

'Concrete block on your chest': astronauts recount failed space launch

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Aleksey Ovchinin and Nick Hague are now waiting for the results of a probe into why the Soyuz rocket malfunctioned

Russian cosmonaut Aleksey Ovchinin on Tuesday said the G-force during last week's emergency landing of the Soyuz spacecraft felt like a

concrete block on his chest but he and NASA astronaut Nick Hague are now in "great" health.

Ovchinin and Hague were forced to make an emergency landing after an accident on their rocket minutes after blast-off to the International Space Station, with the rapid deceleration subjecting them to a painful G-force overload.

In an interview with state Rossiya-24 television, Ovchinin said that "the direction of this (G-force) overload during the descent was from the chest to the back, so imagine that somebody put a big concrete block on your chest that is seven times your weight."

The 47-year-old cosmonaut who has already flown into space once before in 2016, nevertheless said that the G-force was "not that big, a bit less than 7G."

7G is below what cosmonauts have to withstand during training and has not caused long-term ill-effects.

"I am feeling well, so is my colleague, US astronaut Nick Hague," Ovchinin said.

"The doctors concluded that our health is good, even great."

Hague said he first noticed "being shaken fairly violently side to side as that safety system pulled us away from the rocket."

Both are now waiting for the results of an investigation into why the Soyuz rocket malfunctioned and never made it to the International Space Station, forcing Ovchinin to command a ballistic descent back to Earth amid a communication breakdown with mission control.

Ovchinin said he and Hague understood something was wrong when emergency lights came on in the cabin.

"Your training really takes over," Hague told reporters during a Q&A streamed online by NASA.

"For the most part, the rescue system worked automatically, and we just followed the system," according to Ovchinin.

In footage of the flight released by the Russian space agency Roscosmos Ovchinin can be heard calmly telling mission control that there has been an "accident" and even quipping about a particularly "short flight" before the feed is cut off.

"There was no time to be nervous, because we had to work," he said.

"We had to go through the steps that crew has to take and prepare for emergency landing ... so that the crew is still functioning after landing."

NASA's Hague has already flown back to the United States following the landing, after undergoing a medical check and being questioned about the accident.

He is of course disappointed not to be in space, having trained two years for the mission.

"I was supposed to be doing a spacewalk two days from now," he said.
"But life doesn't always give you a vote."

"When NASA wants me to fly, I'm ready to go," he said, including aboard the Soyuz, currently the only vehicle capable of taking humans into space.

The failure "only helped to solidify my appreciation for how robust that system is," Hague said. "That system hadn't been tested in 35 years, but we tested it last week, and it's ready."

"That's a testament to the commitment and the perseverance and the attention to the details" of the teams involved with Soyuz, he said.

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