

Private ship's space station flyby called success

Marcia Dunn, Aerospace Writer, The Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida (AP) — The world's first private supply ship flew tantalizingly close to the International Space Station on Thursday, passing a critical test in advance of Friday's actual docking.

The unmanned SpaceX Dragon capsule performed a practice lap around the orbiting lab and checked out its communication and navigation systems. Officials at the U.S. space agency, NASA, and the SpaceX company declared the rendezvous a success.

It is the first U.S. vessel to visit the space station since NASA's shuttles retired last summer — and the first private spacecraft to ever attempt a delivery. The Dragon is carrying 1,000 pounds (453 kilograms) of provisions.

Thursday's accomplishment "is a big confidence boost. Everyone's very excited," said SpaceX mission director John Couluris. After working all night, he urged his team to go home and rest up for Friday. "It's exciting to be an American and part of putting American spacecraft into orbit, and we're very proud right now."

NASA flight director Holly Ridings said the mood was upbeat on her side as well, but noted "there's still a lot of really new things that the teams need to perform and the vehicles, frankly, need to perform" on Friday.

The space station astronauts struggled with bad computer monitors and camera trouble as the Dragon zoomed toward them, but the problem did not hold up the operation.

The astronauts successfully turned on Dragon's strobe light by remote control, but could not see it because of the sun glare and distance. The Dragon finally popped into camera view about 10 minutes later, appearing as a bright speck of light against the blackness of space, near the Earth's blue horizon. The two solar wings were clearly visible as the Dragon drew closer.

"Can nicely see the vehicle," Dutch spaceman Andre Kuipers said.

On Friday morning, Kuipers and fellow astronaut Donald Pettit will use the space station's robot arm to grab the Dragon and attach it to the complex. The crew will have just under a week to unload the contents before releasing the spacecraft for re-entry next Thursday. It is the only supply ship designed to return to Earth with experiments and equipment; the others burn up in the atmosphere.

SpaceX's objective is to help stockpile the space station, joining Russia, Europe and Japan in resupply duties. In three or four more years, however, the company run by the billionaire who co-founded PayPal, Elon Musk, hopes to be launching station astronauts.

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It is the cornerstone of President Barack Obama's strategy for NASA: turning over orbital flights to private business so the space agency can concentrate on destinations farther afield, like asteroids and Mars. Several U.S. companies are competing for the opportunity.

Obama called Musk on Wednesday, a day after Dragon's flawless launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida, aboard the company's Falcon 9 rocket.

"The President just called to say congrats. Caller ID was blocked, so at first I thought it was a telemarketer," Musk said via Twitter early Thursday.

Couluris said two more supply trips are planned by year's end.

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