After the explosion of an Antares supply rocket headed to the International Space Station (ISS), the search begins for pieces of wreckage on land and in the water surrounding the launch pad near Wallops Island, Virginia. The Antares rocket was built by the Orbital Sciences Corporation in Dulles, Virginia.
NASA and "Orbital Sciences" Look for Answers in Rocket Explosion

BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:

Good evening. The flaming wreckage of a failed rocket launch on the Virginia coast might just be a metaphor for the current state of the U.S. space program. The rocket that exploded last night stood fourteen stories tall. It was en route to the International Space Station to supply the U.S. astronauts on board. Americans who remember the race to the Moon against the Soviets may be surprised to learn that these days American rocket launches are contracted out. Luckily, this one was unmanned, but NASA has no way of getting NASA astronauts into space. We rely on the Russians for that, too. This may now all get more attention after last night. A whole lot of people on the East Coast planned to watch the launch. It was going to be visible from Cape Hatteras north to Cape Cod. Instead, they, along with the rest of the world, saw a catastrophic failure on television. It's where we begin tonight with NBC's Tom Costello who's outside that launch facility on Wallops Island in Virginia. Tom, good evening.

TOM COSTELLO, reporting:

Hi, Brian. Good evening. And in effect they tell me that for the most part the debris field is relatively contained because launch controllers hit the self-destruct button when they saw that the rocket was coming apart seconds into the liftoff.

MAN (recording): Five, four, three, two, one.

COSTELLO: It was supposed to be a spectacular nighttime launch along the eastern seaboard, but within seconds it turned into a spectacular failure.

WOMAN (Matthew Travis/Zero-G News): Oh, God.

COSTELLO: The explosion was enormous, ricocheted across eastern Virginia and captured on dozens of cameras in the air and on the ground.

WOMAN: Oh, my God.

COSTELLO: Photographer Ken Kremer captured incredibly detailed images as the Antares rocket came apart.
KEN KREMER: It was like, yeah, the-- the sky was on fire. And I was stunned, actually, because I never expected to see anything like this.

COSTELLO: Today, the search began for pieces of the wreckage on land and in the water. Orbital Sciences built the rocket and has had two successful previous missions. But it was the first loss of a commercial spacecraft since NASA stopped flying the space shuttle three years ago.

FRANK CULBERTSON (Orbital): A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into building this rocket and put in this program together. And we had a lot riding on it.

COSTELLO: On board, five thousand pounds of equipment, experiments, clothing and food destined for the space station. Orbiting two hundred miles above the Earth, the space station crew insisted they are not running low.

BARRY "BUTCH" WILMORE: We plan for four to six months ahead. So we've got plenty of food to-- to keep us, all varieties.

COSTELLO: In some ways, the Antares rocket was a throwback to the Cold War, using two engines built for the Soviet space program but recently refurbished. A competitor, SpaceX founder Elon Musk, recently called them a joke. But others insisted the engines have a good track record.

STEVE ROBINSON (NBC News Analyst): They are very fuel efficient and they tend to be fairly-- fairly simple and cleverly designed to do the job. That said they have been on-- in storage for many, many years for decades.

COSTELLO: Yeah. We should mention that one of these Soviet-built engines just exploded a few months ago at a U.S. test facility. This was a re-supply mission but it was hardly the only one. Just today, a Russian-built Progress re-supply craft docked with the space station and another Soyuz-type of vehicle lifted off from Kazakhstan. There are lots of vehicles faring cargo to the space station. Brian.

WILLIAMS: Tom Costello at the Wallops Island launch facility on the Virginia coast tonight-- coast tonight. Tom, thanks for that report.