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'We've lost 'em, God bless 'em': What it was like to witness the Challenger disaster

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30 years ago, the Shuttle Challenger exploded during launch while CNN broadcasted on live television. All seven crew members were killed. (Jenny Starrs/The Washington Post)

The space shuttle Challenger exploded 30 years ago

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Thursday, killing its seven crew members, including high school teacher Christa McAuliffe, the woman touted as “the first private citizen” in space.

If things had gone differently, Kathy Sawyer might have become the second.

Sawyer, then a Washington Post reporter in her early 40s, was a finalist for NASA’s program to place a journalist on a shuttle mission. On Jan. 28, 1986, though, she was on the ground at Kennedy Space Center, covering a space story for the first time.



Kathy Sawyer (The Washington Post)

“The media and the public had gotten a trifle bored with the space shuttle program — it launched, went around in circles, and came back,” she recalled this week. No one imagined anything could go wrong. “So it was quite reasonable for the Post to send me, with absolutely zero experience in space coverage.”

It was a thrilling thing, on that crisp, cold day, to see the takeoff in person, standing among the families of the shuttle crew. “We felt the blast from the launch hit us in the chest,” she said.

Staring up at the exhaust plume, “we couldn’t see clearly what had happened at first.” But some of the NASA personnel there realized what the families had not, “and

gold.

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they had already started getting tears in their eyes.”

And then, Sawyer had to file her story. She ran to the press center, and grabbed the phone assigned to Time before the magazine reporter got there. Longtime Post editor Bob Kaiser took the call. “Sawyer,” she recalled him telling her, “this is the biggest story of your life; don’t f— it up.”

A political reporter who happened to be in Florida was sent to assist her. “His job the rest of the day was to stand in line at a payphone for me so that when I was ready to file, I was able to call the story in and dictate it.”

Thirty years ago, a TV critic watched the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. This is what he saw.

Sawyer spent the next 17 years on the space beat, retiring from the Post not long after the 2003 Columbia space shuttle disaster. Now a freelance writer and the author of “[The Rock from Mars](#),” she thinks about the Challenger often. “It was a turning point for me personally. It got me into a whole new area of interest.”

Of course, NASA suspended the journalist-in-space program after the Challenger disaster before selecting anyone. But if they had asked Sawyer? Yes, she would have done it. “How many people get that chance? And as a reporter it would be a heck of an assignment, a heckuva story.”

Ronald Reagan’s amazing speech on the Challenger disaster

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Sawyer's evocative A1 story about witnessing the Challenger explosion is republished here, below the image of that day's front page.

Weather
Today: Cool, chance of light snow.
High: 32°. Low: 21°. Wind: NNE 10-15 mph.
Tuesday: Mostly sunny. High:
34-38°. Wind: NW 10-15 mph.
Wednesday: Partly cloudy. High:
32-33°. Wind: SSW 10-15 mph.
Source: National Weather Service
12-23. Details on Page C2.

The Washington Post

FINAL

Detailed index on Page A2

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Space Shuttle Explodes, Killing Crew



*Fire Engulfs Ship
With 7 Aboard
Soon After Liftoff*

By Bryce Renchberger
Washington Post Staff Writer

The space shuttle Challenger, carrying six astronauts, exploded moments after liftoff yesterday, killing all seven aboard. It was the first worldwide witness to the event by television.

The unexplained explosion occurred within seconds of the shuttle's attempt to proceed flawlessly at about 2,900 feet per second, 10 miles above Earth and eight minutes down range from Cape Canaveral. The successive appendages disintegrate into bits of debris that rained into the Atlantic Ocean. Those aboard, strapped into their seats, had no chance of escape.

In addition to McAuliffe, those killed were spacecraft commander Francis R. (Dick) Scobee, pilot Michael J. Smith, mission specialist Judith A. Resnick, mission specialist Ronald E. McNair, Air Force Lt. Col. Ellison S. Onizuka, and payload specialist Gregory B. Jarvis.

It was the worst accident in the history of space exploration. No one has ever been killed during an American space flight. The tragedy occurred 19 years and one month after the fatal explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, which killed Francis G. Grissom, Roger A. Chaffee and Edward H. White during a training session when a fire in the oxygen tank caused the three astronauts to asphyxiate.

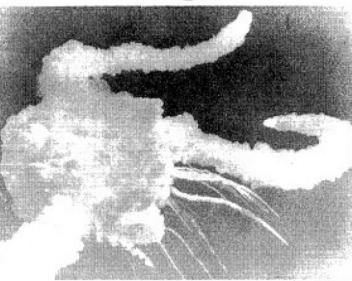
Five hours after yesterday's tragedy, Jeanne Foley, widow of Concord High School teacher Charles F. Foley, was still unable to believe it had happened.

