

Space shuttle on verge of final landing

July 21 2011, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



This image provided by NASA shows the space shuttle Atlantis photographed from the International Space Station as the orbiting complex and the shuttle performed final separation of a space shuttle in the early hours of Tuesday July 19, 2011. The Raffaello multi-purpose logistics module, which transported tons of supplies to the complex, can be seen in the cargo bay. It is filled with different

materials from the station for return to Earth. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- Perfect weather awaited space shuttle Atlantis on Thursday for the very last landing of the 30-year program.

Atlantis' four astronauts shut the payload bay doors in the wee hours of the morning. That set them on a course toward an on-time touchdown at 5:56 a.m., just before dawn.

Commander Christopher Ferguson told Mission Control that this really was it.

NASA is ending its [shuttle program](#) with Atlantis' successful space station resupply mission. It is the 135th flight in shuttle history. This grand finale comes 50 years to the day that Gus Grissom became the second American in space, aboard Liberty Bell 7.

A record crowd of 2,000 was expected at NASA's landing strip to welcome Atlantis home.

It was to be a true homecoming for Atlantis, which first soared in 1985. The next-to-youngest in NASA's fleet will remain at [Kennedy Space Center](#) as a museum display.

Atlantis - the last of NASA's three surviving shuttles to retire - performed admirably during the 13-day flight.

It dropped off a full year's worth of food and other supplies at the [International Space Station](#), just in case upcoming deliveries get delayed.

The space station's international partners - Russia, Europe and Japan -

will continue to carry up cargo loads. And Russia will keep launching American astronauts to the orbiting lab until private industry is ready to fly people up in three to five years.

Several private companies are vying for the cargo runs and astronaut ferry flights. The front-runner hopes to make its first shipment of supplies by the end of this year.

A U.S. flag that flew on the first [shuttle flight](#) in 1981 and returned to orbit aboard Atlantis, is now at the [space](#) station. The first company to get astronauts there will claim the flag as a prize.

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

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