



Space shuttle Columbia breaks apart in the skies over Tyler, Texas, on Saturday, killing the seven astronauts aboard. The disaster occurred roughly 40 miles above Earth as the shuttle slipped into the upper atmosphere, slowing to 12,500 miles an hour toward its destination, the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Tyler Morning Telegraph/DR. SCOTT LIEBERMAN

'It's gone'

Columbia disintegrates; wing damage suspected

By **MIKE WILLIAMS**
COX NEWS SERVICE

KENNEDY SPACE CENTER — Space shuttle Columbia broke apart during re-entry Saturday, sending a streak of fiery debris tumbling from the Texas sky and killing a crew of seven astronauts just minutes before their scheduled landing in Florida.

NASA officials refused to speculate publicly on what caused the shuttle to disintegrate, but attention was focused on possible damage to the left wing during Columbia's launch.

The tragedy shook a nation focused on a possible war with Iraq, even as it raised new questions about a space program struggling to overcome management and budgeting snafus, congressional criticism and a largely indifferent public.

The loss of Columbia — the first shuttle ever to fly — is the second fatal accident in the 113 flights spanning the program's 22-year history. In 1986, Challenger exploded shortly after liftoff, also killing seven

SEE **GONE**, PAGE 3A



Associated Press/**TOM ECKERT**

Jimmy Brown said he heard a loud roar and his house shook Saturday morning in Bronson, Texas. When he looked outside he found a large piece of smoldering debris thought to be from the shuttle Columbia in his yard.

Disbelief gives way to sadness

By **IVONA LERMAN**
and **SANDRA FREDERICK**
STAFF WRITERS

Scott Krammer was filling in at a New Smyrna Beach fruit stand Saturday morning when he got a call he didn't expect.

"'Scott, we lost Columbia,'" Krammer said his father told him. His father called from Kennedy Space Center, where he works as an information technologist.

"He said the Space Center is very solemn and he's shutting down the computer sys-

tem."

Krammer, 17, who was born 12 days before the Challenger explosion, was one of many locals distraught by the Columbia tragedy. Jews and Indians mourned fallen heroes. A teacher recalled an astronaut's visit to her fourth-grade class. The father of two astronaut sons spoke of meeting Columbia crew members.

"Living in Florida," Krammer said, "I guess we take the Space Center for granted and that nothing can go wrong. This is the kind of thing when it happens, you remember it. I will for the rest of my life."

SEE **SADNESS**, PAGE 4A

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The Astronauts

Rick Husband, payload commander, 45, an Air Force colonel from Amarillo, Texas. Former test pilot selected as an astronaut in 1994 on his fourth try. Married father of two.



William McCool, 41, pilot, a Navy commander from Lubbock, Texas. Became an astronaut in 1996. First spaceflight for McCool, who was married with three sons, ages 22, 19 and 14.



Michael Anderson, 43, payload commander. Chosen in 1994 as one of only a few black astronauts. Lieutenant colonel, lived in Spokane, Wash., handled science experiments. Married with children.



Kalpana Chawla, 41, immigrated to the United States from India in 1980s; became an astronaut in 1994. Previous mission as robotic arm operator on STS-87 in 1997.



David Brown, 46, Navy captain, pilot and doctor. Joined the Navy after medical internship; went on to fly A-6E Intruder and F-18. Became an astronaut in 1996. Columbia's mission his first spaceflight.



Laurel Clark, 41, a flight surgeon before she became an astronaut in 1996. Had been on Columbia to help with science experiments. Lived in Racine, Wis., married with an 8-year-old son.



Ilan Ramon, 48, colonel in Israel's air force and first Israeli in space. Chosen as Israel's first astronaut in 1997; moved to Houston in 1998 to train for flight. Wife, four children — ages 5 to 15 — live in Tel Aviv.

