

# THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

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# ALMOST HOME

Columbia's Astronauts Were 16 Minutes From A Perfect Mission



Photo by SCOTT LIEBERMAN

Debris from Columbia streaks across the sky Saturday over Tyler, Texas. The country will mourn the lost seven, who just Tuesday bowed their own heads in memory of Challenger's crew.

## INSIDE



Tribune photo by KATHY MOORE-LENGELL

### A Moment Of Silence

Primed for revelry, the gathering Gasparilla crowd was stunned as news of the disaster rippled through.

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### Disaster Coverage

As the country mourns the loss of Columbia, investigators will try to piece together what went so terribly wrong.

DETAILS, Pages 9-16

By KEITH EPSTEIN  
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**C**APE CANAVERAL — As it hurtled into the atmosphere at 18 times the speed of sound Saturday morning, space shuttle Columbia, the oldest in the nation's fleet, seemed destined for a routine landing at Kennedy Space Center. Ground controllers even marveled how unusually well the weather had cooperated.

In many ways, the flight of STS-107 seemed little different from more than 100 that preceded it, save for extra security measures because of an Israeli astronaut aboard.

Relatively few Americans even knew astronauts had gone up again Jan. 16, and Mission Control went about the usual business of monitoring the spacecraft's carefully orchestrated return to Earth. For all its turns and engine firings, Columbia was on track, on time and angled correctly for a safe return.

"Everything from a flight control perspective was perfect," said shuttle program director Ron Dittmore.

At 8:03 a.m. EST, the shuttle soared 176 miles above the Indian Ocean, properly upside down and backward. At 8:15 — precisely on time — the engines fired, lurching the seven astronauts back in their seats. Pilot William McCool then spun the craft around, nose first. He pulled it up on its tail, necessary preparation for skidding from 17,500 mph to an eventual 200 mph above Florida. Still business as usual.

By 8:45, high above the Pacific Ocean, the actual skidding began, like doing a wheelie on ever-thicker air. Intense friction heated the shuttle to

about 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit. Through the windows, the astronauts probably witnessed the usual flares of white, pink and red against the darkness of space.

Then, 16 minutes before scheduled touchdown, things quickly went awry.

Between 8:53 a.m. and 8:59 a.m., a succession of 12 temperature, tire pressure and structural sensors on the craft's left side went dead. NASA officials said it was as if wires had been cut. In the last transmission about 9 a.m., the crew seemed to be responding to an alert. The spacecraft was 207,000 feet above Earth.

"Columbia, Houston," said Mission Control. "We see your tire-pressure messages, and we did not copy your last."

"Roger, uh, buh..."

Then the radio fell silent.

Nobody at Mission Control pan-

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Silence followed: "Columbia? Houston."

See WFLA, News Channel 8 for team coverage from Kennedy Space Center at 9 a.m., noon, 6 p.m. and 11 p.m.

Go to TBO.com for video of President Bush, NASA's reaction, photos and the history of Columbia.



The Associated Press

NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe composes himself before a news conference Saturday at the Kennedy Space Center. Mission Control lost contact with the shuttle sometime after 9 a.m.



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