

Applause, but no tears in Mission Control at end

July 21 2011, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer



Johnson Space Center employees Jeremy Rea, right, and Shelley Stortz, left, hold hands as they watch space shuttle Atlantis land Thursday, July 21, 2011, in Houston. The landing of Atlantis brings the space shuttle program to an end. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

(AP) -- There was no crying in Mission Control.

And it took awhile before there were any signs of emotion from the steely engineers of that famous room that takes care of the astronauts from start to wheels-stop.

As the last [space shuttle](#) landed Thursday morning, the two dozen men and one woman in Mission Control stayed focused. Behind and above them in the VIP room, their families applauded when Atlantis touched down, but not the controllers themselves. They had to make sure the

shuttle and its crew of four were safe.

Their work only ends when the crew is out and Florida ground operations takes charge.

Now, this historic room - which has overseen more than 60 shuttle flights - will revert to a training center for future controllers for the [International Space Station](#). Thursday was a milestone that many had been dreading.

Before giving the final command to order Atlantis to fire its engines to come home, flight director Tony Ceccacci turned to his colleagues and told them: "Time to make our Mommas proud."

An hour after landing, the inevitable could no longer be avoided. It was time to let go.

"Hopefully, I can get through this," Ceccacci said, launching into a speech to his colleagues and others over NASA airwaves.

He couldn't. He choked up once, but then pushed through. Still no tears.

"The work done in this room, in this building, will never again be duplicated," he said.

"Savor the moment," Ceccacci said. "Soak it in. And know that you are the best. The best in the world. Your work here has made America and the world a better place. It's been an unbelievable and amazing journey."

Then came the applause, the hugs and handshakes. People took pictures, laughed and some had long wistful faces. Controllers kept giving the thumbs-up and tissues mostly stayed in the pocket.

They were under orders to keep dry eyes.

"You guys must know that we do have a motto in the Mission Control Center that flight controllers don't cry," Ceccacci had told reporters Wednesday. "So we're going to make sure we keep that."

Once control was given to Florida, the doors to Mission Control opened up and the sparsely populated room filled with scores of back room [flight controllers](#), former NASA engineers and top managers. More hugs followed. One woman was seen wiping her eyes. A chocolate iced cake with a large Atlantis on top of it was wheeled out. One flight controller's tie was even cut in a NASA tradition.

Cigars were tossed about the room. None were smoked because it's a no smoking room.

Mark Shelton of the Dallas area who has sent roses to Mission Control since 1988 came down with a large bouquet of white roses.

Norm Knight, who heads all the shuttle flight directors, kept giving the thumbs-up to his family in the viewing area. Up in that room, children played and a toddler watched from his mother's lap. On the giant television screen in the front of the room, patches from previous missions of Atlantis were displayed.

Ceccacci, who smiled and laughed and kept rolling a pen between his hands, soon separated himself from the throng that was now well beyond standing room only. He found his cloth bag and put his flight director headset away. While the hugging continued, he put away his briefing books and logged off his computer.

Each flight control office has its own toys as symbols. The team that plans crew activities keeps a large hourglass next to a shuttle model. On

Thursday, the time in the hourglass had run out.

In Florida, it was different. The tears flowed. Shuttle launch director Mike Leinbach describing the scene at the landing strip said, "I saw grown men and women crying today." He said they were tears of joy and "you couldn't suppress them."

At Johnson Space Center, Tammy Gafka, a NASA structural engineer, could have been at the [Mission Control](#) building, but chose to watch the landing with her husband and four small children at a viewing center set up by [NASA](#) on a grassy field on the space center's campus. A jumbo TV screen stood on top of a truck, memorabilia was given away and [astronauts](#) signed autographs. Lines formed where workers and their families could touch a moon rock and pose in a spacesuit.

Gafka and family had driven to Florida to watch Atlantis launch and decided to watch the landing together in the pre-dawn darkness, spread out on a blanket decorated with moon emblems.

"We just didn't want to regret not being here," she said. "It's kind of weird. It's like grief. It goes in waves."

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