The flight's terrible misfortune also evoked resentment from some students toward the space program's namesake crew, who periodically disrupted their lives over the last six months and made their misery a public concern. As the full extent of the disaster became clear, a voice on the public address system asked students to remain silent and asked the people to leave the building.

Dismissed early, some of the students gathered outside to give their names, others to speak at all. "It's pretty hard to handle," one boy said.

"It's a terrible, terrible loss for us," Foley said.

See CONCORD, A6, Col. 1



Solid rocket boosters veer away from exploded fragments of Challenger and its liquid fuel tank.

The Horror Dawned Slowly

For One Very Long Moment After the Explosion,
Few Realized They Had Witnessed a Disaster

By Kathy Sawyer
Washington Post Staff Writer

It took an age to realize that the column ended there.

One of the smaller solid rocket boosters could be seen looping out and back in to loops, like a small, trailing, transonic fighter plane.

"Obviously," a major said, "it had to be a major malfunction."

Steve Nesbit, a major spokesman for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, announced from the Cape Canaveral control room that the launch had been suspended for an extensive investigation.

But President Reagan, who was on the phone to his wife, Nancy, and to the nation via a nationally televised statement from the Oval Office, had exploration of space would continue.

"There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews and, yes, more voluntary civilian participation in space," Reagan said. "Nancy and I are pained to the core over the tragedy of the crew of the space shuttle Challenger."

The cheering, crackling, continuous roar of the engines, lagging behind the rising spacecraft, had reached on. The spacecraft, climbing fire-fashion to the "wall" of tensis containing 3.8 million pounds of fuel, had been up

We were gasping and cheering at the column of fire-shuttle-pellet growing like a tree into the cold blue sky. As the rumbling sound fell trailing the visible smoke continued, a curious rooster tail seemed to form almost gently at the top, with glints of fire in it.

See SHUTTLE, A6, Col. 3

■ Related stories of the shuttle disaster on Pages A4-A16 and B1.

The Horror Dawned Slowly

Joy Turns to Grief in Teacher-Astronaut's Town
As Students at High School See Tragedy Unfold

By Laura A. Klemm
Washington Post Staff Writer

CONCORD, N.H., Jan. 29.—"We were racing in the lift-off. We were excited about it. We were celebrating with her. Then it stopped." That's how Concord High School principal Charles Foley, his voice shaking,

described a national news conference this afternoon. Foley stood in the auditorium where, hours before, students with parents and teachers had gathered in stunned silence as they realized, slowly, that the shuttle carrying Concord teacher Christa McAuliffe had exploded.

The horrifying moment when Challenger lifted off gloriously and burst apart was witnessed on television by schoolchildren, office workers and families throughout New

Hampshire and across the country.

McAuliffe, 37, died in the accident.

During a press conference this afternoon, Foley stood in the auditorium where, hours before, students with parents and teachers had gathered in stunned silence as they realized, slowly,

that the shuttle carrying Concord teacher Christa McAuliffe had exploded.

The horrifying moment when Challenger lifted off gloriously and burst apart was witnessed on television by schoolchildren, office workers and families throughout New

The Horror Dawned Slowly

For one very long moment after the explosion, they had witnessed a disaster

By Kathy Sawyer

Washington Post Staff Writer

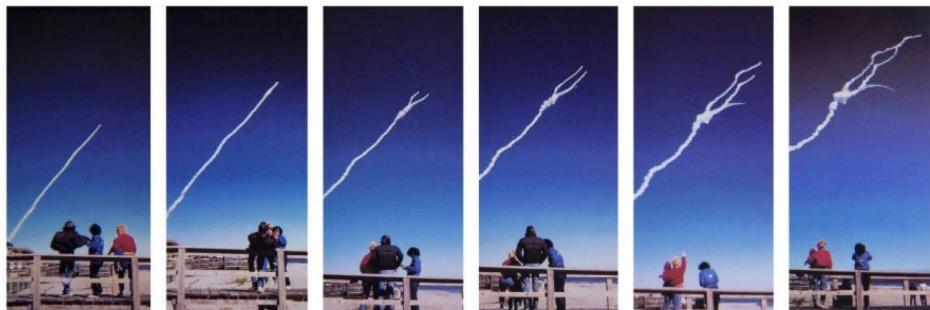
Jan. 29, 1986

Awareness came slowly, not in a fiery burst, to those watching the shuttle launch from the better seats — the grandstands set up for families of the astronauts, dignitaries, the news media and a class of third graders with connections.

The chest-trembling, concussive roar of the liftoff, lagging behind the rising spaceship, had reached us. The spacecraft, clinging fly-fashion to the “wall” of tanks containing 3.8 million pounds of fuel, had been up about one minute.

