

Giffords' astronaut husband decides to fly shuttle

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In this undated file photo provided by the office of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, Giffords, left, is shown with her husband, NASA astronaut Mark Kelly. There are hints that astronaut Mark Kelly will take a shuttle into space in April. That would mean leaving his wounded wife, Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, to continue her rehab work without him for at least a few weeks. Scott Kelly, also an astronaut, said his brother would decide “fairly soon” whether to fly the space shuttle mission in April. (AP Photo/Office of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, File)

(AP) -- The astronaut husband of wounded Rep. Gabrielle Giffords will head to space in April, a stunning decision coming almost one month to the day that his wife was shot through the head.

The congresswoman not only survived, by all accounts she is making good progress in rehab in Houston, where husband Mark Kelly will resume training Monday for shuttle Endeavour's final voyage. One

doctor has described her recovery as "lightning speed."

NASA confirmed late Friday morning that Kelly will be aboard Endeavour as commander of the two-week mission. He is holding a news conference at Johnson Space Center in Houston on Friday afternoon.

Kelly, who's been on leave since the shooting, said in a news release that he's looking forward to rejoining his crew and finishing all the training. He noted that they have been preparing for the space station delivery mission for more than 18 months and will be ready to carry it out.

"I appreciate the confidence that my NASA management has in me and the rest of my space shuttle crew," Kelly said.

Kelly took a leave from training after his wife was gunned down outside a Tucson, Ariz., supermarket as she met with constituents on Jan. 8. Six people were killed and 13 were injured in the rampage; a 22-year-old suspect is in custody.

The 40-year-old congresswoman was in intensive care for two weeks, with Kelly at her bedside, before she was transferred to Houston for what is expected to be a lengthy rehabilitation. Kelly wanted her as close to him as possible, if he returned to work at Johnson Space Center. He lives in the Houston area with his two teenage daughters from a previous marriage, Claudia and Claire.

Kelly, 46, spent the past month debating whether to step down as commander of Endeavour. As he agonized over the decision, NASA named a backup commander, Rick Sturckow, who joined the crew for training. Kelly said all along that he wanted his wife's input in the matter, if at all possible.

He has just over two months before liftoff, targeted for April 19. There's

considerable training between now and then for the mission, almost certainly with long hours and few days off for the crew. The six astronauts will go into quarantine a week before the launch, with limited access to family members.

"We are glad to have Mark back," NASA's chief astronaut, Peggy Whitson said in the news release. "He is a veteran shuttle commander and knows well the demands of the job. We are confident in his ability to successfully lead this mission."

Kelly's identical twin, Scott, currently commander of the International Space Station, hinted in an interview earlier this week that his brother would choose to fly.

Kelly has flown three times aboard space shuttles; April's trip to the International Space Station will be his fourth. He will lead a veteran, all-male, American-Italian crew.

The mission already was set to be one of the highest profile shuttle flights ever. It will be Endeavour's last voyage and the next-to-last for the entire 30-year shuttle program, and will feature the delivery of an elaborate physics experiment by a Nobel prize winner.

Kelly's mission originally was scheduled for last July, but was bumped into 2011 because the experiment wasn't ready.

With Kelly back on board, the launch will "get the same kind of attention that the (1998) John Glenn mission" received, said Howard McCurdy, a public policy professor and space expert at American University in Washington, D.C.

McCurdy suggested the public will embrace Kelly's decision, because it provides a sense of normalcy.

"We all want her to go back to Congress; we'd like them both to continue their careers and we'd like them to be whole and normal as if this thing had never happened," said McCurdy, author of the book "Space and the American Imagination."

Both Kellys are Navy captains and joined NASA's astronaut corps in 1996. In an interview from the space station Wednesday, Scott Kelly said their Navy background as high-performance pilots enables them to put their personal lives aside, when necessary, and focus on the job at hand.

"My brother certainly is very good at that," he told The Associated Press. "I am absolutely 100 percent confident that he will have no problem fulfilling his responsibilities the same way as if this incident would have never occurred."

Scott Kelly will be back on Earth by the time his brother flies. He's due to land in a Russian Soyuz capsule in mid-March, closing out a 5 1/2-month mission.

Last fall, Mark Kelly told the AP he felt lucky to command one of the last shuttle flights. Atlantis will close out the shuttle program this summer, if enough money is forthcoming.

"It's just timing, actually. It's all about timing," he said. "I've got a great mission. I've got a great crew. I've got what I think is going to be some of the most important science that the space station does."

Until late last year, there was a chance the Kellys would meet up in space because of their coinciding missions. But that opportunity was dashed by delays caused by fuel tank cracks on shuttle Discovery.

When asked if there was anyone other than his brother he'd like to fly

with in space, Mark Kelly responded: "If it wasn't so dangerous? My kids and my wife and my brother all at once. But this flying in space stuff is a risky proposition. So I wouldn't let my kids do it, not at their current age."

More information: NASA: <http://www.nasa.gov/shuttle>

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