

The Man Who Fell From The Sky

This past October 14, “Fearless Felix” was lifted into the sky in an enclosed capsule and then jumped down to earth from a height of 128,100 feet. That’s over 24 miles high—three and a half times the normal cruising altitude of a plane! In the process, he set a record by becoming the first human to surpass the speed of sound in a free fall. This was the latest trick by the stuntman, who specializes in jumping from extreme heights.



- Aviva Sternfeld

It was pleasant weather for a midwinter morning on February 1, 2003. Dozens of people were gathered at the landing field of Kennedy Space Center on Merritt Island in Florida. These were the family members of seven astronauts who were scheduled to return from space.

The family members, accompanied by a few reporters and other guests, sat on bleachers near the runway. They waited anxiously for the Space Shuttle Columbia to make its eagerly awaited appearance in the sky. Most of the time, the spectators' eyes were glued to the huge clock that counted down the seconds remaining to the shuttle's arrival. They also followed the conversation between the Mission Control Center in Houston and the astronauts aboard the shuttle, as it played over the loudspeakers.

Everything was going fine with just 15 minutes left to landing. But then, officials on the ground noticed that Columbia was having a problem with its landing gear. "Columbia, this is Houston. We see your tire pressure message and we have not received your latest information."



Space Shuttle Columbia launches on its doomed mission.



Astronauts returning on the Space Shuttle Columbia, moments before the craft broke apart.

"Ok, b..."

Those were the last words to come from the seven astronauts aboard the shuttle. Mission Control kept up its side of the conversation for several more minutes, and the families continued to listen. Suddenly the loudspeakers went silent. The people gathered near the runway were left with only the large numbers on the screen. 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... 0...

Nothing. There was no sign of the space shuttle.

The large clock continued counting the seconds after Columbia's "landing," but the landing had not taken place. Moments later, the cell phones of the NASA officials who had been appointed to escort the family members all began ringing at once. After the brief calls ended, the officials asked the families to follow them inside the building. They led the spectators down a long hallway to the large briefing room where press conferences are generally held.

When everyone was inside, the NASA officials remained silent and refused to answer questions. They just waited there with serious expressions on their faces.

Among those waiting for news of the missing space shuttle and fearing the worst was Dr. Jonathan Clark, who was there with his eight-year-old son. After waiting nervously for a few minutes, Dr. Clark lost his patience and slipped out of the room. He headed to the nearby office of the flight surgeon who keeps track of the astronauts'

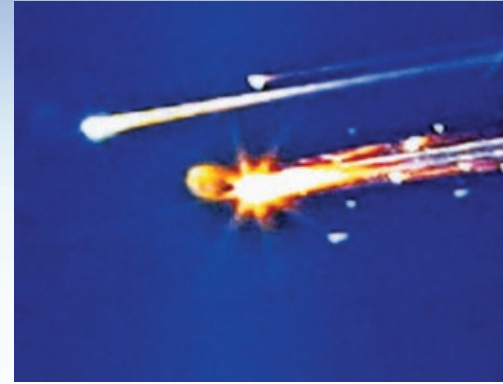
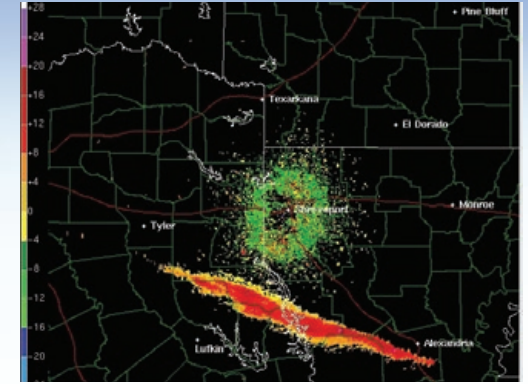


Image of the space shuttle disintegrating in the sky above Dallas.

health from earth during space missions. Dr. Clark himself had served as flight surgeon for six shuttle missions, so he had the key to the office.

He was interested in this shuttle mission, STS 107, not for professional reasons, but because his wife, Laurel Clark, was one of the seven astronauts on that flight.

Dr. Clark closed the door behind him and tuned the television set to a news station. The news showed a streak of white crossing the sky and breaking up into more and more streaks as it went. The footage had been videoed by a reporter in Dallas. Clark made



Radar photo of the huge area of Texas and Louisiana where debris from Columbia fell.

a quick calculation and figured that when the space shuttle passed over Dallas it was traveling at an altitude of 200,000 feet. He knew what that meant.

None of the astronauts who were aboard Space Shuttle Columbia were going to return.

Dr. Clark returned to the briefing room where the others were still waiting. He found his son and took his hand. He stood there pensively, envisioning those streaks of white over the Texas sky replaying themselves over and again.

Eventually, Bob Cabana, a NASA director and a friend of Clark's, entered. Even before



Small pieces of the once-proud space shuttle.