

GO FEVER IS WELL ENTRENCHED:(

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CAPE CANAVERAL — Everything appeared normal June 5, 2002, as shuttle Endeavour thundered to orbit from Kennedy Space Center through hazy afternoon skies.

Unknown to the public, however, the Air Force's top two safety officials at Cape Canaveral had tried to stop the countdown. Air Force technicians could not verify that a critical backup system used to destroy errant rockets was working properly.

In an apparently unprecedented move, the safety officers were overruled after a phone conversation between Brig. Gen. Donald Pettit, commander of the Air Force's 45th Space Wing, and KSC Director Roy Bridges.

Endeavour launched minutes later in violation of flight rules designed to protect the public.

Those and other findings are detailed in a 2005 internal briefing on the incident written by investigators with NASA's Office of the Inspector General. The draft, a copy of which was obtained by the Orlando Sentinel, concluded the "Entire Florida Central Coast [was] placed at UNKNOWN but INCREASED risk."

Despite those findings, NASA Inspector General Robert "Moose" Cobb derailed the inquiry and declared the issue an Air Force matter last year, according to investigators familiar with the case. Sources in Cobb's office said they were forbidden from interviewing Bridges and Pettit or requesting crucial information from the Air Force.

"It was obvious to me that he didn't want to make the agency [NASA] look bad," said a former investigator in the office, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "He wouldn't do his job."

Cobb, a White House political appointee, is under investigation by an administration integrity committee after being accused of repeatedly quashing cases and retaliating against those who resisted.

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The Sentinel interviewed five current or former investigators in NASA's Inspector General's Office, as well as a safety official at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, for this story. All requested anonymity because of concerns they would face retribution for speaking publicly.

Cobb referred an e-mail request for an interview last week to Madeline Chulumovich, his executive officer.

"Our audit office is working on a report on how this safety matter has been resolved," Chulumovich said. "We've never stopped work on this issue."

'Non-standard procedure'

All manned and unmanned rocket launches from KSC and Cape Canaveral are supported by the Air Force's Eastern Range.

The range is a network of tracking and communications stations that extend more than 5,000 miles from Cape Canaveral to Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. The network is managed in the Range Operations Control Center, or ROCC, at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station.

One of the main reasons the range exists is to ensure public safety.

All rockets launched from Cape Canaveral are equipped with explosive devices to destroy them if they veer off course. Both of the shuttle's pencil-shaped booster rockets have such devices, which range-safety officers can detonate by remote control. During the 1986 Challenger disaster, a safety officer used the system to destroy the shuttle's still-intact boosters as they arced uncontrollably away from the massive explosion.

As with other critical functions, the so-called command-destroy system has a backup communication link in case the primary link fails. Launch rules mandate that both links must be working properly before a mission lifts off.

On June 5, 2002, Endeavour was poised to begin a 14-day flight to the international space station. Bad weather and a faulty valve in one of Endeavour's rocket pods had delayed the launch for almost a week. Weather conditions were expected to worsen the next day.

As countdown clocks ticked toward a 5:23 p.m. liftoff, the backup command-destroy link went down about 2:30 p.m. Components were changed out, but still the link wouldn't work. After more troubleshooting, the system faded in and out before being reported back online about 3 p.m. However, the link went down again less than an hour later.

According to the document drafted by investigators, Pettit and Bridges discussed the problem at some point late in the countdown in a "totally

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non-standard procedure" that occurred off of the regular communications network used by range personnel.

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