

This Day in History... January 28, 1986

The Space Shuttle *Challenger* Disaster

On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle *Challenger* broke apart during the launch of its 10th mission.

America's second orbiter in the Space Shuttle program (after *Columbia*), *Challenger* was named after the British ship HMS *Challenger*. The contract for the shuttle's construction was awarded in 1979 and was completed in 1981.

The *Challenger* made its first flight on April 4, 1983. After that, it flew 85% of all shuttle missions, averaging about three per year between 1983 and 1985. During this time, *Challenger* carried the first American woman, African American, Dutchman, and Canadian into space. It also conducted three Spacelab missions and made the first nighttime launch and landing of a space shuttle.

In 1986, *Challenger* was slated to carry out the 25th mission of the US Space Shuttle program. The mission was planned as the first Teacher in Space Project and would have observed Halley's Comet for six days. The crew consisted of Commander Francis R. Scobee, Pilot Michael J. Smith, Mission Specialists Ronald McNair, Ellison S. Onizuka, and Judith A. Resnik, Payload Specialists Gregory B. Jarvis and Christa McAuliffe, who was also a teacher and would have been the first teacher in space.

Challenger was launched at 11:38 local time on January 28, 1986, in Cape Canaveral, Florida. Just 73 seconds into the flight, the spacecraft disintegrated due to a structural failure (later discovered to be a failure in the primary and secondary O-rings in the shuttle's right Solid Rocket Booster).

The disaster killed all seven crew members and destroyed the orbiter. It was the first of two US orbiters to be destroyed in flight (the other being the *Columbia* in 2003). Days after the accident, President Ronald Reagan attended a special ceremony honoring the crew members where he stated, "Sometimes, when we reach for the stars, we fall short. But we must pick ourselves up again and press on despite the pain."

Immediately after the accident, the shuttle program was put on hiatus for 32 months. President Ronald Reagan also created a special commission to investigate the accident. The commission found a number of issues that contributed to the accident. Among them were that NASA had violated its own safety rules and the failure of some managers to address warnings about the O-rings and launching in cold temperatures.

Recovery efforts began right after the accident and continued for some time. Among the items recovered was an American flag, dubbed the *Challenger* flag, which had been sent by Boy Scout Troop 514 of Monument, Colorado. Most of the debris from the shuttle was buried in a former missile silo.

The *Challenger* and its crew have been honored in a variety of ways since then. The families of the crew created the *Challenger* Center for Space Science Education. Seven asteroids, as well as seven craters on the Moon, were named for each of the astronauts. A painting of the crew was added to the US Capitol Brumidi Corridors. There are several *Challenger* schools and a *Challenger* Air Force Unit.



Priority Mail stamp pictures *Challenger* above Earth during one of its missions.

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