

Challenger, Columbia wreckage on public display for 1st time

August 2 2015, by Marcia Dunn

NASA is offering up wreckage from the Challenger and Columbia for public view after hiding it from the world for decades.

A new exhibit at Kennedy Space Center features two pieces of debris, one from each lost shuttle, as well as poignant, personal reminders of the 14 astronauts killed in flight.

It is an unprecedented collection of artifacts—the first time, in fact, that any Challenger or Columbia remains have been openly displayed.

NASA's intent is to show how the astronauts lived, rather than how they died. As such, there are no pictures in the "Forever Remembered" exhibit of Challenger breaking apart in the Florida sky nearly 30 years ago or Columbia debris raining down on Texas 12 years ago.

Since the tragic re-entry, Columbia's scorched remains have been stashed in off-limits offices at the space center. But NASA had to pry open the underground tomb housing Challenger's pieces—a pair of abandoned missile silos at neighboring Cape Canaveral Air Force Station—to retrieve the section of fuselage now on display.

The exhumation was conducted in secrecy. Everything about the exhibit, in fact, was kept hush-hush during the four years it took to complete the project, out of respect to the dead astronauts' families.

June Scobee Rodgers had never seen an actual remnant of her husband's

destroyed shuttle, Challenger, until previewing the exhibit just before its low-key opening at the end of June.

Displayed in a dimly lit room: a 12-foot section of the left side body panel of Challenger, standing vertically and bearing the gouged and scraped but still brilliantly colorful U.S. flag, and the charred frames for Columbia's cockpit windows, seemingly floating at eye level.

"Sad, yes," to see the wreckage but it is "a wonderful memorial" to the shuttles, Scobee Rodgers said. The items representing the astronauts, on the other hand, are a "truly fitting" reminder of who they were as individuals.

Challenger commander Francis "Dick" Scobee's display case, on the left side of the exhibit's main corridor, contains the leather helmet from the Starduster biplane he and June used to fly, and his blue "TFNG" T-shirt from the Astronaut Class of 1978, nicknamed the Thirty-Five New Guys.

Across the hall on the right are Columbia commander Rick Husband's scuffed cowboy boots and well-worn Bible opened to Proverbs. There's a display case for each astronaut, filled with personal items, although not all families contributed, including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe's.

"Forever Remembered" is a permanent exhibit, part of a larger display centered on the retired space shuttle Atlantis. NASA opted to keep Atlantis at Kennedy, the shuttle launch site, after Atlantis closed the program with the final mission in 2011.

The entrance to the new exhibit is directly beneath the nose of Atlantis, which is suspended with its payload bay doors wide open as though perpetually orbiting Earth.

One recent afternoon in July, tourists filled the predominantly blue hallway, pausing in front of the astronaut display cases. One woman wondered aloud which shuttle burned up and which one blew up. A few young children scampered about, their parents shushing them given the solemnity of the place.

A few weeks after visiting the exhibit, Scobee Rodgers noted in a phone interview that much of the world's population wasn't even born yet when Challenger went down in 1986.

"It's mostly history for the general public. It's very personal for us," she said.

Amber DiSalvatore—an Apopka, Florida, resident touring the space center with her husband and two children—was 4 years old at the time of Challenger. Seeing the actual wreckage—along with Husband's Bible—brought tears to her eyes.

The astronauts sacrificed their lives for exploration, said DiSalvatore, "so it's something that everybody—every human being—should know."

In the aftermath of the Feb. 1, 2003, Columbia accident, NASA meticulously stored the 42 tons of debris in Kennedy's iconic Vehicle Assembly Building and made them available for research. The space agency displayed a remnant or two of Columbia in a restricted area of the [space center](#) and, for the fifth anniversary, organized a traveling in-house exhibit. The relics were intended as safety reminders for the workforce. The three surviving shuttles—Discovery, Atlantis and Endeavour, Challenger's replacement—still were flying then.

After Challenger's accident, NASA wanted it out of sight and out of mind. The Jan. 28, 1986, launch disaster unfolded on live TV before countless schoolchildren eager to see an everyday teacher rocketing

toward space. And so Challenger's wreckage—all 118 tons of it, salvaged from the Atlantic—was buried in the pair of former missile silos, 90 feet deep.

The chamber containing this particular fuselage section, in fact, had never been opened—until the "Forever Remembered" exhibit began to take shape.

Determined to avoid any hint of commercialism or sensationalism, NASA took charge of the memorial effort at the visitor complex, which is run by an outside company. The job fell to Michael Ciannilli, a shuttle engineer and test director who had become responsible for the Challenger and Columbia debris.

"Our biggest concern the whole time was doing the right thing," Ciannilli said. "Is this the right time? Is this the right thing?"

As the conversations unfolded over the months then years, Ciannilli entered the underground storage silos to find the proper display piece to represent Challenger.

"I was hoping to find something that would show the beauty of Challenger, the dignity of Challenger, the strength of Challenger, and these are words I don't use lightly," Ciannilli said.

The 12-foot section of fuselage with the flag fit the bill. For Columbia, he chose the cockpit window frames. He said it's like gazing into the eyes of Columbia and thus its soul.

Ciannilli tapped the same preservation company that had worked on the Titanic, for the Challenger and Columbia relics. He sought out soothing, uplifting music for the exhibit.

And, yes, he deliberately kept out real-time scenes of the shuttles disintegrating.

"There's more to this story" than those awful final moments, he said. "Great pains were taken not to have anything sensationalized or exploited."

Above all else, Ciannilli wanted the end result to be respectful.

"I can't stop thinking about it," Evelyn Husband-Thompson, the widow of Columbia's commander, confided in a NASA interview. "As you walk in, you know that you're in a special place."

© 2015 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Challenger, Columbia wreckage on public display for 1st time (2015, August 2) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-08-columbia-wreckage-1st.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
