Witness to Tragedy: The Shuttle Columbia Disaster

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Nacogdoches has witnessed much history. De Soto stayed among the Caddo Indians in the winter of 1542 and 1543, and La Salle first described Nacogdoches and its friendly natives in 1685, and the Marx Brothers performed their zany comedy here. While we, in hindsight, recognize these and other events as important, a recent and tragic incident placed East Texas and Nacogdoches at the center of the world’s intense scrutiny.

Saturday, February 1, 2003, dawned sunny and crisp. Tension was high as the specter of war with Iraq loomed, but the sky was clear, unmarked by clouds, and the local newspaper, The Daily Sentinel, predicted spring-like high temperatures of 70° for the day. Shortly before 8:00 a.m. there were still some areas blanketed by fog, but elsewhere, objects had a sharp-edged quality that only a winter’s day, albeit a mild one, can bring.

Nacogdoches County citizens went about their usual Saturday morning routines. Sue Kennedy, Nacogdoches county judge, was having coffee with her husband, Bill; county sheriff Thomas Kerss was visiting near Longview with his family; Pam Fitch, executive director of the local Convention and Visitors Bureau, was dressing for a meeting in the city.

Some residents watched in anticipation as the space shuttle Columbia approached the skies over Texas en route to its scheduled landing at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida. Veteran shuttle watchers soon realized that something was different this time. While the loud booms and the rolling rumbles sounded similar to those familiar with the shuttle’s usual pattern of reentry, these noises seemed too loud, too lengthy, too complex to be the usual and expected sonic boom. Fitch, who had grown up in Bossier City, Louisiana, near an Air Force base, said “It wasn’t like any sonic boom I ever heard; I knew something was wrong.”

Overhead, unlike the compact condensation trails left by high-flying airplanes, the white trail in the sky was blunt, crooked, too wide, and fluffy. Within seconds, concerned citizens overwhelmed the Nacogdoches County sheriff’s office switchboard. All reported an explosion that rattled windows and blew open doors. Television networks soon announced that NASA had lost communications with Columbia. As anxious moments passed, CNN reported that the shuttle and its crew were overdue. Those who were old enough to remember the Apollo 1 fire in 1967, or that terrible day in 1986 when the shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after liftoff, may have begun to feel uneasy and, perhaps quietly, beseeched the powers of the universe, “Please, not again.”

As minutes lengthened into hours, pieces of wreckage fell to earth across East Texas. Dr. James Kroll of the Forest Research Institute at Stephen F.
Austin State University (SFA) later discovered that the Nacogdoches County debris field was approximately ten miles wide and forty miles long. Nacogdoches, it appeared, was at the eye of the storm as other East Texas communities, including Hemphill, Norwood, Palestine, and Waxahachie, became the final resting places for pieces of the space shuttle. Most of the debris was jagged and not identifiable, but some, such as the charred helmet found in a field near Norwood in San Augustine County, or the three-ring notebook discovered partially covered by leaves in the woods near Nacogdoches, provided mute testimony to the tragedy played out more than thirty miles above Texas.

One county resident said, “Something exploded, and while I was standing out here, something fell out of the sky.”

Texan Carol Farrar’s car was struck by debris as she drove along U.S. Highway 69, south of Interstate 20. “It was pinkish in color like some type of insulation and about twelve inches in diameter,” she said.

On February 2, the headline on the front page of the Nacogdoches newspaper, The Daily Sentinel, stated what a stunned world already knew: “Shuttle explodes over East Texas.” At the top of the page was a small photograph of the crew, for Columbia was not an empty piece of machinery. Aboard were seven young, bright, and brave astronauts. They were Rick D. Husband, commander; William C. McCool, pilot; Michael P. Anderson, payload commander; David M. Brown, mission specialist 1; Kalpana Chawla, mission specialist 2; Lauren Blair Salton Clark, mission specialist 4; and Ilan Ramon, payload specialist 1 and Israel’s first astronaut.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, communities across the country had examined their emergency response procedures. Nacogdoches’ leaders had been working on the local plan and as a result were quick to respond to the tragedy. Mayor Roy Blake, Jr., was enroute to San Antonio, but turned around when he heard about the shuttle’s breakup. Fire Department Chief Rusty Sanders and others set up a temporary command post to establish security, coordinate local recovery efforts, and deal with media demands for information. Sanders, whose home was struck by a piece of Columbia, said that there were many concerns in the period immediately following the explosion. Since NASA was part of the Department of Defense, there were potential national security issues. Photographic and encryption equipment needed to be secured if found. Recovery leaders were also worried about the presence of hazardous material, including explosive bolts and toxic rocket propellant. Most importantly, if human remains were found, they needed to be protected and recovered quickly.

