

# SCHOLASTIC News

## Space Shuttle Lost

By Steven Ehrenberg

The space shuttle *Columbia* broke apart as it returned to Earth at about 9 a.m. on Saturday. Seven astronauts were aboard.

"It's gone," said a senior U.S. official.

The shuttle was streaking across the bright, wintry sky over Texas when it appeared to burst into flames and break into pieces. The shuttle was only 16 minutes from touching down at Cape Canaveral in Florida when NASA officials lost contact with the crew.

Residents on the ground below reported hearing a thunderous boom and watching pieces fall to the ground.

"The barn started shaking and we ran out and started looking around," said Benjamin Laster of Kemp, Texas. "I saw a puff of vapor and smoke and saw a big chunk of material fall."

NASA officials warned residents of Texas and Louisiana not to touch the shuttle debris. "We want people to stay away, because some of it could be toxic," said Detective Greg Sowell of Nacogdoches, Texas.

### The Crew

The seven astronauts aboard were Rick Husband, the commander; pilot William McCool; mission specialists Kalpana Chawla and Michael Anderson; flight surgeons David Brow and Laurel Clark; and payload commander Ilan Ramon.

All but one of the seven astronauts were Americans. The other, Ilan Ramon, was Israel's first astronaut. For Ramon, McCool, Clark, and Brown, it was their first trip into space.

This is the second time astronauts have died on a shuttle mission. The space shuttle *Challenger* exploded just after takeoff on January 28, 1986, killing all seven American astronauts aboard.

### The Mission

*Columbia* launched two weeks ago to perform 80 science experiments in space. Astronaut Laurel Clark talked about the experiments in an interview with *Scholastic News* last summer.

"We'll be looking at flames in space, understanding the ways that fire works, and trying to make cleaner burning engines," Clark told *Scholastic News*. "We'll be looking at the human body... and we'll be trying to understand [why] you lose bone and muscle in space... We'll be studying cancer cells. We'll be studying viruses. We'll be looking at the way sand acts and trying to understand how sand moves and how sand turns from a solid to a liquid... This will help us understand how and where to build homes in earthquake-prone regions."



The Columbia crew. Seated: Rick D. Husband, Kalpana Chawla, and William C. McCool. Standing: David M. Brown, Laurel B. Clark, Michael P. Anderson, and Ilan Ramon. (Photo: NASA)

The crew completed the experiments they set out to perform; their research was considered a success.

"They dedicated their lives to pushing the scientific challenges for all of us here on Earth," said NASA official Sean O'Keefe. "A more courageous group of people you could not have hoped to know."