

Challenger: The Final Flight: A four-part docuseries on the 1986 disaster

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2 October 2020

Challenger: The Final Flight, a docuseries created by Steven Leckart and Glen Zipper, examines the tragic incident in late January 1986 in which NASA's Space Shuttle *Challenger* broke apart and disintegrated over the Atlantic Ocean.

All seven crew members, including five NASA astronauts and two "Payload Specialists," one of whom—most famously—was Concord, New Hampshire schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe, died in the disaster.

Directed by Leckart and Daniel Junge, the four-episode series chronicles the events that led up to the shuttle's destruction 73 seconds after its launch from Cape Canaveral in Florida—along with the aftermath.

This was the worst calamity in the history of space exploration to that point and was witnessed by millions of people via live television broadcast. At the time, the footage of the *Challenger* explosion was played over and over. Rarely did such an event penetrate and disturb the mass psyche so immediately and directly. Other images also became grimly iconic, including those of stunned observers at Cape Canaveral, among them McAuliffe's parents, watching as the mission ended in nightmarish fashion before their eyes.

The episode, like other shocking events such as the Kennedy assassination and the 9/11 attacks, although obviously not possessing the same history-altering character as those occasions, remains vividly in the collective memory. Those old enough most likely recall where they were and what they were doing when the shuttle tragedy occurred. The fate of the crew worked on the imagination and deeply affected great numbers of people, not only in the US, but globally.

The current mini-series manages to capture some of that popular-tragic element, but it falls down in other, important ways. *The Final Flight* is relatively forthright about the culpability of contractor Morton-Thiokol, the Utah-based company (now part of Northrop Grumman) that manufactured the rocket boosters for NASA, but it significantly lets the Reagan administration off the hook, an accommodation to right-wing forces.

The US space shuttle program involved partially reusable rocket-launched vehicles designed to go into orbit around Earth, transporting people and cargo to and from orbiting spacecraft. The program's first launch occurred on April 12, 1981, and the final landing took place on July 21, 2011. NASA's space shuttle fleet—*Columbia*, *Challenger*, *Discovery*, *Atlantis* and *Endeavour*—flew 135 missions in total and helped construct the

International Space Station. Both *Challenger* (1986) and *Columbia* (2003) were destroyed in flight.

The Netflix series efficiently organizes archival material, news footage and interviews with relatives of the vessel's crew, as well as engineers and others involved with the space shuttle mission.

The lost crew members included Francis Scobee, Michael Smith, Ronald McNair, Ellison Onizuka, Judy Resnik, Gregory Jarvis and McAuliffe. Astronauts had died before in the decades-long history of US manned space flight missions, but McAuliffe was the initial civilian selected to go into space and, of course, the initial civilian to be killed.

One of the series' segments details the shuttle program's diversification effort that began with the class of 1978, the year the group of astronauts in training would include for the first time three African Americans, six women and one Asian American.

Challenger: The Final Flight shows the crew's training and the intimate friendships that developed, as well as the moving, intense family dynamics among crew members. The Boston-born McAuliffe comes across as a devoted educator who believed her presence on the spacecraft would help promote scientific knowledge. Effervescent and sincere, she was planning to give lessons to her students while in orbit.

The documentary focuses centrally on the events of the disaster itself. After numerous delays, *Challenger* was finally scheduled to go into space January 28, 1986. The morning of the proposed launch was unusually cold in central Florida, with temperatures dipping below freezing. A number of the shuttle's engineers were concerned about the integrity of the seals, the O-rings, on the solid rocket boosters at such low temperatures.

Indeed, the most compelling and salient issue raised by the documentary, which overshadows nearly everything else, is that the shuttle catastrophe was utterly preventable.

Most of the problems that led to the explosion had been known for years. In one of the episodes, Leslie Serna explains that her father, Bob Ebeling, an engineer at Morton-Thiokol, had adamantly predicted the demise of the *Challenger*.

Questions had been raised on numerous occasions about the O-rings by engineers and others at the company. *The Final Flight* interviews several of those engineers about the long-standing issue.

After the crash, President Ronald Reagan appointed a commission, headed by William Rogers, to investigate the loss of the *Challenger*. The 20-member panel included former astronaut

Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the Moon, and Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman.

