

NASA's latest astronaut graduates almost half women

January 10 2020, by Julia Benarrous With Issam Ahmed In Washington



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NASA on Friday honored its latest class of graduating astronauts in a ceremony at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, a diverse and gender-balanced group now qualified for spaceflight missions including

America's return to the Moon and eventual journey to Mars.

After completing more than two years of basic training, the six women and seven men were chosen from a record-breaking 18,000 applicants representing a wide variety of backgrounds and specialties, from experienced pilots to scientists, engineers and doctors.

The group includes two candidates from the Canadian Space Agency (CSA), which has participated in a joint training program with the US since 1983.

"They are the best of the best: they are highly qualified and very diverse, and they represent all of America," said NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine.

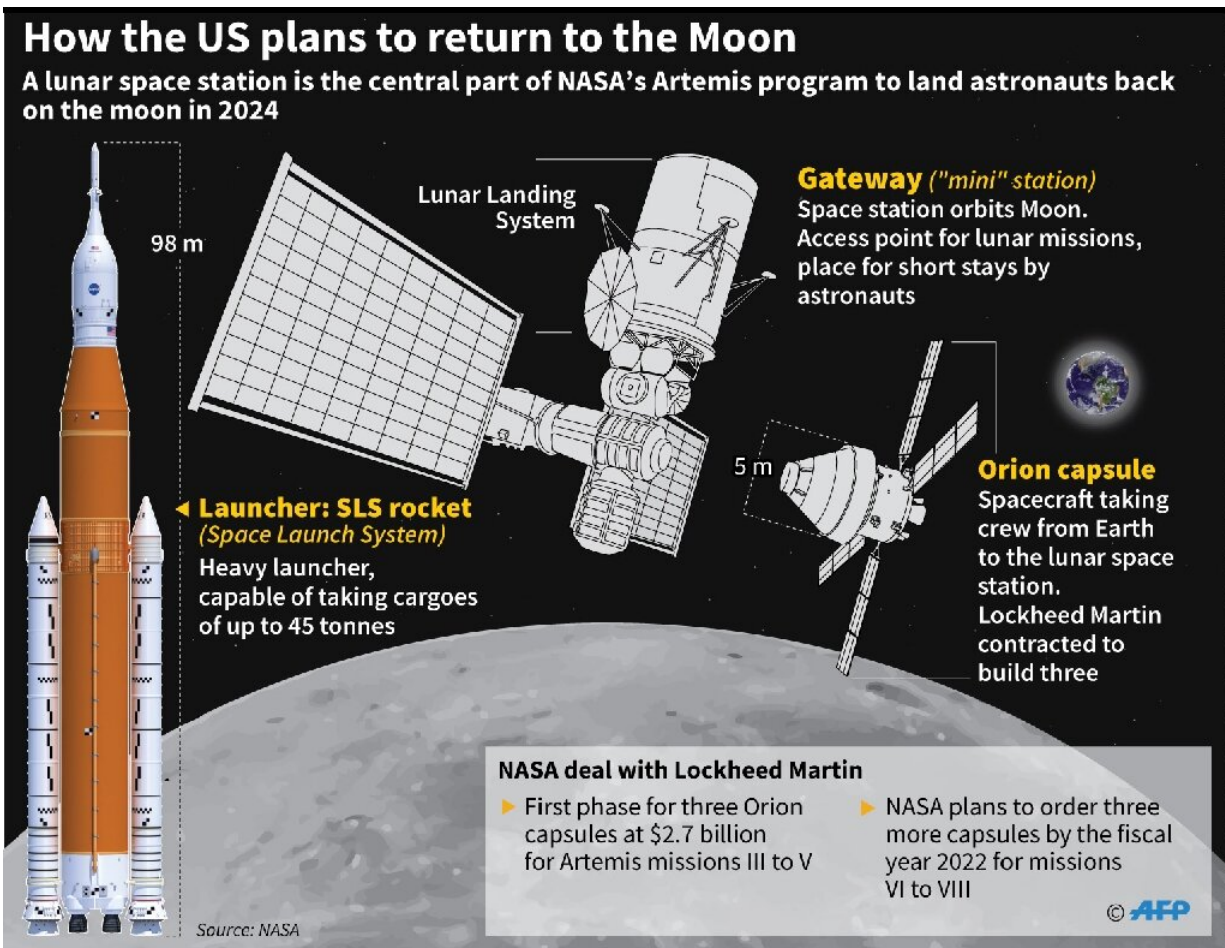
They include five people of color, including the first Iranian-American astronaut Jasmin Moghbeli who flew combat missions in Afghanistan and holds an engineering degree from MIT.

The group, known as the "Turtles", wore blue flight jumpsuits and took turns approaching the podium to receive their astronaut pins, as one of their classmates paid tribute to their character and shared playful and heartfelt anecdotes.

After being selected in 2017, the class completed training in spacewalking at NASA's underwater Neutral Buoyancy Lab, robotics, the systems of the International Space Station, piloting the T-38 training jet and Russian language lessons.

They are the first to graduate since NASA announced the Artemis program to return to the Moon by 2024, this time on its [south pole](#), as the US plans to place the next man and first woman on lunar soil and set up an orbital space station.

Part of the group's training therefore included studying the building blocks of that program, which are still being developed: the Space Launch System rocket, the Orion crew capsule and the gateway space station.



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Elite group

Astronauts play an active role in the development of spacecraft, and the current group will eventually join the ranks of the approximately 500 people in history who have journeyed into space.

The group's diversity stands in contrast to the early years of space exploration, long dominated by white men (including all 12 people who have walked on the Moon), until Sally Ride became the first American woman in [space](#) in 1983 and Guion Bluford the first black astronaut the same year.

It includes Indian-American Raja Chari, an Air Force colonel and aeronautical engineer; Jessica Watkins, who holds a doctorate in geology from UCLA and is the class's only black woman; Frank Rubio, a medical doctor and Blackhawk pilot; and Jonny Kim, a decorated Navy SEAL and emergency physician, who holds both a doctorate in medicine from Harvard and a mathematics degree.

Asked about the difficulties she faced in her career, Moghbeli said some had questioned her choices when she decided to join the military after graduating from MIT.

"In a post-September 11 world, did my parents think I was crazy? Yes, I'm pretty sure they did," she said, but added that her family then gave her their full support.

"It's because of that that I'm here today, and I think everyone feels similarly, but—that being said—there will always be people out there that doubt.

"When I was a sixth grader and said I was going to become an astronaut, do you think everyone was like, 'Yep, she's going to become an astronaut?' Probably not."

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