

Astronauts prepare for 1st of 2 spacewalks

February 27 2011, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



In this frame grab from video taken from NASA television, space shuttle Discovery performs a maneuver as it zooms toward an afternoon check-in at the International Space Station, its final visit before being parked at a museum, Saturday, Feb. 26, 2011. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- The astronauts aboard the orbiting shuttle-station complex geared up Sunday for the first spacewalk of their mission, amid some good news from Mission Control.

Flight controllers told Discovery's six astronauts that the shuttle made it through its final liftoff relatively unscathed, and that no further inspections would be needed before undocking next weekend.

NASA officials had said they did not suspect any damage from a section of insulating foam that broke off the [fuel tank](#) and struck Discovery's belly. At least four pieces of debris came off the tank during Thursday's launch, though none posed a safety concern.

More than 300 digital photographs snapped from the [International Space Station](#) during Discovery's close approach Saturday confirmed the shuttle's thermal armor is free of any deformities. The pictures still are being analyzed, but nothing serious has popped up, said flight director David Korth.

Shuttle commander Steven Lindsey and his crew got to sleep in Sunday after staying up late the night before to install an equipment platform to the orbiting lab. Once up, the 12 orbiting astronauts hustled to haul fresh supplies from Discovery into the space station and get ready for Monday's [spacewalk](#), the first of two planned for this week.

One of the two astronauts stepping out - Stephen Bowen - is a latecomer to the mission. He joined the crew last month, replacing lead spacewalker Timothy Kopra, who was hurt in a bicycle crash.

Bowen, an experienced spacewalker with five to his credit, quickly came up to speed, Korth said.

"Steve will do just fine, and we have absolutely every confidence that we'll knock off all these tasks," the flight director told reporters.

Kopra - still on crutches - will help direct both spacewalks from Mission Control.

During Monday's outing, Bowen and Alvin Drew will move a broken ammonia pump to a better storage area on the station's exterior and install an extension power cable. The cable extension needs to be hooked

up before a chamber full of supplies can be installed permanently on the orbiting lab; the Italian-built compartment was carried up aboard Discovery to serve as an extra closet.

The first humanoid robot in space - Robonaut 2 or R2 for short - will remain boxed up inside the compartment for another few months. Beginning in spring or early summer, it will be tested as an astronaut helper. R2 will remain indoors; future versions may venture out on spacewalks.

"Today my crew is going to be getting ready for the mission's 1st spacewalk," R2 said in a tweet, posted by a human colleague back on Earth. "Wish I could go with them! Maybe someday."

This is the last flight for Discovery, after 39 missions spread over 26 years. The shuttle will be retired when it returns to Earth in just over a week and sent to the Smithsonian Institution.

Two launches remain - by Endeavour in April and Atlantis at the end of June.

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