When it became clear that the disaster affected more than just the city of Nacogdoches, city-wide recovery activity was absorbed by the larger county-wide effort directed by Judge Kennedy, who in addition to her duties as county judge also served as the emergency management director for the county. She established her command post in the John Lightfoot Law Enforcement Center (LEC). In assuming her post, Kennedy said, “We can’t
forget what a tragedy this is. We want to respond with all the dignity and respect that is due.”

Sheriff Kerss served as the emergency management team’s operations chief. His responsibilities encompassed procuring and allocating personnel and resources. As he drove back to Nacogdoches, he communicated with the senior sheriff’s department officer on watch, Lieutenant Mike Claude. “I instructed him to cancel all days off and call in everyone normally scheduled on a day shift. All officers who normally worked the night shift were to be told to report that night. That way we were able to cover twenty-four hours a day in twelve-hour shifts,” he said. One problem was that agencies from across the country were calling to offer personnel and resources. “Some agencies just showed up without being called,” Kerss explained. “We needed a list of the personnel we had, as well as what agencies had called to offer help. By the end of the second week some 135 agencies had personnel here. Orange County, California, called and offered 1200 reserve officers,” he continued, “but when I thought about the problem of getting them here, and then where I would put them, I eventually had to decline the offer.”

On Saturday afternoon President George W. Bush invoked the Stafford Act, making the space shuttle Columbia disaster a federal emergency. National Guard troops were called in to help secure debris sites. Also by Saturday afternoon, hundreds of other state and federal agency personnel, volunteers, and representatives from the media began to converge on Nacogdoches. Although volunteers initially reported to the LEC, it quickly became clear that the facility was not equipped for the large number of persons involved. Staging for the many people who arrived for the recovery was soon shifted to the Nacogdoches County Exposition (Expo) Center.

Pam Fitch was one of the first people Kennedy called. “I needed someone who had the contacts and could make the necessary arrangements for food and shelter for the rapidly-growing recovery team,” she said. Fitch commandeered the LEC squad room, which was one of the few rooms large enough to accommodate seventy-five people for meals, the approximate number in the core administrative group at LEC.

“What Kennedy was asking for grew rapidly,” Fitch remembered. “We also needed food and shelter for the 500 or so volunteers and staff at the Expo Center. By the end of the day I acquired the [logistical] duty of obtaining the supplies that would be needed [long-term], like...copy paper, [since we quickly exhausted the supplies at the LEC. Also, we needed bottled water for the guys in the field.”

The challenges Fitch faced evolved over the five days she assisted the recovery team. “The first day the problem was to get the food in there and to keep it stocked for them at any time,” she explained. “And the type of food changed, too; it didn’t need to be food where they came in and were served a hot plate there. That was nice and we had some of that, but we also needed [portable food such as] sack lunches [and] fruit. Because it was the weekend, we relied heavily on local restaurants and merchants. Wal-Mart and Kroger
were great. They opened their doors to us.” She added, “by Monday, Southwest Canners delivered a truckload of drinks, which really helped, and Pilgrims Pride delivered, I don’t know how many, fried chicken tenders. Eventually, many corporate sponsors, like General Mills, also contributed badly needed food and supplies.”

There were other necessities as well. Fitch added, “We had [portable restroom facilities] for the searchers located...in different parts of the county. [Also] by Saturday night and Sunday, we had so many officials coming in that hotel room procurement began to be a huge part of what we were doing. Moreover,” she continued, “the initial supplies that we received, by the second or third day, were running out, so we had to secure more.” The men in the field needed everything from flashlights and batteries to spray paint used to mark the location of small pieces of debris. “We went to Texas Farm Products for stock tanks in which to ice bottled water and drinks,” she concluded.

