

# Tragic romance eclipses 2nd-to-last shuttle flight

April 24 2011, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer

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FILE - In this Thursday, Jan. 20, 2011 photo provided by the office of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., Giffords' husband, Mark Kelly, stands with his wife as she looks from her bed at the Santa Catalina Mountains while on an outdoor deck at University Medical Center in Tucson, Ariz. Looking back on the horror of Saturday, Jan. 8, 2011, this seems miraculous today: that Kelly would indeed command the next-to-last space shuttle flight and that his wounded wife would be in Florida watching. Yet that is what is expected to happen Friday, April 29, 2011 provided doctors approve her travel. The Kelly-Giffords ordeal has been a national drama since the congresswoman was shot in the head at a meet-and-greet in her hometown of Tucson, Ariz. (AP Photo/Office of U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords)

(AP) -- Looking back on the horror of that Saturday in January, this seems miraculous today: that Mark Kelly would indeed command the next-to-last space shuttle flight and that his wounded wife, Gabrielle Giffords, would be here in Florida watching.

Yet that is what is expected to happen Friday.

The Kelly-Giffords ordeal has been a national drama since Jan. 8, when the congresswoman was shot in the head at a meet-and-greet in her hometown of Tucson, Ariz.

The couple's love story - her struggle to survive a serious brain injury and her remarkable progress, and his devotion to both his wife and NASA - has overshadowed Endeavour's final voyage and the looming end of the shuttle program.

It's all about Mark and Gabby.

"They're America's sweethearts," said Susan Still Kilrain, a former space shuttle pilot.

On a day fit for princes and princesses - Britain's Prince William will wed Kate Middleton that morning - Endeavour's scheduled 3:47 p.m. blastoff is the big draw for tourists and residents on Florida's Space Coast.

The Obama family will be here, as will a congressional contingent and an estimated 40,000 other NASA guests. Plus, hundreds of thousands are expected to jam surrounding beaches and roadways, all eager to catch one of the last two space shuttle launches.

In an interview with CBS' Katie Couric, excerpts of which were released Sunday, Kelly said Giffords' doctors have cleared her to travel to Cape

Canaveral, Fla., to watch.

No one, it seems, can resist the real-life drama surrounding the 47-year-old astronaut and the 40-year-old congresswoman, married just three years when a bullet changed everything. The shooting rampage outside a supermarket left six dead and 13 injured, including Giffords.

Kelly rushed by private jet from Houston to Tucson with his two teenage daughters and his mother, as soon as he learned of the assassination attempt.

His shuttle co-pilot, Gregory Johnson, was also moving at rocket speed. He opened his Houston home to the rest of the shuttle crew and their families that bleak Saturday night, as he struggled to come up with a game plan amid the shock waves.

"We wanted to deal with the emotions of all the kids. My daughter was completely beside herself," recalled Johnson.

The six astronauts, all men, have 15 children among them, from 3 to 17 years old.

Italian astronaut Roberto Vittori's plane had just landed in Houston when he got the urgent one-word message. "Call." Just the day before, Italy's president had given him a flag to fly into space.

The news hit Vittori hard, just as it did everyone else on the crew and at NASA.

"Crews get close after 18 months," Johnson explained in an interview with The Associated Press, "and all my kids had met Gabby on numerous occasions and we had socialized together as a crew. So just getting past that emotional trauma was important. And then we were

faced with OK, what do we do next? How are we going to move on?"

Kelly figured he'd be at his wife's ICU bedside for "maybe two, four, six months." That's what her trauma surgeon and neurosurgeon warned him, in the hours after the shooting.

"I'm pretty sure I'm done," he told his boss, chief astronaut Peggy Whitson.

For several weeks, Johnson and his crewmates didn't know whether Kelly would fly the April mission or whether the flight might be delayed. A backup commander stepped in to keep up the training momentum.

But as the days went by, Giffords made steady progress. Her previous good health, great care "and maybe a little bit of luck" contributed to her swift improvement, Kelly said. "Or maybe people really thinking about her and praying for her." The astronaut's aunt is a Catholic nun. As it turns out, Pope Benedict XVI will make the first papal call to space during Endeavour's mission.

After a monthlong leave, Kelly returned to work in February at Johnson Space Center, bringing his wife with him to Houston for rehab. It's what she would have wanted, he assured journalists.