We were gasping and cheering at the column of fire-topped smoke growing like a beanstalk into a cold, blue sky. As the rumbling sound (still trailing the visible scene) continued, a curious rooster tail seemed to form almost gently at the top, with glints of fire in it.

It took an age to realize that the column ended there.



A series of photos shows the shuttle rising in the sky and then exploding as a family watches from Cocoa Beach, Fla. (Malcolm Denemark/Florida Today via AP)

One of the smaller solid rocket boosters could be seen looping out and back in toward the shuttle, trailing smoke. Other trails appeared.

“Obviously . . . a major malfunction . . . has occurred,” the voice of Mission Control, Steve Nesbitt, who normally speaks crisply, said slowly over the NASA public address system.

“They’re coming back,” said Reader’s Digest writer Malcolm McConnell, who has covered 10 launches. He and several other reporters started running, planning to make their way to the landing strip several miles away where the shuttle was to return in an emergency. There were confused shouts, swearing, a short scream.

Then, still looking up, McConnell sat back down. “Where are they?” someone asked. “Dead,” he answered flatly. “We’ve lost ‘em, God bless ‘em.”

Phrases drifted down from Mission Control. “. . . Appeared nominal through engine throttle-back . . . apparent explosion. . . . Tracking crews have reported that the vehicle had exploded.”

Shortly, there was the announcement that an “impact point” had been located in the ocean.

The rumbling sounds from the sky gradually died away. The scattered screams and shouts died. The immediate families of the astronauts were escorted quickly away to the crew

quarters. Other relatives and visitors were urged onto the buses that had brought them to the scene.

Then this stretch of Kennedy Space Center along an Atlantic Ocean beach was overwhelmed in silence.

The beanstalk of cloud, ending in a large blossom, hung in the air for hours, breaking lazily into smaller puffs. The debris from the explosion, which occurred 18 miles downrange from the space center, continued to fall into the ocean for nearly an hour, the loudspeaker voice explained later, and thwarted the search teams on helicopters, planes and ships that were converging on the spot.

The closed-circuit television monitors scattered everywhere in the press area, which had recorded the bustle of launch activity, the suiting up of the astronauts, one by one, now showed an empty picture of Atlantic horizon.

Some of the crustier observers here compared their feelings to the aftershock of combat, others to the day President John F. Kennedy was shot.

Some people sobbed. Most had red eyes.



Spectators at the Kennedy Space Center react to seeing the shuttle explode. (AP)

"I was just standing, looking up, watching for the shuttle to come out of the cloud," said Brian Ballard, 16, editor of a student newspaper.

Christa McAuliffe, 37, a social studies teacher from his school, Concord High in Concord, N.H., was in the middeck section of the spacecraft, part of the seven-member crew. She had been officially designated by the White House as the "first private citizen in space." Officials had hoped her participation would rekindle interest in the space program among schoolchildren.

"My stomach turned over," Ballard said quietly a little while after the explosion, recalling the moment of realization. "I felt sick right that minute."

McAuliffe's parents and other relatives were standing in the VIP grandstand area surrounded by a white picket fence, a

parking lot between them and the press stands. They were with the visiting third-grade class of about 20 children that had traveled here with McAuliffe's son, Scott, 9, last week. Scott, McAuliffe's daughter, Caroline, 6, and the teacher's husband, Steven, were watching from the roof of the nearby Launch Control Center, at the foot of the giant Vehicle Assembly Building. The grandstands are 3 1/2 miles from the launching pad — as close as it is safe to get, officials here said, to the rockets' potentially explosive 3.8 million pounds of fuel at liftoff.

Bob Hohler, a reporter for the Concord Monitor, had followed McAuliffe for seven months, from the time she became a finalist in the competition for yesterday's brief ride.

At liftoff, he was watching McAuliffe's parents, Edward and Grace Corrigan, through a telephoto camera lens.

"They already had tears in their eyes, from the liftoff," he said. "As the truth of what had happened dawned on them, they kept looking up, the tears of delight still on their faces, their mouths half-open. I guess they were in shock."

Then a man standing nearby put his hand on Edward Corrigan's arm and led him and his wife away. Someone else was calling "Back to the buses, please get on the buses," to the other visitors.

A NASA official who was with McAuliffe's parents during the launch said afterward, "I'll never forget the expression

on her mother's face."

Barbara Morgan, the teacher chosen as backup to McAuliffe, had stood on a TV platform near the press stand. Just at ignition and liftoff, she had smiled and waved, "Bye, Christa. Bye, Christa."

A minute later she was being helped from the platform, shaken.

A grizzled senior Lockheed technician who helped close out the shuttle before launch sat tiredly drinking a cup of coffee in the NASA cafeteria 1 1/2 hours after the disaster.

