

Shuttle Program Complete with Atlantis Landing



*Space shuttle Atlantis lands for the final time at
Kennedy Space Center early Thursday morning.
(NASA/Kim Shiflett)*

The space shuttle Atlantis made its final touch down in Florida in the pre-dawn darkness just before 6 a.m. Thursday, marking the end of an era in America's space program.

"After serving the world for over 30 years, the space shuttle's earned its place in history. And it's come to a final stop," commander Christopher Ferguson radioed after Atlantis landed on the runway.

"Job well done, America," replied Mission Control.

Thirteen days ago the world watched as the shuttle shot into space for the last time.

"I think of the past crews that have sat here and shared a meal and think about 'wow, this is the last time,'" Mission Specialist Rex Walheim said.

Since 1981, NASA space shuttles have been rocketing from the Florida coast into earth orbit.

The five orbiters—Columbia, Challenger, Discovery, Atlantis and Endeavour—flew more than 130 missions, carrying more than 350 people into space and travelling more than half a billion miles.

Atlantis has been credited with building much of the international space station during the last 12 years and helping repair the Hubble Space Telescope.

The program has seen tragedy, with two shuttles and their entire crews lost in devastating accidents.

While the shuttle era may be over, the space program will continue. NASA will now focus on deeper space exploration, leaving low-orbit space travel to private companies.

"It is a much better value for the taxpayer. It takes advantage of an industry and allows them to put their creative and innovative spirit into what they do, while NASA does the cutting edge hard thing," NASA Deputy Administrator Lori Garver said.

Atlantis' crew of three men and one woman admitted they were filled with emotion ahead of the shuttle's 135th and final mission.

"I don't think you'd be human if you didn't feel something," NASA Entry Flight Director Tony Ceccacci said.

"The future is very bright but at the moment it's very somber because we are saying goodbye to an old friend," Commander Ferguson said.

The Atlantis will go on public display at the Kennedy Space Center Visitors Complex.

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