

Wishing Space Shuttle Atlantis all the best

I'm a little wistful today, as I watch media coverage of the final launch of the space program. As a college journalist, I covered the very first shuttle launch, STS-1, April 12, 1981.



STS-1, Columbia, clears the tower at Kennedy Space Center in Florida, April 12, 1981. Photo © 1981 Christopher Guntz

I had followed the shuttle program all through high school and college, and as the launch date came closer, I realized I really wanted to be there for this historic occasion. I called NASA PR in Florida and learned how to get media credentials. I convinced our editor, also our best photographer, that we should make a road trip. We convinced our school advisers that the trip was worthwhile. And we talked my parents into loaning us a car. We rented camera equipment and were on our way within a day.

We arrived in Florida the night before the scheduled launch and were met with a long line of traffic. Stuck outside the media gate, we nearly missed the launch, until it was scrubbed because of a mechanical problem. With the two-day delay, we picked up our credentials, found a hotel room 60 miles away, and then came back the night before the launch, spending the night on the ground in the press area.

We set up our cameras next to Time magazine with its six-camera rig, and ImaX, with its new technology camera for high-definition, large-screen movies.

As the shuttle lifted off, we witnessed history. We could not only hear the rumble of the powerful engines, we could feel it in the ground.

Eventually, I saw several more shuttle launches over the years, on visits to Florida, and while I lived there.

[slideshow]

The tragedies of the losses of the Challenger and Columbia crews marred the program, and it never fulfilled the dream/vision that it would be a weekly “space truck” ferrying cargo 50 times a year to low earth orbit. But the benefits that came from exploration and experimentation in space have been great. The views of the cosmos from the Hubble Telescope make it difficult to not believe in a supreme Creator who has an intelligent design for the universe. The advances in medicine and other technology serve us in many ways.

NASA Administrator Charlie Bolden said last week that human space flight will continue. At the National Press Club July 1, he said the foundation is set for space exploration for the next half-century, “and for us at NASA, ‘failure is not an option,’” echoing a line often attributed to former Apollo program flight director Gene Kranz that has come to reflect NASA’s can-do attitude.

NASA’s reach, and the shuttle’s reach, is everywhere, even in Maryland, where Goddard Space Flight Center plays an important role.

Today is a chance to salute all those who perished in human space flight, and all those who have been part of this endeavor in which we strive to explore and learn.

At this point, with launch scheduled about an hour from now, the crew awaits a “Go for Launch” while they wait for weather to clear.

And I recall that day in April when the “Go for Launch” sent Columbia into the heavens, and started this incredible journey for all of us.

Godspeed, Atlantis.