Phase III DBI Challenger: Families of Lost Astronauts React to Tragedy

Astronauts William McCool and Laurel Clark — both 41 years-old — left behind children who watched their worst fears come true when Columbia broke up in the skies over Texas. Family members of the Columbia crew say they knew of the risks and held their fear in the bottom of their hearts and the back of their minds.

Job No. 1: Mom

Clark of Racine, Wis., was an astronaut, a submarine medical officer and a flight surgeon, but she often told her 8 year-old son, Ian, that her most important job was being his mother.

Clark's brother, Dan Salton, said the young boy never wanted his mother to go on the Columbia mission "Actually he told me, he said 'Dan I wish you could go, cause I want to see the launch but I don't want my mommy to go,'" Salton said.

The day before she lost her life on Columbia, Salton said he received an e-mail from his sister about how much she was enjoying her first flight aboard the space shuttle. She wrote, "I have seen some incredible sights" — and described her view of lightning flashing over the Pacific, the city lights of Australia and a crescent moon setting over the Earth.

She also thanked her family and friends for supporting her adventures. Her closing words were "Love to all, Laurel."

Salton said his sister was an amazing woman who died doing what she loved.

"I think everyone's getting to know her a little bit," Salton told ABCNEWS' Good Morning America. "I think the story of all seven of the astronauts is coming out. And I think we're finding that they're all remarkable people and that she was one of seven who had a lot to contribute and was very thrilled to be part of the NASA program and what she was able to do and wanted to contribute her part and she just loved doing what she was doing," he said.

For Clark's aunt and uncle, Betty and Doug Haviland, the Columbia disaster marked the second time in just over a year that they found out a loved one had perished while watching TV. The Havilands lost their son Timothy, who was also 41 years old, in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11.

"We had a memorial service in November of that year of the disaster and Laurel and Ian were both at the memorial service," Betty Haviland said. "And Tim had wanted very much to go down and see the launch but it was not to be."

Doug Haviland said family members of the astronauts couldn't help worrying about their loved ones, and what might happen to them during the launch, the mission and the re-entry.

"Well, certainly you get an uneasy feeling in the back of your mind I think," he said. Betty Haviland says she hopes their niece will be remembered as someone very special.

"She was a loving woman and we'll miss her very much," she said.

William McCool Was Born to Fly

Cmdr. William McCool was known as "Cool Willie" during his high school days at Lubbock Coronado High School in Texas.

No one who knew him was surprised by his amazing success. The former Eagle Scout graduated second of 1,083 in his class from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1983.

The husband and father of three had always wanted to fly and his family said he was thrilled when he found out he would be a part of the Columbia mission.
His parents, Audrey and Barry McCool, both have a background in the military, but they said there is nothing that can prepare parents for the loss of a child. "When it comes to your doorstep it's harder to take," Audrey McCool said on Good Morning America.

McCool's oldest son, Shawn, 22, says his father was always there for his family, despite his busy career. "He was the greatest guy, he was always my soccer coach or baseball coach," Shawn McCool said. "He always made us go for runs, he was big into running. He would drag us out and make us run in the morning before school and things like that," he said.

William McCool talked about his excitement from his first space mission. "The 'oh, wow' for me is I have the opportunity to be on the flight deck," McCool told reporters.

Despite their grief, the McCools say the space program must continue. "To not do so would mean he died in vain," Audrey McCool said. "The long-term benefits to mankind are so important, you need to continue explorations," she said.

All Seven Crew Members Lost

NASA says new evidence shows that the temperature on Columbia's left side shot up and the ship was buffeted by wind resistance before it disintegrated over Texas, killing all seven astronauts aboard. Those conditions forced its automatic pilot to quickly change course.

Family members have not publicly commented on the cause of the tragedy as of yet. Many have, however, come out to say that the astronauts died doing what they loved.

June Scobee-Rodgers, the widow of the commander of the space shuttle Challenger, Dick Scobee, has been counseling the families of the crew members of Columbia since the disaster occurred. Challenger exploded after liftoff 17 years ago.

Scobee-Rodgers said she remembers how hard it was for her own family and others who lost loved ones when the Challenger exploded and she hopes her own experience will help others.

"I immediately called my children and then all of the Challenger families to alert them," Scobee-Rodgers said.

Sunday night, she spoke with Evelyn Husband, the wife of Rick Husband, Columbia's shuttle commander. Husband left behind Evelyn, and two children.

"I talked with Evelyn Husband last night and she is strong and she has deep abiding faith and it's your faith that moves you forward," Scobee-Rodgers said.

"We all share a bond. We accepted when our husbands, our wives, our loved ones became astronauts," she said.

Before his first mission, Commander Rick Husband said he had dreamed of being an astronaut since he was 4 years old. Captain David Brown, a doctor and pilot, echoed Husband's sentiment.

Payload commander Michael Anderson's father said his son was just 3 years old when he fell in love with flying.

As a child in India, Dr. Kalpana Chawla, surprised her father when she announced she wanted to be an engineer. Chawla's mother said her daughter enjoyed every minute of her time in space.

Col. Ilan Ramon, an Israeli war hero and father of four, was so happy in space that he sent his family an e-mail from Columbia saying he didn't want to come back to earth. He called the mission "his proudest moment."