

Shades of Columbia? Discovery Shuttle Launch Fractures Heat Tiles

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PEJ News - C. L. Cook - As was the case with its predecessor, the doomed Columbia, exploded in the atmosphere during re-entry, video of today's launch of Discovery too revealed pieces of the ship's ceramic-tiled underbelly falling away during lift-off.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/space/article/0,14493,1537109,00.html>

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C. L. Cook

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Cameras recorded images of debris falling from the Space Shuttle Discovery's tiled bottom during today's launch. The launch is the first attempt since the disastrous re-entry explosion that killed the crew of [Columbia two years ago](#). NASA says it is studying the fragments, but at least one, 1 to 2 inch piece is part of the ceramic tile that protects the craft from the intense heat generated by the high-speed penetration of the planet's atmosphere. Though yet to be determined, the state of the shuttle, which ["succesfully"](#) reached orbit, has also sent NASA's PR department into a frenzy.

Like Columbia, the Discovery launch was delayed for technical reasons; and, like the delay-plagued Columbia, who some charge [pushed impatient, & budget allocation-minded administrators to rush the launch](#), questions were being asked about NASA's priorities before their decision to go ahead today.

The latest aborted Discovery launch came almost two weeks ago, on July 13th. Problems with fuel sensors were cited then, and perhaps with an eye to the take-off explosion causing the original, Challenger shuttle disaster, scientist's spent the last two weeks methodically going over fuel systems. Now, that focus is being brought to bear elsewhere.

Operations Manager, John Shannon says they are pouring over multiple-angle camera views of the lift off "frame-by-frame," noting that [an object that appeared to be falling ice](#), as with Columbia, seemed to too have been part of the debris, but no conclusions have yet been arrived at. There were more than a hundred camera positions trained on practically every inch of the shuttle as it took off, and now a similar number of analysts are going over the footage at the Kennedy, Johnson, and Marshall Space Centers.

Over the coming hours, it is expected NASA will reveal more information on the state of the Discovery, and contingency plans. In the two years since Columbia's destruction, NASA has worked on both space repairs to the shuttle and rescue scenarios, should a repeat of the

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ill-fated Columbia occur.

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