



Rodney Rocha – The Pursuit of Images of Columbia Interview of 9/22/2010 - Transcript

Why didn't my NASA colleagues and NASA managers listen to our debris assessment group photo request? Why did they not abet our pretty urgent request for extra information, extra imagery about the Columbia and the possible damage?

Well, after the mission, and during Return to Flight, I had years, months and years to think about this and I think I have a few essential points. One of these is that the mission was going I'll say swimmingly. It was virtually a flawless mission and to interrupt this mission with this extraordinary procedure of taking some extra images through some asset, possibly the military would have interrupted a mission that showed no problems as reported by the crew or by flight controllers on the ground. There was no engineering data to show there is definitely a problem. This is a case where I think I can say it was weak evidence. The weak evidence was of course the blurry video that we saw on flight day 2 and ponder over that many times. What did it mean? Did it cause damage? What are we actually seeing? Will it be enhanced in time. No it was not. And where exactly did it hit? All of those were uncertainties. So it's possible, and at the time we were thinking this could be a catastrophic event, loss of vehicle and crew. But how do you prove that? We weren't in a position of having enough information or data to say that was the case. It could have been okay and damage that could have been fixed after safely landing on the ground. But we decided to push on the side of conservatism and flight safety and say we need extra information. It could be very bad, possibly catastrophic. So, in addition to that factor of the mission is going so well and you can't prove anything is wrong, we got into the prove it's unsafe mentality. That's what we bucked up again. I certainly did. I think some of my colleagues did too, members of the Debris Assessment Team.

The other thing that may have contributed to this is when some upper management makes themselves accountable, they pass on the message something I'm accepting this risk, that it's okay, I'm thinking it's okay, you have concerns but you can stand down. A lot of people surrendered to that kind of thinking. That well upper management has accepted all the risks and it's okay. In this case, though, I felt that was not the right thing to do because this was not a flight readiness process, this was not an engineering process on the ground, where well, if you're wrong, testing or gathering more evidence

late.. this was not the case. These were seven people up there and things could have gone very wrong...and they were.

I think I can come up with a third reason. There was the prospect, the possibility, if we had taken an image, if we'd got that extra asset and lo and behold there is damage and it's not repairable I think there was some management thinking along the line of "there's nothing we can do about it". The spacewalks or EVAs are extraordinarily dangerous. They were not trained for this particular damage repair scenario. What do you repair with? There is no repair kit up there to repair carbon panels of the wing or the tiles. Those came later in Return to Flight I think most people know but at the time there were none such. And again we're interrupting a perfectly fine running mission the science is good and everything is running. Rescue was probably another possibility by another orbiter. Remember this was not a Space Station Mission. Columbia was up there alone and could not make it to the station so there were really no good answers as to how do you react or repair damage. There were pretty awful scenarios and I think some managers didn't want to face that prospect.