

FORMER NASA SPACE SHUTTLE ENGINEER URGES NASA TO GIVE NTSB A MORE SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN SHUTTLE INVESTIGATION

AUSTIN, TEXAS (Feb. 5, 2003) - Michael L. Slack, a former senior aerospace engineer who worked on the Space Shuttle program from 1974 to 1980 during the time Columbia was designed and built, today urged the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to allow the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to take a more prominent and visible role in the investigation into the tragic loss of the Columbia on Feb. 1.

On Feb. 1, NASA invited the NTSB to send investigators to assist in the investigation at NASA's command post at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. However, Slack said that the NTSB should take a more visible and significant role in the ongoing forensic investigations.

"As a space agency, NASA does not have personnel trained to reconstruct air crashes from forensic evidence, while the NTSB has some of the world's best experts in the aviation forensic sciences. This disaster, because of the manner in which it occurred, should be considered an aviation disaster for which the NTSB is charged, by law, with investigating," Slack said.

The NTSB is an independent federal agency responsible for investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States, as well as significant accidents in other modes of transportation. The NTSB also issues safety recommendations aimed at preventing future accidents.

CHANGES IN DIRECTION

According to Slack, NASA's early investigative efforts appear to have reflected changes in direction and approach, and could benefit from more guidance from the NTSB. The NTSB follows a very sophisticated investigative discipline in its efforts to ascertain the cause of a crash.

"Early in the Columbia investigative process, recovery teams spent considerable time focusing on debris that was far downrange of the incipient incident that caused Columbia to break up and disintegrate. Now there is a sudden realization that the critical evidence will be much farther up-range and as far west as California." Slack said.

"It took two days for NASA to acknowledge the importance of finding wreckage west of the debris field in East Texas and Louisiana. Most aviation forensic investigators would know that the westerly or up-range debris would be far more significant in determining the primary events in the catastrophe. While it is appropriate to identify and locate all debris and establish the confines of the debris field, NASA's delay in calling attention to critical events much further up-range suggests that NASA is not getting the desired input from the NTSB.

"The NTSB, from its work on the crashes of TWA 800, American Airlines Flight 587 and similar disasters involving decomposition of aircraft, understands investigative processes and the importance of moving quickly to recover wreckage along the entire flight path - especially the wreckage at the beginning of the debris field." Slack said.

He added that because this tragedy occurred within the boundaries of the United States after the aircraft had reentered the atmosphere from space, it arguably falls within the dominant investigative jurisdiction of the NTSB.

"NASA has appointed an investigative board that is charged with conducting an independent investigation. I applaud NASA's candor and its aggressiveness in convening an investigative board. However, it is unclear to me why the NTSB would not suffice as the independent investigative body, since it is already charged by law with investigating all aviation accidents occurring within the boundaries of the United States," Slack said.

UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

Slack has a unique perspective on this Shuttle tragedy, having spent six years as a senior aerospace engineer at NASA working on the Space Shuttle program, including the Columbia. After leaving NASA in 1980, Slack became an attorney. His practice primarily focuses on air crash litigation, most recently involving American Airlines Flight 587 and American Airlines Flight 1420. In the course of representing clients involved in air crashes, Slack has become quite familiar with the NTSB and its forensic capabilities.

On the day of the Columbia disaster, Slack was interviewed by Austin network television stations as well as the *Austin American Statesman*. In those interviews, Slack pointed out that investigators would find the most significant debris related to the cause of the disaster further up-range and west of Dallas. The *Austin American-Statesman*, CBS affiliate KEYE-TV and NBC affiliate KXAN-TV carried those reports.

ABOUT SLACK & DAVIS, LLP:

With offices in Austin and Dallas, Slack & Davis was founded in 1993 by Michael L. Slack, Tom H. Davis (retired), and his son Mike Davis, who remains a partner with the firm. The firm currently represents clients in the crash of American Airlines Flight 587. Slack formerly served as one of the lead attorneys in the crash of American Airlines Flight 1420. Slack is listed in *The Best Lawyers in America* and was recently recognized as an Associate Fellow by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

Slack & Davis represents plaintiffs in litigation involving severe injuries and wrongful death from air crashes, dangerous products, pharmaceuticals, medical malpractice, environmental pollution, vehicular accidents and negligence. Donna Bowen, partner, and John C. "Rusty" Allman, aviation attorney, complete the Austin office roster. Attorney Ladd Sanger mans the firm's Dallas office. Slack, Allman and Sanger comprise the boutique aviation law practice, while Bowen and Davis focus on other areas of personal injury law.

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