

Spacewalking astronaut gets stinging soap in eye

May 25 2011, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



In this image taken from NASA television spacewalker Mike Fincke repositions himself on the International Space Station after laying power cables and adding a robot arm attachment during the third space walk early Wednesday May 25, 2011. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- A spacewalking astronaut got soap in his eye and almost had to retreat into the safety of the International Space Station on Wednesday.

Andrew Feustel said it stung "like crazy." But several minutes later, he said he was feeling better and the third spacewalk of shuttle Endeavour's final voyage continued as planned for about seven hours.

The incident came as the spacewalk hit the five-hour mark. Feustel and Mike Fincke had just finished running power cables from the U.S. side of the orbiting house to the Russian half.

"Just as an FYI, my right eye is stinging like crazy right now. It's watering a lot. Must have gotten something" in it, Feustel called out quietly and calmly.

"Sorry, buddy," Fincke said.

NASA's lead spacewalk officer in Mission Control, Allison Bolinger, later identified the irritant as an anti-fogging solution that had been applied to the inside of Feustel's helmet. It's essentially off-the-shelf dishwashing soap and occasionally flakes off, if not buffed properly, and can get in a spacewalker's eye.

Feustel managed to rub his eye against a foam block in his helmet - normally used for clearing ears - and said that helped. The spacewalkers noted that tears in space "don't fall off of your eye ... they kind of stay there."

Until Feustel's eye irritation, everything had been unfolding uneventfully 220 miles up, a relief for the spacewalkers who struggled with loose bolts during Sunday's excursion. And during a spacewalk late last week, a spacesuit malfunction forced an early end to the work.

Early in Wednesday's spacewalk, when told they were running ahead of schedule, Fincke replied, "I want to enjoy it while it lasts."

This is NASA's next-to-last space shuttle flight. One more spacewalk is planned before Endeavour heads home, to install the shuttle's long inspection boom to the station as an extension tool for hard-to-reach repairs. The shuttle astronauts will use the laser- and camera-tipped boom one last time late Wednesday night to check for any signs of micrometeorite damage to Endeavour's heat shield.

Landing is scheduled for early next Wednesday. NASA will close out the

30-year shuttle program in July with one last flight by Atlantis.

As their spacewalk ended, Mission Control urged Feustel and Fincke to go back in, even though they were willing to tackle more chores.

"It's been a great day, a great (spacewalk), and we'd like you to finish up on a great note," Mission Control said.

Feustel and Fincke turned cable installers to carry out their job. The new power lines they installed ultimately tap into the space station's huge U.S. solar wings and provide a power backup to the Russian systems.

The astronauts also hooked up a grapple fixture for the space station's robot arm, putting it on the very first piece of the outpost, a Russian compartment launched in 1998. They also finished wiring up antennas, work left over from the first spacewalk.

Before stepping out in the wee hours of Wednesday morning, Feustel and Fincke tried a new spacewalk preparation method of light exercise. NASA officials said it was a success.

As for the much-anticipated photos of the shuttle-station complex taken from the departing Russian Soyuz capsule on Monday, flight director Derek Hassmann said everyone will have to wait another week. The camera images are still aboard the Soyuz in Kazakhstan, he said, and must be transported to Moscow before being processed and released.

The pictures will provide a historic postcard for the soon-to-conclude shuttle era.

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