

STS-115 IT'S OUT IN FRONT OF THE VEHICLE...

At approximately 1:18 AM CDT (6:18 GMT) on 19 September 2006, Atlantis' payload bay camera, under the control of the INCO, picked up what NASA later said was a bit of unexpected debris. A great deal of attention was given by NASA leaders, and the media, to this debris. There was concern that, due to its appearance, it might possibly be one of Atlantis' heat shield tiles which had somehow come off the orbiter. It set into motion a series of actions which led to the event we will explore in this article.

Because of the sighting of the "black debris", the crew of Atlantis was ordered to inspect the heat shield for damage yet again. This was in order to insure that the unaccounted for debris was not a lost part of said heat shield, and that it had not struck the Shuttle in any critical area. Mission planners wanted to be certain that there would be no danger to the crew or the orbiter during re-entry. The inspection caused the STS-115 mission to be extended for an extra day to accommodate this activity.

Part 1

The detailed inspection of the underside of Atlantis was well underway when at about 6:22 AM CDT (11:22 GMT) on 20 September, an anomalous object came into view off the port side of the Shuttle. This object was at first moving vertically relative to the orbiter. BUT, as time progressed, it became obvious that it was actually changing course! It described an arc, altering its trajectory by MORE than 170°! This behavior is simply not possible for mere ice or debris. In addition, even NASA admitted that ice and debris are rarely seen this late in a mission and can potentially be cause for alarm.

The flight deck crewmen noticed the object, and brought it to the attention of controllers back in Houston. Curiously, they stated that it was passing in front of the nose of their ship "AGAIN". Again? When had this same object been sighted before? It certainly wasn't mentioned in any of the "live" public downlinks earlier in the flight. Later, in "Part 3", the crew even wrested control of the payload bay camera from the INCO in order to track the object for themselves.

Next, we have the actual words which passed between Atlantis and Mission Control in Houston when the crew first reported the object in public.

A = Atlantis Astronaut

C = CapCom In Houston

N = NASA Commentator

All italics mine for emphasis, CAPITALS reflect the voiced emphasis of the respective speaker. Hesitations and grammatical errors are left in as originally spoken. JC

Clip 1 Transcript – The Actual Sighting

4:33 to 4:47

Atlantis: "...object in question just, uh, passed off the nose *again*. Right now it's at about 12:30, and it's, uh, passing out in front of the vehicle."

MCC CAPCOM: "We're Tally Ho. Can you get a, uh, still imagery by hand, and any estimate on size or range."

END TRANSCRIPT

Did you catch that part about the object passing in front of the Shuttle's nose AGAIN? What does THAT mean? One might suppose that it means the Astronauts had sighted this object earlier in the day, and it had returned. Very strange behavior for a conventional object indeed.

When the object passed out of view beyond the nose of Atlantis, the elbow camera on the robotic arm was called into service to follow it longer. The arm was in a position at the time to see the area in front of the Shuttle. At this point the anomaly became STATIONARY off Shuttle's nose!

Then it went on the move again, this time in an upward direction relative to Atlantis. The Astronauts tentatively identified this object as "a piece of foil". To my knowledge, a simple piece of foil cannot change course, stop and start again. This sort of maneuvering is also outside the ability of satellites. Only controlled vehicles, with engines, can do the things this object did.

There were other objects seen during this portion of the event. The crew identified them as "rings", but did not elaborate, at least publicly. Since the "rings" didn't display any blatantly unusual maneuvers, or behavior, we will not concern ourselves with them here either.

Two attempts, one by the NASA Commentator, and one by the CapCom, were made to identify the objects as "reflections". The CapCom even tried to get the Shuttle Crew to "confirm" that they were "reflections". It didn't work. The Crew stubbornly insisted that all of the objects in their field of view were solid and physical.

In the end, the Flight Director at Mission Control Center ordered the men to use "hand held" cameras to record the object, and to return to work. From this point onward, "live" video was curtailed in favor of computer generated animation of the inspection for public consumption. Now we have transcriptions of the relevant audio for you, in the exact words of the parties involved.

Clip 2 Transcript

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9:19 to 10:25

MCC COMMENTATOR: "The Instrumentation Communication Officer...here in Mission Control, operating the payload bay camera. With, uh, *reflections* in the uh, camera lens, as uh, it looks past, uh, the Space Shuttle Atlantis..."

Atlantis: "...our digital downlink.

MCC CAPCOM: "Uh, we do see that."

Atlantis: "OK. That's, uh, looking out in front of the orbiter."

MCC "OK, we're seein' three or four objects, uh, canya, can you confirm that it's just the one that's actually moving, the other ones are just *reflec, reflections?*

Atlantis "Uh, there are, uh, there are three objects. The one you see, you see two rings right there, they're the ones we kinda had the late

Tally Ho on. Uh, the one, uh, down at the bottom. That was the one we initially saw that, uh, appeared to be foil. So we've got like two rings, and then a *piece of foil*. The piece of foil...um, seems to be further in front, with the, with the grounding strap on, it seems to be further in front of the other two. And the other two seem to be about the same, uh, equidistant from, uh, both us and the forward one."

MCC "Copy that."

Clip 3 Transcript

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10:42 to 10:50

MCC Commentator "*The crew actually commanding the payload bay camera* to look at the objects observed out, uh, the flight deck windows."

Clip 4 Transcript

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11:25 to 12:09

Atlantis "Houston, Atlantis"

MCC "Go Ahead"

Atlantis "Yeah, I'm just wondering, uh, how close we are to the trajectory flown by the Soyuz."

MCC "Yeah, we're asking."

MCC "We're gonna check on that, umm, but while we're waiting for that, we're thinking based on our daylight and Ku availability, if we can

get to the OBSS inspection, and maybe use the, uh, still cameras to photograph these objects.”

Atlantis “Yeah, we understand, uh, we’ll, we’re getting’ back to OBSS.”

MCC “Thanks”

(OBSS = Orbital Boom Sensory System. This is the add-on boom used for inspecting the Shuttle heat shield in detail.)



At a subsequent press conference, a still photo was produced for reporters to see. There was absolutely no proof that the still photograph was actually of the object seen in the video. But, that didn't stop NASA leaders from claiming that it was the object in question, and that it was a plastic bag! How about that? A plastic bag capable of maneuvers only a powered vehicle, under control, could produce!

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