

Space shuttle Enterprise set to open to public

July 18 2012, by ALEX KATZ

(AP) — The last time some New Yorkers saw the space shuttle Enterprise, it was zipping around the city, riding piggyback on top of a modified jumbo jet past the Statue of Liberty and other local landmarks.

Others got to lay eyes on it as it sailed up the Hudson River on a barge.

Today, following its April and June sojourns, the piece of NASA history is on the move no more.

The Enterprise, a 150,000-pound (68,000-kilogram) mammoth of a flying machine, goes on public display Thursday at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum's new Space Shuttle Pavilion. Encased in the center of an accommodating inflatable dome, the shuttle will be available for visitors to admire up close from just feet away.

At 57 feet (17 meters) wide and 137 feet (41 meters) long — with a 78 foot (23.7 meter) wingspan to boot — the Enterprise is an imposing figure with quite a presence in its new home.

The space shuttle, which was completed in 1976, was NASA's first. Though it never actually flew a mission into outer space, it performed critical tests around the Earth's atmosphere and is widely credited with paving the way for five future shuttles.

Of the six shuttles NASA built, only four remain. The other two experienced disasters during their missions, killing their crews: The Challenger exploded in 1986 and the Columbia disintegrated in 2003.

President Richard Nixon first announced NASA's intention to construct the Enterprise in 1972 amid heightened tensions during the Cold War. With U.S. officials fearing the Soviet Union would dominate the novel realm of space travel, the Enterprise was designed to be a reusable spacecraft that could also land safely — allowing NASA to conduct launches more frequently and with greater efficiency.

Previous space crafts could neither land nor be reused for future missions.

When tests including the Enterprise began in 1977, the shuttle would sit atop a 747 carrier aircraft that helped get it off the ground. Once it reached an altitude hundreds of thousands of feet in the sky, the Enterprise would separate from the flight and two pilots would glide the shuttle for several minutes before making a smooth landing. This was thanks in part to an aerodynamically designed tail cone.

Fred Haise, an Apollo 13 astronaut who piloted the Enterprise on five flights, said flying the shuttle was "nearly perfect."

"It's something exciting, especially when you put five years of development into getting it ready," said Haise, 78.

Of the moment right after his first takeoff in the Enterprise, Haise said: "I was immediately happy and grateful."

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