

# 'Burning plane' just a load of space junk

**HOBART:** The space shuttle Atlantis appeared to offer the best explanation for mysterious reports of a light aircraft burning-up over Hobart early yesterday morning.

Police said yesterday that one of the first reports had told of a ball of flame flying over the city's northern suburbs and then diving towards the Derwent River, but an aerial search for wreckage later failed to find anything.

"He [the witness] indicated he believed it was a light aircraft on fire," a police officer said after a police helicopter had returned from the search.

Air-traffic controllers in Melbourne then searched their records for any overdue or missing aircraft yesterday morning, but nothing came to light until they finally put through a call to the Tidbinbilla deep-space communication complex in Canberra.

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The fiery object above Hobart was, according to the complex, the fuel tanks jettisoning from Atlantis about 240 nautical miles above the earth, south of Fiji.

The first report to Hobart police was at 1.45am — not long after the tanks had separated from the shuttle. It was launched from Cape Canaveral just after midnight (AEST).

“We have no reports of aircraft missing or persons missing,” senior Melbourne air-traffic operations controller John Lang said.

“We have basically put it down to the fact that it may have been to do with the space shuttle, and we have basically held up our investigations until such time as further information becomes available.

“We get a lot of calls that are unexplainable. It’s not as if we are talking about UFOs; it’s just that we do get observations passed through to us that we can’t find an explanation for.”

**Atlantis into space.**  
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