



Picking Up the Pieces

By Steven Ehrenberg

Monday, February 3—Hundreds of police, soldiers, and volunteers are combing Texas and Louisiana today for the remains of the space shuttle *Columbia*. The shuttle broke apart on Saturday morning as it came in for landing. All seven astronauts aboard were killed.

Much of the debris fell into a forested area in east Texas called Piney Woods. Searchers rode horses and four-wheel-drives through the area, spotting pieces as small as a pea and as large as a truck. Volunteers marked the debris with red flags.

Experts will analyze the remains at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana for clues to explain what brought the shuttle down.

NASA warns local residents not to touch the pieces they find, because they could contain toxic materials. Several dozen people have gone to the hospital to be treated for rashes and breathing problems.

The Task Ahead

The searchers have a tremendous task in front of them. "There is no way to describe how many pieces there are and how spread out over the landscape they are," said James Kroll, who is helping NASA to map where the debris fell. "Ten years from now, folks are going to be walking around the woods and finding stuff."

More than 1,200 shuttle pieces were found in Nacogdoches County (pronounced NA-ca-DOE-chiz), Texas, alone. Two of the county's nine school districts were closed while the campuses were inspected.

"There are several crews from the [Environmental Protection Agency] coming—they'll have 16 crews here later today," said Deborah Gaston, a spokesperson for the county. "They will go to each of those campuses to make sure that they're safe for the students to return."

In the meantime, local residents continue to stumble across remains of the disaster. On a quiet spot along a highway near San Augustine, Texas, a group of people stopped to gaze at an astronaut's seat harness.

"It sends chills up your spine to know that there was a person in front of it," said Efred Vivar of Conroe, Texas.