As he resumed training, his wife's full days of rehab were paying off. She began walking and talking more, completing short sentences. She also began to take stock of what had happened to her; Kelly told her she'd been shot.

Kelly settled into a routine: early mornings with Giffords, taking her a newspaper and a cup of her favorite nonfat latte with cinnamon on top, then straight to Johnson for a long day of training, then back to the rehab center to say goodnight to his wife.

Before the tragedy, the two split their time among Texas, Arizona and Washington, hooking up on as many weekends as possible. The shooting brought them together practically every day, until Friday. As is the custom one week before liftoff, Kelly and his crew went into quarantine.

Almost certainly, Giffords will be kept out of public sight at the launch, as she has been ever since the shooting occurred. Her husband will face the cameras when he arrives Tuesday with his crew at Kennedy Space Center, and again on launch day.

Dr. Anna Fisher, a NASA manager for future spacecraft, said it's natural the world is focused more on the Kelly-Giffords saga than Endeavour's grand finale, though she thinks all the previous 133 shuttle flights should have gotten more attention.

"Whenever everything goes well, nobody pays attention," she added. "It's only when you have your Challengers, your Columbias or, like now, Mark's wife Gabby being shot," said Fisher, one of NASA's first female astronauts.

Indeed, journalists have descended in droves on NASA news conferences - those with or about Kelly - in a way not seen since shuttle flight resumed in 2005 following the Columbia disaster.

It will be the 25th and final flight of Endeavour, NASA's youngest shuttle that was built to replace the Challenger and first soared in 1992, six years after the launch accident.

And it will be the second-to-last shuttle mission, as NASA winds down the 30-year shuttle program with one last fling by Atlantis in early summer.

Even the Nobel laureate whose \$2 billion science experiment will be

delivered to the International Space Station by the Endeavour crew doesn't seem to mind that his project is being overlooked.

"I have great admiration for Commander Kelly," said physicist Samuel Ting. "It takes great courage for him to do this. Really, it takes total dedication to do this."

Perhaps the only two people on the planet who bristle at all the attention are Kelly and his identical twin Scott, also an astronaut and a Navy captain. They repeatedly have tried - but failed - to steer attention back to their space missions.

Scott abruptly walked away from a series of interviews after he returned from the space station in mid-March; he kept being asked about his brother and sister-in-law. Two days later, Mark canceled all private interviews that already had been set up with reporters at Johnson. He took part in the traditional crew news conference and talked about his wife, but kept it short.

Seldom does a single individual take over an entire space mission like this.

John Glenn was the exception when he returned to orbit in 1998 aboard Discovery at age 77. It's still called the John Glenn flight, even by NASA. Never mind there were six others on board and science experiments galore.

That's the only time a sitting president has ever attended a shuttle launch - at least until Friday. President Bill Clinton was on hand to see the original Mercury astronaut, the retiring senator, soar.

Now it's Kelly's turn. The Mark Kelly flight.

The five men who will ride into space with Kelly have circled around him, like a band of brothers.

"We also went through it," said astronaut Gregory Chamitoff. "We know Gabby and Mark really well. It's hard for us to see them go through this."

Astronauts point out that all space shuttle missions have distractions: divorce, child concerns and other family issues, health matters, accidents. On the last flight, for example, a crew member was injured in a bicycle crash just weeks before liftoff and had to be replaced.

Top-level managers insist the latest distraction will not affect the launch or the two-week flight, a particularly complicated mission featuring four spacewalks.

"I've talked to Mark extensively on it, and he is completely focused on the mission and ready to go," said shuttle program manager John Shannon.

Endeavour astronaut Mike Fincke said Kelly has set a good example for the crew, all veteran space fliers. Kelly will be making his fourth shuttle flight.

"He's able to compartmentalize and he's also able to count on us as his crewmates, while he's dealing with the things that he needs to deal with," Fincke said. "Mark doesn't need to worry. The mission's going to get done."

And, of course, Giffords herself is an inspiration.

"She's on a path to recovery," said crewmate Andrew Feustel, "and that is, I think, allowing us all to just carry on and get done what we need to get done."

**More information:**

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

Messages: <http://tinyurl.com/NASAmessages>

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Citation: Tragic romance eclipses 2nd-to-last shuttle flight (2011, April 24) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-04-tragic-romance-eclipses-2nd-to-last-shuttle-flight.html>

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