

ALMOST HOME

By Carolyn Permentier
For Psst Magazine

The courageous crewmembers aboard the shuttle, *Columbia*, were almost home when something went very wrong on Saturday morning, February 1, 2003. I can only imagine their excitement at the near completion of a successful research flight that had begun on January 16th.

Seventeen years after the *Challenger* exploded on liftoff on January 28, 1986 another disaster has tainted the already beleaguered U.S. space program, with the loss of 7 precious lives.

As body parts and pieces of the shuttle are being retrieved from Texas and Louisiana, the nightmarish question seeps into every thinking man and woman's consciousness ... could this have been prevented?

The loss of life, and the agonizing pain of loved ones left behind, is always horrific. And the scope of such a catastrophe cannot be fully grasped, as we all stand aghast by the tragedy. Words are so inadequate.

But if this horrible loss of life was the result of an under-funded or mismanaged space program, the implications become even more significant. And, apparently, there's rumor adrift that these are precisely the reasons for *Columbia's* tragedy.

I recall a time in 2000, when some high level military were warning, and offering intelligence to prove their concerns, that we better be worried and ready to combat a terrorist attack. The military wanted to prepare for a Smallpox epidemic, and they warned that a "lone terrorist" with a vial could wreak havoc on America. Their battle cry to Congress? "We need funding!"

Funding did not come, nor was adequate attention given until September 11th. Then, funding became a non-issue immediately. Of course there's funding now ... after the fact. Why must it require a catastrophe to get our attention? The squeaky wheel doesn't get the oil, until it falls off the axle.

And then, we have to build a totally new wheel. And all it would have taken was a little preventive maintenance.

Much attention is being given to the shuttle tiles that protected critical wing parts. And according to a technical report by Paul Fischbeck, an engineering professor at Carnegie Mellon University, he alerted the space agency nine years ago about the tile problem. He said that NASA struggled for years to try to ensure the tiles were firmly attached to the shuttle, but they never completely solved the problems. As of the writing of this article, NASA has made no comment on this report.

Following a \$90 million overhaul in April, 2000, the *Columbia* was put back in service last March, when it flew astronauts on a servicing mission to the Hubble Space Telescope. The *Columbia* was the oldest ship in NASA's fleet and was also the first to fly in space. This fatal mission was only its 28th, and they are designed to fly 100 times before they are retired.

The overhaul took 17 months to complete and the Boeing official, overseeing the work, expressed concern about some changes in the shuttle maintenance program to save money. His concerns were quoted in a letter in the Los Angeles Daily News on October 7, 2001.

NASA looked into replacing the aging shuttle fleet with a experimental design by Lockheed Martin, but announced on March 1, 2001 they were going to upgrade their existing fleet. Did they? And if so, to what extent were they upgraded? What was left undone?

So, is it the problem of the space agency improperly managing their funds? Or is it a problem of insufficient funding? A report from the General Accounting Office to Congress in January, said NASA "continues to face challenges that threaten its ability to effectively run its largest program."

Others, such as Senator Kay Bailer Hutchison, Republican from Texas, and member of the Senate subcommittee, overseeing the space agency, expressed concern over NASA's history of staff shortages and that the new administrator was struggling to cope with cost overruns.

I wonder how all this will affect Capitol Hill's focus on other vital programs like tax cuts, Medicare reform, terrorism and the impending war with Iraq?

Whatever the truth behind the truth is concerning this devastating blow to the space program, it will be a tragedy of even more monumental proportions, if we one day learn that their deaths were caused by cutting corners to save money.

We're either involved in a viable space program, or we're not. If we are, it must be sufficiently funded for safety above all else. Otherwise, let's tell the truth and just say it isn't important and get the hell out.

Seven precious lives were going home on that fateful Saturday. Just a few more minutes and they would be home, their mission complete. I choose to feel these brave souls are somewhere, and I trust it is their ultimate home.

We celebrate your courage, commitment and sacrifice. And whatever you're doing now, I'm sure it is as indescribable as my futile attempt to express our gratitude. We're happy for your return to your Ultimate Home. Whatever and wherever that is ... I bet it's beyond words. Peace be still.