

Astronauts capture SpaceX's Dragon for station dock

May 25 2012, by Kerry Sheridan

Astronauts aboard the International Space Station reached out and caught SpaceX's Dragon capsule for docking at the orbiting lab on Friday in a historic first for commercial spaceflight.

The California-based SpaceX, owned by [Internet entrepreneur](#) Elon Musk, has now reached the climax of its test mission to become the first privately owned craft to reach the space station, restoring US access to the space outpost.

With no humans on board, the capsule is [delivering about a half ton of supplies](#) and science experiments for the ISS, and aims to return a slightly larger load of gear to Earth on May 31.

"It looks like we got us a Dragon by the tail," said US astronaut Don Pettit, who was operating the Canadian-built [robotic arm](#) from the space station as it reached out and hooked on to the unmanned SpaceX capsule at 9:56 am (1356 GMT).

The two spacecraft were traveling about 250 miles (402 kilometers) above northwest Australia at the time of the grab, [NASA](#) said.

Next, a formal berthing of the Dragon will bring the capsule closer to latch on at the station's Harmony module at around 1 pm (1700 GMT) so its cargo can be unloaded over the coming days, SpaceX said.

The Dragon is toting 521 kilograms (1,148 pounds) of goodies for the

space lab, including food, supplies, computers, utilities and [science experiments](#). It plans to return a 660-kilogram (1,455-pound) load to Earth.

A press conference is also scheduled for 1 pm (1700 GMT) to discuss more details on the mission.

The US [space shuttle program](#) ended last year, leaving only Russia capable of carrying [astronauts](#) to the ISS and the space agencies of Russia, Japan and Europe capable of cargo missions to service the \$100 billion space station.

SpaceX hopes its gumdrop-shaped Dragon capsule will be able to carry astronauts to the ISS in about three years' time.

The capsule blasted off atop the Falcon 9 rocket from [Cape Canaveral](#) in Florida on Tuesday.

"Once again SpaceX has done it. They have just become the first private company to successfully launch their own spacecraft and get captured by the [International Space Station](#) robotic arm," said a NASA commentator.

The demonstration flight has been near flawless, according to progress reports from NASA and SpaceX, after the launch marked what NASA, the White House and SpaceX officials described as a "new era" in [spaceflight](#).

In addition, a successful berthing mission opens the way for SpaceX's \$1.6 billion contract with NASA to supply the space station and return cargo to Earth in 12 missions over the coming years.

SpaceX and a handful of other companies are using their own funds but are also being helped in their endeavors with seed money from NASA to

build cargo and crew capability.

Both SpaceX and NASA have praised their newfound partnership, while insisting that any missteps that may occur are a necessary part of such demonstration missions.

While SpaceX is the first in its field, its competitor Orbital Sciences also has a \$1.9 billion contract with NASA to supply the space station and is scheduled for its first launch attempt later this year.

SpaceX is the brainchild of Musk, a 40-year-old billionaire who made his fortune founding a company that later merged with the PayPal online service, bought by Internet auction giant eBay for \$1.5 billion in 2002.

Today he leads [SpaceX](#), Tesla Motors -- a venture marketing electric cars -- and SolarCity, a company that makes solar panels for homes and businesses.

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