

Can I come? Final shuttle crew besieged for favors

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In this Wednesday, June 29, 2011 photo, the crew of STS-135, from left, Chris Ferguson, Rex Walheim, Doug Hurley and Sandy Magnus review procedures on the mid-deck of the Crew Compartment Trainer (CCT) II mockup as they train at the Johnson Space Center, in Houston. The training marked the crew's final scheduled session in JSC Building 9, before space shuttle Atlantis' scheduled liftoff on July 8. (AP Photo/Houston Chronicle, Smiley N. Pool)
MANDATORY CREDIT

(AP) -- The four astronauts assigned to NASA's last space shuttle flight can't seem to escape all the fuss and hubbub.

With just eight days until Atlantis blasts off, the [astronauts](#) said Thursday they're still getting last-minute requests. Relatives, acquaintances and special-interest groups are all clamoring for launch tickets. And just about everyone wants the astronauts to take something

of theirs on the last shuttle ride.

At a news conference, commander Christopher Ferguson said there's so much hoopla surrounding this last mission that he can't wait to go into quarantine Friday. Shuttle crews always take up residence at Johnson Space Center in Houston a week before [liftoff](#) to avoid germs.

Ferguson and his crew will fly on the Fourth of July to [Kennedy Space Center](#) in Florida, where they'll remain in quarantine. Liftoff is set for 11:26 a.m. next Friday for the 12-day delivery mission to the [International Space Station](#).

Ferguson said he'll use the peace of quarantine to gather his thoughts, take some notes and do all the things that got lost in the excitement of the mission.

"Looking forward to a little bit of quiet time," he told reporters.

Even before the hourlong news conference began, photographers crowded the stage where Ferguson and his crewmates - all dressed in dark suits - sat at a long podium. Ferguson pulled out his cellphone and recorded a half-minute of video of the onslaught.

The commander said even though the 30-year shuttle program is ending he's not hoping for any launch delays that would stretch it out.

"Eight days away, it just sounds so final," he said in response to a reporter's question. "We're ready. We're trained."

Co-pilot Douglas Hurley said the astronauts have the easy part, sitting on the rocket and launching.

"It's real tough on your family and friends," he said.

Astronaut Rex Walheim said the crew has gotten lots more requests than usual for [NASA](#) passes to see the launch up close from within Kennedy Space Center. Each astronaut has more than 300 tickets, he said.

Veterans have put in requests, as well as sick children. Plus there are all the family, friends, co-workers, even casual acquaintances.

"It hasn't been easy, but I think we've done our best to try to be as fair and practical as possible," Walheim said.

The astronauts also have had to be pickier than usual about what personal souvenirs can take up on this last flight. They can't possibly carry up everything that everyone would like, so they're sticking to the typical handful of medallions, flags, banners, jewelry charms and the like.

Atlantis' journey to the space station, with a full load of food and other supplies, will mark the 135th [shuttle](#) flight. Making the trip with Ferguson, Hurley and Walheim will be Sandra Magnus.

The plan to retire NASA's three surviving shuttles was made seven years ago, a year after the Columbia tragedy. That was so NASA could focus more on outer space. The plan now is to send astronauts to an asteroid or Mars, while private companies take over ferrying cargo and astronauts to the space station.

Ferguson said he's put some thought recently to "why the emotion, why the passion" of closing out the [shuttle program](#). Saying goodbye to the shuttles, he said, is "like mourning a friend."

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