

Honor crew by expanding our journey into space

By Rick Maier

It broke my heart to see the pictures and read about the lives of the seven courageous astronauts who died aboard the Columbia space shuttle. These brave men and women represent the best of mankind – bright adventurers from all over the world who worked together to improve our future.

My thoughts and prayers are with their families. I can only imagine how excited they must have been knowing their loved ones would be landing in just 16 minutes, only to have that excitement turn to despair as the radio transmissions went silent. And then to see not one but several plumes of white smoke streak through the sky.

What makes the loss even more painful for me is that I knew nothing about the crew or the mission of this flight. It's like wishing you had spent more time with a relative or close friend while you still had the chance.

For most Americans, the shuttle flights had become routine. Despite the Challenger and Apollo I tragedies, we began to take NASA's safety record for granted.

I love the space program, partly because I feel like I've grown up with the progress of man's flight beyond earth's atmosphere. I'll never forget that late night in July 1969 when Neil Armstrong first stepped foot on the moon. A few years later in 1973, I held my breath and prayed along with the rest of the world during the re-entry of Apollo 13 after the crippled craft barely made it back to earth. The 1995 movie *Apollo 13* is my all-time favorite. In 1997, I was riveted to the broadcast of the unmanned Pathfinder probe exploring the surface of Mars.

But now I have a gnawing feeling that this latest tragedy will further erode America's already weakening support for space research. People are questioning what the space program has done to improve life on earth.

I personally credit America's achievements in space as ending the Cold War and contributing to much of the progress we've enjoyed in technology, especially designing smaller and more dependable electronics.

People say the money we spend on space should go to help the needy on earth. But since we cut back the funding for NASA in the 1970s, little progress in the war on poverty has been made. We need to construct and discover, not simply redistribute existing resources.

The weightlessness and purity of space offer advantages we can't find on earth. Our contributions toward outer space research provide new discoveries, exciting careers, benefits we cannot measure and opportunities we do not yet understand.

To me, devoting a small portion of our collective resources to space is investing in the future of mankind. I think of my grandfather. During his lifetime he saw man go from plowing fields with a horse, to driving a rover on the surface of the moon. We'll never know what the next generation can achieve unless we pursue our present dreams.

As I look to the sky thinking about the men and women whose lives were extinguished aboard Columbia, I hope we don't compound the sadness of the disaster by losing interest in space. As dust from the fallen craft must have drifted down over Middle Georgia, we must realize that every one of those seven heroes that perished would want us to not just continue, but expand our exploration of the stars.

Our hearts go out to the families of the seven brave crewmembers of Columbia. Let's honor and remember their lives by recommitting to America's journey into the heavens.