

NASA's newest test pilots are veteran astronauts, friends

May 22 2020, by Marcia Dunn



In this Jan. 17, 2020 photo made available by SpaceX, NASA astronauts Bob Behnken, left, and Doug Hurley, wearing SpaceX spacesuits, walk through the Crew Access Arm connecting the launch tower to the SpaceX Crew Dragon spacecraft during a dress rehearsal at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. For their May 27, 2020 mission, Hurley will be in charge of launch and landing and Behnken will oversee rendezvous and docking at the International Space Station. (SpaceX via AP)

The two astronauts who will test drive SpaceX's brand new rocketship are classmates and friends, veteran spacefliers married to veteran spacefliers, and fathers of young sons.

Together, they will end a nine-year drought for NASA when they blast into orbit next week from Florida's Kennedy Space Center.

Retired Marine Col. Doug Hurley will be in charge of launch and landing, a fitting assignment for the pilot of NASA's last space shuttle flight.

Air Force Col. Bob Behnken, a mechanical engineer with six spacewalks on his resume, will oversee rendezvous and docking at the International Space Station.

Hurley, 53, and Behnken, 49, are NASA's first test pilot crew in decades.

"It's probably a dream of every test pilot school student to have the opportunity to fly on a brand new spaceship, and I'm lucky enough to get that opportunity with my good friend," Behnken said.

Their flight will mark the return of NASA astronaut launches to the U.S., the first by a private company.

They've got Robert Crippen's respect. Crippen and the late John Young rode NASA's first space shuttle, Columbia, into orbit on April 12, 1981. Their two-day flight was especially dangerous: It was the first launch of a shuttle, with no dry run in space in advance.



In this Thursday, March 19, 2020 photo made available by SpaceX, astronauts Doug Hurley, foreground, and Bob Behnken work in SpaceX's flight simulator at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., as SpaceX teams in Firing Room 4 at Kennedy Space Center and the company's Mission Control in Hawthorne, Calif., along with NASA flight controllers in Mission Control Houston, run a full simulation of launch and docking of the Crew Dragon spacecraft. (SpaceX via AP)

While SpaceX's Dragon crew capsule and its escape system have already been demonstrated in flight—with mannequins—there are no guarantees.

In spaceflight, there never are.

"So both Doug and Bob, I think, they're brave gentlemen and I admire both of them," Crippen said.

SpaceX President Gwynne Shotwell also has high praise for Hurley and Behnken, who have worked closely with her company for the past several years. She made sure employees knew them not only as "badass" astronauts and test pilots, but dads and husbands.

"I wanted to bring some humanity to this very deeply technical effort as well," she said.

Hurley and Behnken are married to fellow members of their 2000 astronaut class at NASA: newly retired Karen Nyberg and Megan McArthur. Each couple has one child, boys 10 and 6.

Being married to an astronaut, both men acknowledged, has made it easier in the unexpectedly long run-up to their SpaceX flight. Their wives and sons joined them in quasi-quarantine back home in Houston in mid-March when the coronavirus hit, so they're able to travel to Kennedy for the customary countdown farewells. The pandemic slashed the rest of their guest lists.



In this August 2018 photo made available by SpaceX, NASA astronauts Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken familiarize themselves with SpaceX's Crew Dragon, the spacecraft that will transport them to the International Space Station as part of NASA's Commercial Crew Program, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. (SpaceX via AP)

While their quarantine has been the longest of any space crew, it allowed them to spend more time with their sons with the schools closed—"a tiny bit of sliver of silver lining," Behnken noted.

At Friday's press briefing—conducted remotely—Behnken said he's thankful he's flying with Hurley "because he's going to be prepared for whatever comes our way." Hurley, meanwhile, had this to say about Behnken: "He's already got it all figured out, everything that we could possibly, potentially deal with."

On launch day, the astronauts anticipate not so much nervousness as a heightened awareness of "what can happen to you at any given point," Behnken told reporters earlier this month.

Hurley considers a capsule a safe, "pretty tried and true" design. He particularly likes the Dragon's launch pad-to-orbit abort capability to save a crew in an emergency, something NASA's shuttles lacked.



This undated photo made available by SpaceX shows NASA astronaut Bob Behnkin during training exercises in Hawthorne, Calif. (Ashish Sharma via AP)

Unlike shuttle, though, the Falcon 9 rocket will be fueled—a hazardous operation—with the astronauts already on board.

Hurley, who grew up in Apalachin, New York, never thought he'd be next up when he climbed out of Atlantis on July 21, 2011, bringing the

30-year space shuttle program to a close.

