

Letter - February 1, 2003

My Lady,

1 Feb 2003

Your man is hurting this morning. My spirit is wounded, cut to the bone by images of a fireball over east Texas - Columbia returning for the last time. I could use a hug right now - I'm finding it difficult to breath.

I keep staring at my big picture of her. It's hung in my various offices for twenty two years now - and will continue. "April 14, 1981 - 10:15am - Columbia Returns" - that's how the caption reads. God how proud and happy I was that morning! As she settled calmly onto that dry lake bed the stars were again within reach.

This morning I walked out to see her fly over. I've never seen her fly, not with my own eyes - only on television. But she didn't get this far. When the time passed I still waited, watching the empty sky and making excuses - maybe it was too bright to see her - maybe I was looking in the wrong direction - maybe I had the time wrong. But my heart accepted none of these. Finally I walked back inside and turned on the television to see why she had missed our rendezvous - I already knew that I would never see her fly.

The model of Columbia that I keep in my bedroom, the one the folks at Martin Marietta gave me so long ago, reminds me of their invitation to attend a launch. I have always been secretly so proud of being invited, and often regretted not going - but never so keenly as right now.

Columbia could not take us to the stars, that was not her job, but she represented the quest. She is gone - but the quest remains. On this sad morning I realize that has always been my personal goal for America - to pursue the quest - to put men among the stars. Such a noble quest, to realize a dream that has existed since history began, the stars - nothing else even comes close. Saving the world? I've tried, only to discover that first everyone has to agree on who needs saving - and from what. But the stars, everyone sees the same stars, and the dream is always the same - that oh so seductive dream. I wish Americans were today going to Mars instead of Baghdad.

Remember Neil Armstrong? Remember Apollo 11? Remember July 20, 1969 - 9:56pm - "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind"? I remember. I remember the pride and the joy, not just smiles and grins but honest pure joy welling up from the soul - and not just in me but in everyone around the world. That has to be the

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crowning moment in human history so far - we were on our way to the stars!

Richard Nixon committed many sins - killing Apollo was among the worst. Columbia was not Apollo, but she was taking us there again. I miss her already, but she has sisters, maybe I can again feel the joy of watching men set foot on an new place.

The death of Columbia is something new to me. I will need some time to come to grips with those sizzling yet silent images. Challenger, horrible in all of the orange flame and white smoke - and those evil looking horns of smoke, was within my range of experience - it looked similar to an aeroplane disaster. This is different. Those white hot searing spots streaking across the sky trailing smoke were clearly from space. Clearly higher, faster, and hotter than I'd seen before - and somehow more deadly, more final, and more horrible. A new and very public kind of death.

I know this is rambling, and it's hard to explain. Every time I try I choke up. Grief I guess. I know it's out of proportion to my involvement but I can't help it - it was my dream too.

Only a few times have I really needed someone to hug me. Now is one of those times - I wish you were here.

Love,
Wayne