

Remarks by the Honorable Sean O’Keefe
NASA Administrator
STS-107 Crew Memorial Ceremony
NASA John F. Kennedy Space Center
Cape Canaveral, Florida
February 7, 2003

This is the place where our space exploration dreams take flight.

From here seven courageous astronauts sailed to the heavens on their daring adventure of exploration and discovery.

This is where great lives are defined by great purposes.

Throughout our history, people have always marveled when great ships leave their ports and venture out beyond the horizon. When the history of our time is written, future generations will always know that the port that sent spirits and spacecraft soaring was named Kennedy.

It is from this port that forty-one years ago this month mission control uttered the words, “God-speed John Glenn,” as this original seven Mercury astronaut became the first American to orbit the Earth.

It was from this port that our Apollo moon voyagers set forth, coming in peace for all mankind.

“Mystery creates wonder, and wonder is the basis of man’s desire to understand,” said Neil Armstrong, the hero whose very next footprint after he stepped away from the sandy soil here in Florida some 34 years ago came on the lunar soil at Tranquility Base.

Yes, great lives are defined by great purposes.

It was from here, too, that spacecraft were sent to explore the planets and moons of our solar system, sending back images of fascinating places that humans yearn to explore in the century ahead.

Twenty-two years ago, from here, Columbia the new gem of our ocean of space, launched on her maiden voyage with the outstanding crew of John Young, and Bob Crippen, who we are honored to have on our stage today.

Along with her sister shuttle’s, Columbia helped set the stage for the permanent human occupancy of the space frontier, an amazing milestone in human history that is now being achieved on the International Space Station.

This was the port from which all this historic exploration occurred, and from which so much more history will be made as we continue to pursue our mission goals of understanding and protecting the home planet, exploring the Universe and searching for life, and inspiring the next generation of explorers.

Before her final voyage, Scott Thurston and the extraordinary team of folks who lived with, worried about, and attended to every single detail of Columbia, made sure that it was safe for flight.

She carried as wonderful a group of human beings as you could ever hope to assemble—Rick Husband, William McCool, Mike Anderson, David Brown, Laurel Clark, Kalpana Chawla, and Ilan Ramon.

We miss them more than words can describe.

Last Saturday, Columbia and her stalwart crew were minutes away from this port, this very spot and safety, following their noble mission to advance the frontiers of science.

Friends and family, we were gathered here at the Shuttle landing facility, waiting to give these space explorers a welcoming hug on their return to this good Earth.

Instead, God brought the crewmembers into his loving embrace. Such are the mysteries of existence that we can never hope to fathom.

Throughout our NASA family, and here at Kennedy as well, our rivers of tears flow. It was our fervent prayer that Columbia and its crew would safely come home to its harbor here at Kennedy. But this was not to be the case.

But please know this. Do not lose heart. The families of the astronauts, the American public, and the President have all expressed deep confidence in you.

On Tuesday, you will recall, the President said, “The people of NASA are being tested once again. In your grief, you are responding as your friends would have wished—with focus, professionalism, and unbroken faith in the mission of this agency. Captain Dave Brown was correct: America’s space program will go on.”

And we thank the President’s brother, the Governor of Florida who is here with us, for the wonderful expression of support that he demonstrates.

Governor, we are all proud of the performance of the Kennedy Space Center team. We know spaceflight has risk. But on Saturday when our worst fears were realized, the people of this Center were focused, organized and deliberate, doing so well what we’ve all been trained to do so many times. Your response here at Kennedy and the teamwork that was displayed was simply magnificent. And throughout this difficult week, you have assisted our ongoing data analysis and debris recovery work with thoughtful regard for the enormity of our duty. Like the rest of the NASA family, we will persevere.

The entire space coast community and the people of Florida are part of this extended NASA family. To you the astronauts were more than heroes admired from afar—you shared a special bond with these space explorers, because when they went on their amazing adventures, they were going from this very backyard.

We know the pride you have in our astronauts and in our entire NASA family. And to honor the legacy of Columbia's astronauts, and as a commitment to the families, you can be assured that we will find the cause of the accident, correct the problems and return to safe flight.

Every time I come to Florida, I am eager to meet the members of our future generation of explorers, and there are so many here in the Florida area that certainly fit this characterization. Up and down the space coast there are kids who go to bed dreaming that they will one day grow up to be heroes the caliber of Rick, William, Mike, David, Laurel, Kalpana, and Ilan.

And to these explorers of the future who are so fortunate to attend schools with names like Astronaut, Freedom 7, Challenger 7, Atlantis, Discovery, Endeavour and, of course, Columbia, we have a special message: While we are filled with sorrow now, there is so much about these heroic astronauts for us to be grateful about.

Be grateful each had a burning desire to conduct research to help better our lives.

The astronauts, who represented such a wonderful tapestry of different races, religions and nationalities, also demonstrated through their genuine love for each other the essential brotherhood and sisterhood of man. Ilan Ramon reflected on this truth when as he paused to ponder the beauty of his ancient homeland, he observed how it “looks marvelous from up here, so peaceful, so wonderful and so fragile.” We thank him for that priceless memory.

Great lives are indeed defined by great purposes.

This is the legacy of the Columbia astronauts that we will always remember...and treasure...forever.

May God bless the crew of STS-107, and give comfort to all those who mourn for these valiant heroes.