Patricia Spence, director of student publications at Stephen F. Austin State University, was the recovery team’s media liaison. Uncharacteristically, she was out of the house before 8:00 a.m., had checked on a student organization she advises, and was on her way to breakfast when she learned of the disaster. “I was proud to find out when I arrived that student reporters and photographers from SFA were already on the job,” Spence recalled. Her main challenges included maintaining security and deciding when to release information. Assisted by colleague Rhonda Minton, SFA director of communications, Spence explained that “Both Rhonda and I had worked as field reporters, so we both understood what the media wanted and needed to know. Now we were on the other side of the fence. I was impressed by the county government and sheriff’s department, their readiness [and] professionalism. Our spokespersons were respectful of the media [and] helpful. Judge Kennedy held the first news conference at 2:00 p. m. Saturday afternoon. It was important to get information to those in the media. I believe our finest moment was that first press conference on CNN. It demonstrated our pride, professionalism, [and] confidence.”

By the end of the first week much of the debris was removed and recovery became routine. On Wednesday, February 5, Kennedy announced that she would soon return to her regular duties, and although Kerss’ duties in the sheriff’s department kept him caught up in the shuttle’s recovery, he, too, scaled back his involvement. By February 15, most of the volunteers had returned to their normal occupations and the U. S. Forest Service “Blue Team” took over to continue the search.

Both Judge Kennedy and Sheriff Kerss were impressed by the way the community pulled together. Even people not immediately involved sent the searchers cards, letters, and e-mails. Some called to say they were doing a good job. “It was up-lifting and helped keep our spirits high, especially when we would reach a low-point emotionally,” Kerss said. Pam Fitch was impressed that information was released in a dignified manner, when the
remains of the seven astronauts were located. Although she believed that members of the media attempted to manipulate officials for information about human remains, Kennedy declined to answer questions about the astronauts. Their recovery was handled with dignity and respect."

On February 2, NASA officials announced that they had appointed an independent board to investigate and determine the cause of the Columbia disaster. On Wednesday, August 27, the board released its findings. After months of public speculation, the report confirmed that a small piece of insulating foam had broken away from the external fuel tank and struck the underside of the left wing, damaging the surface. Upon reentry, super-heated air entered the wing through the damage and caused the destruction of the craft.

In retrospect, many things contributed to the success of the shuttle recovery. Resources far beyond those available in Nacogdoches were provided to the command center. Volunteers offered what they had, including horses and equipment, and local amateur radio operators made communications in the field possible. Support from telephone and electric companies provided badly needed power and communications at both LEC and the Expo Center. Local residents contributed food and services without expecting payment. Thousands of volunteers searched fields and woods, lakes and back roads, to find and recover pieces of the shuttle and the remains of the seven who died. Perhaps most critically, civic leaders were not only capable but prepared. When tragedy struck, they were ready.

Looking back, the Columbia disaster was a tragic and painful way to be reminded that all history is local. Historian James H. McRandle points out that when "popular history sings of events and makes them great, it transcends the realm of record and enters that of myth." Maybe that is where Columbia is bound, so that when those of us who were here that day pass, it will live on. Already, East Texans are planning memorials to the astronauts and volunteers. Eventually, there may be monuments, parks, and information centers. Another historian, Carol Reardon, writes, "The most enduring moments that claim places in American public memory - the images that best capture and hold longest the popular interest - posses the ability to bridge past and present. In ever-changing and often contentious ways, these episodes touch on basic values, honored traditions, deep-seated fears, unfulfilled hopes, and unrighted wrongs.\" Columbia provides one such episode.

On February 1, 2003, the world lost seven of its finest citizens, pioneers, and scientists. Perhaps President George W. Bush said what many feel in their hearts. The Columbia astronauts willingly "assumed great risk in their service to all humanity," but, he continued, while they "did not return safely to earth, we can pray that all are safely home."\n
NOTES

hereinafter cited as *Bicentennial History*.

6. Fitch Interview.
19. Kennedy interview; Fitch interview.
20. Fitch interview.
21. Fitch interview.
22. Fitch interview.
24. Kennedy interview; Kerss interview.
26. Kennedy interview; Kerss interview.
29. Lynn Winthrop, “East Texans at work planning memorials to astronauts, volunteers,” *The Daily Sentinel*, Friday, August 1, 2003, p. 4A.
30. Carol Reardon, *Pickett’s Charge: In History and Memory* (Chapel Hill, 1997), p. 3.