

SEND TO A FRIEND **When Space Stations Fall...**By [Stewart Taggart](#)

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As Russia's aging Mir station bids goodbye to what may be its last occupants this week, the question is, what happens next?

Russian officials haven't said definitively. But if the 125-ton space station is allowed to fall back into Earth's atmosphere -- probably next year -- not all of it can be expected to burn up on re-entry.

But the station still has fuel on board, and can be remotely controlled from Earth. Therefore, ground controllers can be expected to steer Mir over an ocean, and not over inhabited areas.

"Mir will be a controlled reentry, assuming that it takes place," says Roger D. Launius, NASA's chief historian in Washington. "It will be brought down whenever and wherever controllers want."

The contrast with NASA's out of fuel and out-of-control Skylab, which crashed back to Earth just over 20 years ago -- on July 11, 1979 -- couldn't be more great, he says.

"Skylab was an uncontrolled re-entry," Launius said. "There was no way to fire thrusters and make it either re-enter the atmosphere or to reboost to a higher orbit."

The original plan was for Skylab to stay in orbit long enough for the space shuttle fleet to become operational in 1978. Shuttles would deliver extra rockets, and the 77-ton Skylab would either be guided to a specific re-entry trajectory or boosted to a higher orbit.

Instead, the space shuttles weren't ready in time. The \$2.5-billion Skylab essentially became an orbiting piece of metal beyond anyone's control.

Higher than normal solar flare activity also intervened, causing additional atmospheric drag and pulling Skylab even more quickly toward Earth.

During Skylab's final days, NASA engineers were reduced to merely guessing where on Earth the station's remnants would fall. In India, astrologers did a booming business. The world kept a worried vigil.

Around 2:35 a.m. in the morning of July 11, 1979, Skylab re-entered Earth's atmosphere, falling largely over the eastern Indian Ocean. Parts of it fell over suburban Perth, Western Australia and over Australia's mostly vacant western desert.

No injuries were reported. Souvenir hunters fanned out.

Few did better than 17-year-old Stan Thornton of Esperance, Western Australia.

He scooped a few pieces off the roof of his home and caught the first flight to San Francisco, where he collected a \$10,000 prize from the San Francisco Examiner.

Meanwhile, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser wrote a letter to US president Jimmy Carter, praising the scientific research Skylab had done during its active lifespan. Even so, he said, he would have preferred Skylab hadn't fallen on his country.

He then suggested tongue-in-cheek a trade be made of Skylab wreckage in return for higher Australian beef export quotas to the US market.

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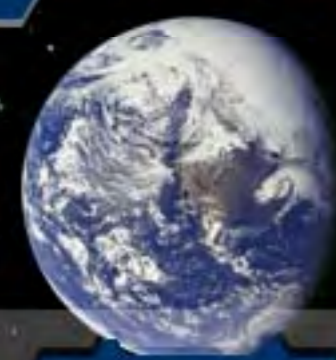
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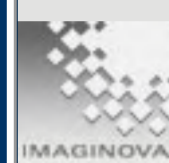
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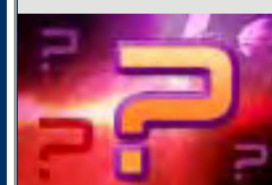
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