If someone had suggested that, "I would have laughed at them," he said.

Hurley and Behnken—both two-time space shuttle fliers—were among four astronauts chosen in 2015 for NASA's commercial crew program. At the time, Behnken was serving as chief of NASA's astronaut corps and the only way to and from the space station was on Russian rockets.

All four trained on both SpaceX and Boeing's crew capsules, before NASA assigned Hurley and Behnken to Elon Musk's SpaceX, which soon surged ahead of Boeing in the race to fly first.



In this Nov. 13, 2019 photo made available by SpaceX, NASA astronauts Doug Hurley, left, and Bob Behnken, seated at consoles inside SpaceX Mission Control in Hawthorne, Calif., monitor the Crew Dragon spacecraft static fire engine tests taking place at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida.

(SpaceX via AP)



In this Monday evening, March 10, 2008 file photo, STS-123 mission specialists Takao Doi of Japan, left, Robert Behnken, foreground right, and Richard Linnehan, partially obscured, wave as they leave the Operations and Checkout Building with fellow space shuttle Endeavour crew members at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)



In this Friday, July 8, 2011 file photo, the crew of the space shuttle Atlantis, from left, mission specialists Rex Walheim and Sandy Magnus, pilot Doug Hurley and commander Chris Ferguson, leave the operations and check-out building on the way to the pad at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Atlantis was the 135th and final space shuttle launch for NASA. (AP Photo/Terry Renna)



In this Friday, May 20, 2011 file photo, NASA astronaut Doug Hurley feeds his son, Jack, at their home in Houston, as his wife, fellow astronaut Karen Nyberg, prepares to leave for training in Russia. Nyberg traveled to the International Space Station on a Russian Soyuz launch for May 2013's Expedition 36 as a flight engineer. Hurley would pilot STS-135, the final space shuttle mission. "We are no more unique than any other of the millions of couples out there that are doing the same thing every day," Hurley said. "The difference being, I guess if there's one, it's that ultimately we end up riding a rocket every now and again." (Smiley N. Pool/Houston Chronicle via AP)



In this Friday, July 22, 2011 file photo, STS-135 pilot Doug Hurley holds his son, Jack, as he walks across the tarmac with his wife, fellow astronaut Karen Nyberg, as members of the crew of the space shuttle Atlantis, the final mission of the NASA shuttle program, arrive at Ellington Field in Houston. "We are no more unique than any other of the millions of couples out there that are doing the same thing every day," Hurley said. "The difference being, I guess if there's one, it's that ultimately we end up riding a rocket every now and again." (Smiley N. Pool/Houston Chronicle via AP)



In this Wednesday, May 20, 2020 file photo, neighbors in Seabrook, Texas wave farewell to astronaut Bob Behnken as he departs for Florida for the upcoming launch of the SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. Behnken and fellow NASA test pilot Doug Hurley are scheduled to blast off May 27 from the same pad where the space shuttle last soared in 2011. (Mark Mulligan/Houston Chronicle via AP)



In this Friday, May 20, 2011 file photo, NASA astronaut Doug Hurley says goodbye to his wife, astronaut Karen Nyberg, as she leaves Houston for training in Russia. At right is their 15-month-old son, Jack. The two-astronaut family isn't something that the early astronauts would have considered, especially one where the family was separated for months at a time as one spouse trained in a foreign country. Women didn't join the NASA Astronaut corps until 1978, and it was 1983 before Sally Ride launched on the shuttle to become the first American woman in space. (Smiley N. Pool/Houston Chronicle via AP)



This undated photo made available by SpaceX shows NASA astronaut Bob Behnken at SpaceX headquarters in Hawthorne, Calif. (SpaceX via AP)



This undated photo made available by SpaceX shows NASA astronaut Doug Hurley at SpaceX headquarters in Hawthorne, Calif. (SpaceX via AP)

That put Hurley ahead of his former shuttle commander, Chris Ferguson, now working for Boeing and assigned to the first Starliner capsule crew.

"Most fighter pilots are very competitive by nature, so we maybe silently had a competition between each other to some degree," Hurley said. "But I think we also realized the bigger picture."

Behnken was inspired by photos of Jupiter and Saturn from NASA's Voyager spacecraft while growing up in St. Ann, Missouri.

Now, he's excited "to bring human spaceflight back to the Florida coast."

© 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: NASA's newest test pilots are veteran astronauts, friends (2020, May 22) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-05-nasa-veteran-astronauts-friends.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.