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Remember Reed's First Law:
Pull your tickets early to avoid the lines!

After more than four days, debris search still fails to find crucial pieces, NASA says

By Pauline Arrillaga & Joseph B. Verrengia
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NACOGDOCHES, Texas — Despite gathering more than 12,000 pieces of debris from the shuttle Columbia, a NASA official said Wednesday none of the pieces provides critical answers for why the shuttle broke up.

"We do not have any red-tag items," said Ron Dittmore, shuttle program manager, referring to items engineers have identified as crucial to the investigation into the cause.

He said those items would include parts of the left wing, data recorders and certain pieces of insulation and tiles.

The widening search now extends from Louisiana to California.

In Texas alone, officials have identified 38 counties with debris, while pieces have turned up in two dozen Louisiana parishes. And NASA investigators are checking California and Arizona for debris as well.

"The scale makes it unprecedented," said Dave Bary, a spokesman for the Environmental Protection Agency, which is overseeing the collection of debris. He noted that even in other major disasters — the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the explosion of space shuttle Challenger — the recovery sites were restricted to a central location.

In this case, "the debris field is so large — covering so many counties — I can't think of anything historically that would compare to this," he said.

That could delay meaningful analysis of those parts that have been collected — and what role they might have played in the disaster, NASA spokesman Rob Navias noted.

"We have to put the puzzle together before we see what the mosaic looks like," Navias said.

The shuttle was composed of about 2 million parts, many of which shattered into pieces as small as a nickel.

Bill Waldock of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Arizona said any of the craft's 20,000 insulating tiles or metal components from the left wing would be significant.

At least two possible wing sections have been discovered in east Texas, although authorities did not know from which side of the shuttle they came. A robotic underwater camera was brought in Wednesday to help search a reservoir along the Texas-Louisiana border where there were reports of debris the size of a small car falling.

A patch of foam insulation that broke off from the shuttle's external fuel tank during launch and struck tiles on the underside of the left wing had been the focus of the probe into the possible causes of Columbia's destruction. After days of analysis, NASA



National Guard soldiers Staff Sgt. Mike Sisk, left, Staff Sgt. Sonny Wiseman and Maj. Beverley Simpson, right, load a piece of debris from Columbia near Nacogdoches, Texas Wednesday.

backed away Wednesday from the theory that the foam might have been the root cause of the accident.

Instead, Dittmore said investigators are focusing more closely on the frantic effort of Columbia's automatic control system to hold the speed of the spacecraft stable despite increasing wind resistance, or drag, on the left wing.

The insulating tiles protect the underbelly and the wings of the shuttle from searing heat. Each is stenciled with a code to tell engineers where it was located on the craft. Tiles that peeled off the left wing had been considered crucial to the probe.

Waldock said some pieces, such as the nose cone, could help investigators rule out other potential causes of the disaster. "It didn't look like the nose cone had much thermal damage at all; it's not even really scorched," he said. "It means that area was not exposed to the high temperatures."

Another expert said the pattern of where pieces fell would also offer important clues. The heat of re-entry would have peeled back the shuttle, layer by layer, heating and breaking off pieces in succession as it streaked eastward through the atmosphere, noted William Ailor, director of the Center for Orbital and Re-entry Debris Studies at The Aerospace Corp. in El Segundo, Calif. "It's basically like heating an onion," he said.

"The sequence of events and of the debris on the ground is going to be very important to unraveling this mystery," Ailor said.

As Columbia shed debris, dense and

streamlined objects would have traveled farther eastward. That explains why the shuttle's heavy, heat-resistant nose cone traveled as far east as it did, Ailor said.

Lightweight, less aerodynamic pieces of debris, including the thermal tiles that coated the underbody of Columbia, would settle more quickly to the ground after breaking off.

Recovery teams are using global-positioning system satellites to determine the location of each piece of debris so the field can be mapped. NASA hopes to use that information to develop computer models to simulate the disaster. The models would track each piece of debris back in time to the moment it was shed from the orbiter.

"The two most critical things are determining where the pieces are and identifying the precise location where those pieces came from on the shuttle, no matter how small or large," said James Kroll, who is heading the mapping project at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches.

"Then we can make them jump back up into the air and go back to that part of the spacecraft."

Retired Adm. Harold Gehman, chairman of the independent panel investigating the disaster, said such computer simulations would be pivotal in determining how the shuttle failed.

Four days after Columbia shattered on its journey home to Florida, more than 1,200 people were picking up the pieces in Texas and Louisiana, traipsing through forests and cow pastures in rain and sleet to hunt down smaller items that can be retrieved by hand.

NEWS IN BRIEF

CBS radio reporter Larry LeSueur dies

WASHINGTON (AP) — Larry LeSueur, a former CBS correspondent and one of the World War II "Murrow Boys," died Wednesday of Parkinson's disease. He was 93.

LeSueur died at his home in Washington, his family said.

A third-generation newsman, LeSueur began his journalism

career in 1936 as a writer for the United Press in New York and, later, in Washington.

Shortly after World War II began, he was hired by CBS' Edward R. Murrow as his assistant in London. In a series called "London After Dark," LeSueur, Murrow and Eric Sevareid reported on the nighttime sights and sounds of London during the Nazi Blitz.

On D-Day, in 1944, LeSueur

landed on Normandy beach with U.S. troops and was the first correspondent to broadcast from the American beachhead. He was made an honorary member of the 4th Division of the 8th Infantry and awarded the Medal of Freedom.

LeSueur reported the first news of the liberation of Paris, for which he was cited by the War Department for "outstanding and conspicuous service"

and awarded the French Legion of Honor. He also covered the liberation of the Dachau and Manthausen concentration camps.

"He was one of the great war reporters that there have ever been," said Stanley Cloud, who co-authored "The Murrow Boys" with his wife, Lynne Olson.

"He did remarkable things," Cloud said, adding that LeSueur was "a gentleman."

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