

Navy returns NASA's Orion after test flight

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This Dec. 5, 2014 image provided by NASA shows NASA's Orion spacecraft after splash down as it awaits the U.S. Navy's USS Anchorage in the Pacific ocean. Orion launched into space on a two-orbit, 4.5-test flight at 7:05 am EST on Dec. 5, and safely splashed down in the Pacific Ocean, where a combined team from NASA, the Navy and Orion prime contractor Lockheed Martin retrieved it for return to shore on board the Anchorage. It is expected to be off loaded at Naval Base San Diego on Monday. (AP Photo/NASA)

NASA's new Orion spacecraft returned to dry land in Southern California after a test flight that ended with a plunge into the Pacific Ocean.

A Navy ship, the USS Anchorage, delivered the capsule to Naval Base San Diego and unloaded the 11-foot-tall cone around 10 p.m. Monday.

Orion made an unmanned flight Friday that carried it 3,600 miles above Earth to test the spacecraft's systems before it carries astronauts on deep space missions. During re-entry into the atmosphere, the spacecraft endured speeds of 20,000 mph and temperatures near 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

It parachuted into the ocean about 600 miles southwest of San Diego, where the ship picked it up.

NASA recovery director Jeremy Graeber called the mission a "great success" and said the recovery from the ocean was "flawless."

"It was quite a thing to see, because it was challenging to get to that point, and to see the orchestration work exactly as we laid it out was priceless," he said.

NASA and contractor Lockheed Martin Corp. assisted in Orion's recovery.

The spacecraft may one day carry astronauts to Mars, but its next trip will be on a truck that will carry it back to Cape Canaveral, Florida, in time for Christmas.

The next Orion flight, also unmanned, is four years away, and crewed flights at least seven years away given present budget constraints. But the Orion team—spread across the country and on the ocean, is hoping Friday's triumphant splashdown will pick up the momentum.

During the flight test, all 11 parachutes deployed and onboard computers withstood the intense radiation of the Van Allen belts surrounding Earth.

Everything meant to jettison away did so as Orion soared into space. It landed just a mile from its projected spot off Mexico's Baja Peninsula.

Data from 1,200 sensors inside and out of the crew module will be gathered to get the full picture of its performance.

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