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Comm Check...: The Final Flight Of Shuttle Columbia



Synopsis

On February 1, 2003, the unthinkable happened. The space shuttle Columbia disintegrated 37 miles above Texas, seven brave astronauts were killed and America's space program, always an eyeblink from disaster, suffered its second catastrophic in-flight failure. Unlike the Challenger disaster 17 years earlier, Columbia's destruction left the nation one failure away from the potential abandonment of human space exploration. Media coverage in the immediate aftermath focused on the possible cause of the disaster, and on the nation's grief. But the full human story, and the shocking details of NASA's crucial mistakes, have never been told -- until now. Based on dozens of exclusive interviews, never-before-published documents and recordings of key meetings obtained by the authors, Comm Check takes the reader inside the conference rooms and offices where NASA's best and brightest managed the nation's multi-billion-dollar shuttle program -- and where they failed to recognize the signs of an impending disaster. It is the story of a space program pushed to the brink of failure by relentless political pressure, shrinking budgets and flawed decision making. The independent investigation into the disaster uncovered why Columbia broke apart in the sky above Texas. Comm Check brings that story to life with the human drama behind the tragedy. Michael Cabbage and William Harwood, two of America's most respected space journalists, are veterans of all but a handful of NASA's 113 shuttle missions. Tapping a network of sources and bringing a combined three decades of experience to bear, the authors provide a rare glimpse into NASA's inner circles, chronicling the agency's most devastating failure and the challenges that face NASA as it struggles to return America to space.

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Customer Reviews

When I look to a history of space flight book, I look to see what it offers to expand or extrapolate data that is new. This really is just another compilation of previously printed data. It is good if you are not familiar with the facts, but there is little new or previously unreported. I would have liked to see more information on what has happened that has changed the situation at NASA. Obviously some has changed since this publication and a new final chapter might be of some significance since it was obvious the lessons learned in the Challenger disaster were so quickly forgotten and resulted in the demise of Columbia. I would recommend this book for those who want to learn more about the event and a good starting point to dig deeper if you are researching the event.

Comm Check: The Final Flight of Shuttle Columbia is a masterful, must-have book explaining the re-entry disaster of shuttle Columbia on February 1, 2003. To those who watched the drama unfold, it was a nightmare which some believe could have been prevented. If that makes Columbia an acutely painful reminder that not only experts, but whole agencies and their management can be dead wrong, perhaps even NASA can salvage enough to prevent such tragedy in the future. Co-authors Harwood and Cabbage go deeply inside the NASA bureaucracy, to the specific people who made life-and-death decisions, based on their beliefs and presumptions at the time. NASA's ambitious program of launching shuttle after shuttle as though on an assembly line created high political expectations and withering demands for success, at almost any price. The authors find a NASA culture a bit too driven for its own good, one where administrators were sorely tempted to cross lines and risk the safety of even our astronauts. Recalling the decision of NASA program manager Linda Ham to cancel a request to take photos of suspected damage to the shuttle's wing, one witness to the conversation said Ham wanted to cancel simply because there was nothing mission control could do, even if the shuttle were seriously damaged. "... you know, even if there was damage, there is nothing we can do about it." In plainest terms, Ham rationalized the yawning

possibility of damage to the shuttle as an abstract and entirely peripheral issue, because the cost of dealing with it as a crisis was simply unacceptable. Rather than make certain all the facts were known for the safety of the astronauts, Ham simply ignored the looming disaster, shutting down all further checks of fact and condition, gambling that all would be well. Clearly, Ham also knew that if photos showed damage, she would be forced into scrubbing Columbia's mission, in order to stage an emergency recovery. Bill Harwood is a veteran CBS reporter on NASA and other space ventures, and Michael Cabbage is space editor for the Orlando Sentinel. Their co-authored book is one of the best on the Columbia disaster.

I believe that anyone interested in safety and industrial culture should read this book. Though it gets bogged down at times in technical details, the explanation of what happened to Columbia and why it happened is thorough and fascinating. The author manages to keep the human details interesting without becoming macabre. Most importantly, it becomes apparent that a tragedy of this magnitude can not and should not be simplified to point fingers at a single individual or group. I came away from this reading with a new appreciation for the challenges of space exploration as well as the realization that all ventures of this magnitude involve risk. A fascinating and thoughtful read.

I liked this book very much. I purchased it to learn more details about the Columbia investigation and the book fully delivered on that. The writing style is easy-going and a joy to read. In fact, I have only one very minor complaint: there are a lot of spelling errors. I realize that's a bit pedantic, but other books can get it right - why not this one?

Outstanding and unflinching look at the Columbia accident, its investigation report, and many related issues. Reading about the indecision and infighting that occurred on the ground while Columbia and crew were on orbit and uninformed evoked some pretty strong emotions. An excellent high level look at how an accident investigation board functions and what goes into the report.

Another great story of how NASA has turned a tragedy into changes for the future!

Well done, excellent details. Great read.

Great read.

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