U.S. astronaut eager for ''sports car'' space ride

Alissa de Carbonnel, Reuters

Veteran U.S. astronaut Daniel Burbank said on Monday he was eager to fly Russia's Soyuz spacecraft to the International Space Station, likening it to a sports car and NASA's space shuttle to a big truck.

Burbank has twice flown aboard NASA's Atlantis shuttle but will launch his maiden Soyuz mission to the space station on November 14 from Russia's Baikonur launchpad in Kazakhstan.

The launch is the first since NASA ended its 30-year shuttle program in July, heralding a period of several years when all 16 partners in the International Space Station will rely entirely on Russia for manned flights into orbit.

Last month's crash of an unmanned Russian spacecraft delayed the mission by a month, disrupting space station operations early on in NASA's post-shuttle era and exposing the vulnerability of having only one way for crews to reach orbit.

Burbank, 50, will head a crew that includes first-time space flyers, Russians Anatoly Ivanishin and Anton Shkaplerov.

"Space flight is one of the harder things that human begins have ever tried to do and it is going to continue to be that way for quite a long time," Burbank told reporters at Star City outside Moscow, where cosmonauts have trained since space pioneer Yuri Gagarin a half century ago.

"To me the Soyuz is like a sports car and the shuttle is like an 18-wheeler (truck)," he said. "I am very much looking forward to the ride."

Flight engineer Ivanishin said space flight was "man's destiny" and well worth the risk.

"Humanity is too curious to remain tied to the Earth's gravitational pull," he said. "Sometimes we face difficulties. Sometimes we lose ships. It is sad but, thankfully, it's rare."

Russia's space agency chief told lawmakers October 7 that safety checks showed the rocket failure that led to the Progress ship crash was an isolated problem. An earlier investigation blamed a fuel pipe blockage.

The launch delay has left a skeleton three-person crew aboard the $100-billion space station and will force a short six-day handover between crews amid a hectic schedule to return the space station to normal operations.

The launch of a new Progress supply flight on October 30 and another crewed missions on December 26 will bring the station back to full operation.

To bridge the gap, members of the new team said they spent hours on video link with outgoing crew members Mike Fossum of NASA, Japan's Satoshi Furukawa and Russia's Sergei Volkov.

"They offered us a wide range of advice, often on everyday questions like how to keep clean, prepare meals and use the toilet. Such seemingly trivial things that are completely different in space," Shkaplerov said.

(Reporting by Alissa de Carbonnel; edited by Richard Meares)

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