"I stood in that field watching them, and I saw the Lord took 'em in a twinkling," he said. "I don't feel sorry for those brave people because they're with the Lord. I feel sorry for the children."

The launch had attracted dozens of busloads of schoolchildren and their teachers, to see the "teacher in space." On the mission's fourth day, McAuliffe had planned to teach the first classes from space, beginning with one entitled "The Ultimate Field Trip."

The morning activities had begun before dawn in high, if chilly spirits. After six delays, it looked as if the mission would finally go up.



The shuttle crew members — Francis Scobee, Judith Resnik, Ronald McNair, Gregory Jarvis, Ellison Onizuka, Christa McAuliffe and Michael Smith — leave their quarters for the launch pad on the morning of Jan. 28, 1986. (Steve Helber/AP)

Watching the closed-circuit monitors, we had followed the preparations on the launch pad. One by one, the proud and smiling members of the crew appeared in the “White Room,” the enclosed entryway attached to the Challenger’s hatch, and put the final touches on their spacesuits.

The room got unusually crowded because everyone was pushing in to get out of the below-freezing weather.

A member of the supporting crew who had come to be known in Mission Control reports as Sonny (Billy Bob) Carter, gave the space teacher an apple as she appeared in the “White Room,” welcoming her as a special passenger. (Before the previous day’s launch had been scrubbed, Carter had welcomed her wearing a mortarboard with

tassel.) Even on the closed-circuit screens, she seemed to glow with delight.

McAuliffe was the first to climb into an American spacecraft with no special training in science or aeronautics, other than the 400 hours' worth that followed her selection from among 11,000 teacher-applicants. After some smiles and small talk with other crew members, she put a little white cap on her dark curls, and then the massive space helmet.

She is reported to have said, "I really feel a part of this crew."

At 8:35 a.m., Christa McAuliffe crawled through the Challenger hatch, her foot disappearing last.

The other woman on board, Judith A. Resnik, 36, was one of the four astronauts on the flight crew who had already taken shuttle flights. She was an electrical and biomedical engineer. The other veterans included Francis R. (Dick) Scobee, 46, the spacecraft commander who had logged more than 6,500 hours in 45 types of aircraft; Air Force Lt. Col. Ellison S. Onizuka, 39, and Ronald E. McNair, 35, a physicist.

Rookie astronaut Michael J. Smith, 40, a Navy Commander, was the pilot. Engineer Gregory B. Jarvis, 41, of Hughes Aircraft Co., was a satellite specialist.

Jarvis had twice been bumped from shuttle missions.

Several hundred of Onizuka's relatives reportedly traveled

from Hawaii to see the launch.

At 9:30 a.m. Mission Control expressed concern about “one-to two-foot-long” icicles, which could be seen hanging like long beards from the service structure around the spacecraft.

The astronauts were sealed in and the launchpad cleared of ground crew at about 11:10 a.m.

Four hours after the 11:38 launch, NASA officials gathered the news media in the same grandstand from which they had watched the tragedy and, red-eyed, made an official announcement that the seven crew members had been killed. NASA space flight director Jesse W. Moore, who made the final decision to “go,” today expressed his sorrow.

As dusk fell, Vice President Bush, who last July announced McAuliffe’s selection to fly on the shuttle, arrived at the space center to pay his respects to her family. He was accompanied by Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio), the first American to orbit the Earth, and Sen. Jake Garn (R-Utah), a veteran of a successful shuttle flight last year who knew the seven aboard.

“We hoped this day would never come,” Glenn said. “But unfortunately it has.”

Christa McAuliffe’s parents had told reporters in recent days that they were “a little scared” for their daughter. But they added that they accepted their daughter’s pride and excitement and her strong desire to go.

In the press room, during the days of delay, there had been the usual gallows humor, jokes about having to write stories about how dangerous the flight was — “gang plank” stories about McAuliffe. The attitude was that this was merely hype. After all, no American had been killed in a spacecraft after leaving the launch pad.

McAuliffe had seen herself as a pioneer. It was her study of the 18th century women who crossed America in Conestoga wagons that inspired her to apply for the space trip, she said last July. She had seen the shuttle as her own frontier vehicle.

Explorers such as the astronauts have always been followed by other people, she said. “I look on myself as one of the first of the ‘other people.’ ”

Remembering Challenger: 30 Years Later



[View Photos](#)

Space shuttle Challenger exploded in a burst of fire 74 seconds after liftoff.

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[NASA's Mission Improbable: A space agency with a proud past faces a rocky road ahead](#)

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Dan Zak is a feature writer and general assignment reporter based in the Style section. He joined the Post in 2005, after stints as an editorial assistant at Entertainment Weekly and a city-desk reporter and obituary writer at The Buffalo News.

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