The Rogers Commission was a highly political undertaking, as the nomination of its chairman indicated. Rogers, Dwight Eisenhower's Attorney General and Richard Nixon's Secretary of State, was an individual with a long and varied history of participating in US imperialist crimes around the world.

The commission soon established the immediate cause of the disaster, the failure of the O-rings joining the sections of the solid rocket boosters. Feynman ascertained that the O-rings failed due to the record cold temperatures at the time of the launch.

In a 2003 article devoted to the later *Columbia* disaster, the WSWS explained that "Rogers pressured committee members, in particular Feynman, to tone down the language of the report. Feynman had written a scathing assessment of NASA management's procedure for risk evaluation. He ridiculed NASA's claim that the probability of shuttle failure was 1-in-100,000, saying this number was chosen arbitrarily to make the program look safe, when the real probability of failure was 1-in-50 or 1-in-100."

Feynman also observed: "Finally, if we are to replace standard numerical probability usage with engineering judgment, why do we find such an enormous disparity between the management estimate and the judgment of engineers? It would appear that, for whatever purpose, be it for internal or external consumption, the management of NASA exaggerates the reliability of its product, to the point of fantasy."

The commission was obliged to acknowledge the guilt of certain parties, while covering up the role of the Reagan White House. The same WSWS article commented: "From the outset the commission confronted evidence showing that NASA officials ordered the launch to go ahead despite safety warnings. There were charges that the White House had intervened to prevent further delays in the launch so that it would coincide with Reagan's State of the Union speech to Congress set for that evening. NASA had submitted to Reagan a paragraph to be included in the speech saluting McAuliffe." There is no reference to this matter in *The Final Flight*.

As the series indicates, contrary to the general perception, *Challenger* did not burst into flames and its crew members were not killed instantly. They survived the disintegration in the protected flight cabin, and one expert hypothesized that the seven men and women on board lived for as many as three more minutes during which the detached shuttle continued its ascent up to 65,000 feet before plummeting into the ocean with such force that neither the cabin nor the crew could have survived the impact. There was no means of exiting the shuttle—NASA officials had decided there would be no possible need.

In the Netflix miniseries, Morton-Thiokol engineers like Brian Russell shamefacedly apologize for not pressing their opinions about the safety of the O-rings. Chillingly, however, former NASA officials Lawrence Mulloy and William Lucas are not weighed down by feelings of remorse, callously defending their decisions. "I feel I was to blame, but I feel no guilt," Mulloy states. Lucas arrogantly proclaims, "I didn't do anything that I thought was wrong then, and I didn't do anything that I think was wrong in

retrospect," adding that the loss of seven lives was the unavoidable collateral damage of spaceflight.

"How could they live with themselves for making a decision like that?" says a defiant, but tearful June Scobee Rodgers, widow of the *Challenger*'s commander Dick Scobee.

Various reviewers have congratulated the documentary series for *not* pointing fingers, which, in fact, is its greatest flaw. The disaster was not the unavoidable product of space exploration, but of space exploration *under capitalism*. The responsibility for the deaths of McAuliffe and the others lay squarely with Reagan administration officials, corporate executives and the military brass.

The *Challenger* disaster was a major blow to US prestige and to the credibility of the Reagan administration, which was dragooning NASA into its Strategic Defense Initiative, or "Star Wars," to turn space into another arena of nuclear militarization.

The tragedy in space occurred in the midst of the Reagan years, spuriously and cynically painted as "Morning in America again." The social and political atmosphere was increasingly dominated—although this was to come to a head after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991—by American triumphalism and chauvinism.

The calamitous *Challenger* chapter provided a truer indicator of the actual situation. The fraudulent Reaganite euphoria in ruling circles and portions of the middle class, made possible by the systematic impoverishment of workers and the poor, concealed the reality of political corruption, corporate greed and unbridled militarism. McAuliffe and the rest of the *Challenger* crew were the victims of processes and tendencies that have only worsened exponentially in the intervening years.

While the creators of *Challenger: The Final Flight* have pieced together crucial and fascinating data about the ill-fated space vessel, telling its story "from the families' perspective," as producer Glen Zipper asserts, their whitewashing of the Reagan administration leaves viewers with only part of the picture.



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