pad on the morning of January 28, 1986.



The launch of *Challenger* had been delayed six times due to equipment problems and powerful winds.



The commander of the shuttle was Francis “Dick” Scobee. He spoke to the **NASA** control center by radio.

“Two minutes,” Scobee said. *Challenger* was about to liftoff.

As the countdown continued, the seven crew members aboard *Challenger* joked with one another. So far, things were going well. However, in just a few minutes, that would all change.

A large crowd gathered  
to watch the liftoff.



# The Space Age Begins

The **Space Age** began in 1957 when the Soviet Union sent a **satellite** into space. Four years later, the first **astronauts** traveled in **capsules** carried on powerful rockets. These capsules took people into **orbit** around Earth. However, they could be used only once. When the capsules returned to Earth, they splashed down into the ocean.

America's early space travelers flew in Mercury capsules like this one.





In 1972, NASA began developing a better way to carry people into space. Workers designed a new spacecraft called the shuttle. Unlike the capsules, the shuttle could glide back to Earth and land on a runway. Then it could be used again for another **mission**.



**Astronaut John Glenn was the first American to orbit Earth in a Mercury capsule.**

The first shuttle was named *Enterprise*, after the spaceship on the TV show *Star Trek*.

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## About the Author

William Caper has written books about history, science, film, and many other topics. He lives in San Francisco, with his wife, Erin, and their dog, Face.







# The *Challenger* Space Shuttle Explosion

The countdown had begun. The crew members aboard the space shuttle *Challenger* joked with one another as they waited for takeoff. Then, at 11:38 A.M., the spacecraft thundered off the ground. The launch seemed to be going well.

Suddenly, everything changed. A bright ball of fire flashed in the sky, and thick clouds of white smoke appeared. NASA officials knew the space shuttle was in trouble. Everyone's worst fears came true as *Challenger* broke apart, killing everyone on board—including teacher Christa McAuliffe. The loss stunned people across the world and led to important changes in the space shuttle program.

**The *Challenger* Space Shuttle Explosion**

**Emergency at Three Mile Island**

**The *Exxon Valdez*'s Deadly Oil Spill**

**The Great Chicago Fire**

**The *Hindenburg* Disaster**

**Nightmare on the *Titanic***

**The Texas City Disaster**

**The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire**

**The 2001 World Trade Center Attack**

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