

Rocket blasts off with 2 Russians, 1 American

April 2 2010, By PETER LEONARD , Associated Press Writer



The Soyuz-FG rocket booster with the Soyuz TMA-18 spacecraft carrying a new crew to the international space station (ISS) blasts off from the Russian-leased Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan, Friday, April 2, 2010. The Russian rocket is carrying U.S. astronaut Tracy Caldwell Dyson, Russian cosmonauts Alexander Skvortsov and Mikhail Kornienko. (AP Photo/Misha Japaridze)

(AP) -- A Russian rocket blasted off from a space center in southern Kazakhstan into brilliant blue skies Friday, transporting a NASA astronaut and two Russian cosmonauts to the International Space Station.

The Soyuz craft carrying California native Tracy Caldwell Dyson and

Russians Alexander Skvortsov and Mikhail Kornienko rose from the [Baikonur cosmodrome](#) on schedule.

Powerful booster rockets shattered the stillness of the immense and arid Kazakh steppe, propelling the Soyuz heavenward atop an iridescent flow of flames against the clear sky. Spectators gazed as the craft disappeared into a faint dot.

The craft, which thundered into orbit at more than 8,000 miles per hour (13,000 kilometers per hour) about 10 minutes into the flight, docks Sunday with the space station, orbiting about 200 miles (320 kilometers) above the Earth.

Live pictures broadcast from the craft showed expedition head Skvortsov smiling as a toy duck nicknamed "Quack" dangled overhead. Once the craft entered orbit, the fluffy talisman began to float, demonstrating [zero gravity](#).

"The vehicle is performing fine," Skvortsov was heard as saying after a long communications disruption due to static. Caldwell Dyson didn't respond to questions from Russian mission control in Moscow asking how she was, apparently due to radio interference.

The same [launch pad](#) was used by Yuri Gagarin when he made the first human trip into orbit in 1961

William Gerstenmaier, NASA's associate administrator for space operations, called the launch "super."

"This is an extremely positive crew and they're looking forward to their work," he said. "If we get the shuttle launched next week, it will be an extremely busy time for them after they get into orbit, but they're ready to go do their work."

Caldwell Dyson, Skvortsov and Kornienko will join the Russian commander Oleg Kotov, [NASA](#) astronaut Timothy J. Creamer and Soichi Noguchi of Japan on board the station.

Their missions ends in September, just before the U.S.'s last-ever shuttle flight launches from the Kennedy Space Center.

A U.S. space shuttle is scheduled to head to the space station next week. Discovery is set to launch Monday for a 13-day mission to add several tons of research equipment to the orbiting laboratory.

Before the pre-launch briefing early Friday, Caldwell Dyson - a lead vocalist in Houston-based all-astronaut rock band Max-Q - drew on her musical talents by regaling her friends, colleagues and relatives with a solo rendition of Garth Brooks' country hit "The River."

In a final statement to a commission of international [space](#) officials, Caldwell Dyson said in Russian: "As our captain said, we are ready."

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