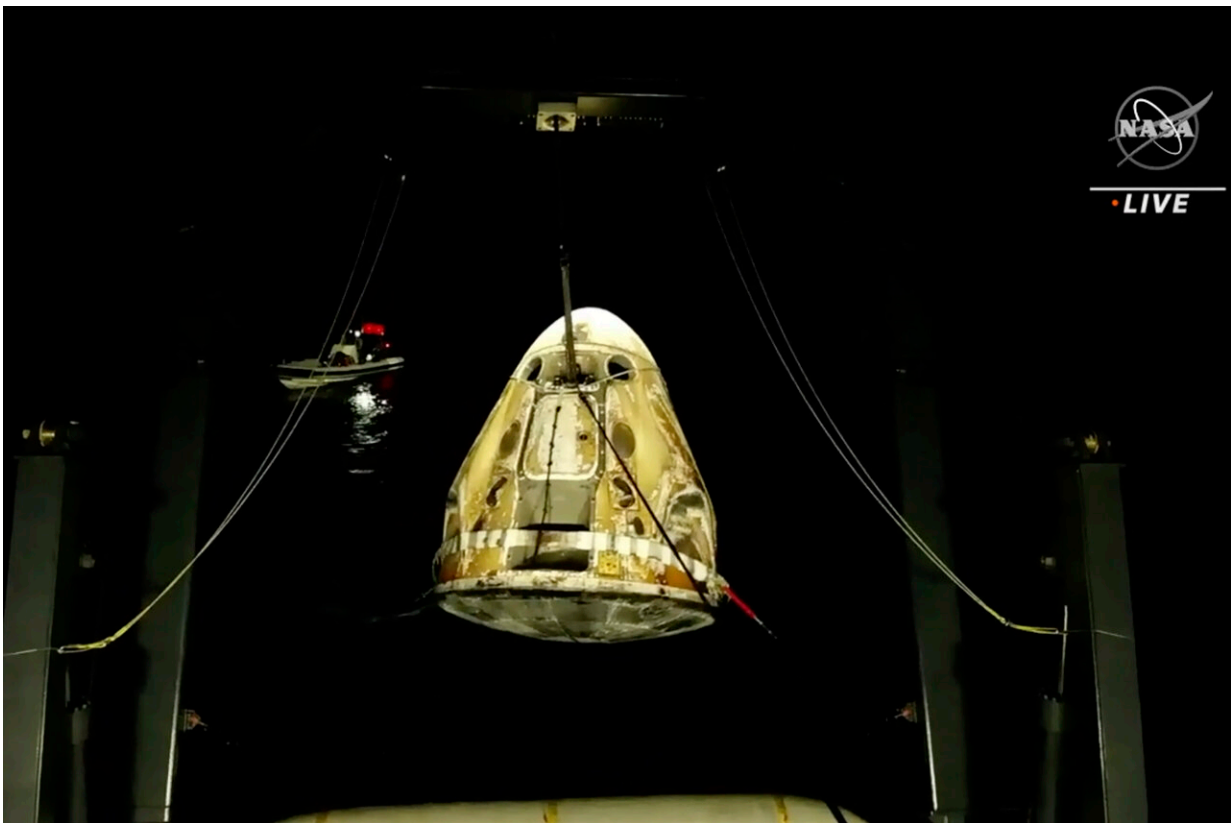


SpaceX brings 4 astronauts home, then launches 53 satellites

May 6 2022, by Marcia Dunn



In this image made from video supplied by NASA, SpaceX Dragon space capsule is lifted out of the water after splashing down in the Gulf of Mexico early Friday, May 6, 2022. NASA's Raja Chari, Tom Marshburn and Kayla Barron, and the European Space Agency's Matthias Maurer undocked from the International Space Station less than 24 hours earlier. Credit: NASA via AP

SpaceX brought four astronauts home with a midnight splashdown in the Gulf of Mexico on Friday, capping the busiest stretch yet for Elon Musk's taxi service.

The three U.S. astronauts and one German in the capsule were bobbing off the Florida coast, near Tampa, less than 24 hours after leaving the International Space Station. NASA expected to have them back in Houston later in the morning.

"That was a great ride," said Raja Chari, the capsule commander. As for the reintroduction to gravity, he noted: "Only one complaint. These water bottles are super heavy."

NASA's Chari, Tom Marshburn and Kayla Barron, and the European Space Agency's Matthias Maurer, were out of the capsule within an hour of splashdown, waving and giving thumbs-up as they were hustled away on rolling chaises for medical checks.

Their departure from the space station Thursday was bittersweet, as they embraced the seven astronauts remaining there.

"It's the end of a six-month mission, but I think the space dream lives on," Maurer said.

SpaceX brought up their U.S. and Italian replacements last week, after completing a charter trip to the station for a trio of businessmen earlier in April.

That amounts to two crew launches and two splashdowns in barely a month. Musk's company has now launched 26 people into orbit in less than two years, since it started ferrying astronauts for NASA. Eight of those 26 were space tourists.



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SpaceX's William Gerstenmaier, a vice president, acknowledges it's "a pretty exciting time."

Barely five hours after splashdown, the company founded by Musk in 2002 launched a fresh batch of its own internet satellites known as Starlinks from Cape Canaveral. There were 53 of the mini flat-panel satellites in this predawn load.

"Satellites are nice, but flying people are a little special and a little bit different, and the team here sure understands that," he told reporters. "There's a sense of relief and and a sense of accomplishment that you know you've done something good."

NASA is more impressed than ever, given SpaceX's unprecedented pace. The only problem of note in the latest flight was a mechanical nut that wiggled loose and floated away from the SpaceX capsule following Thursday's undocking. Officials assured everyone it would not pose a danger to the space station.



In this photo made available by NASA, four commercial crew astronauts, from left, European Space Agency astronaut Matthias Maurer and NASA astronauts Tom Marshburn, Raja Chari and Kayla Barron pose for a photo in their Dragon spacesuits during a fit check aboard the International Space Station's Harmony

module on April 21, 2022. SpaceX brought the four astronauts home with a splashdown in the Gulf of Mexico early Friday, May 6, capping the busiest month yet for Elon Musk's taxi service. Credit: NASA via AP

"Look at all this work in the last month," said Kathy Lueders, NASA's space operations mission chief. "I really want to personally thank SpaceX for just, wow, just performing such seamless operations on all those missions."

The astronauts said their mission was highlighted by the three visitors and their ex-astronaut escort who dropped by in April, opening up NASA's side of the station to paying guests after decades of resistance.

On the down side, they had to contend with a dangerous spike in space junk after Russia blew up a satellite in a missile test in mid-November. More than 1,500 pieces of shrapnel spread across Earth's orbit for years to come.

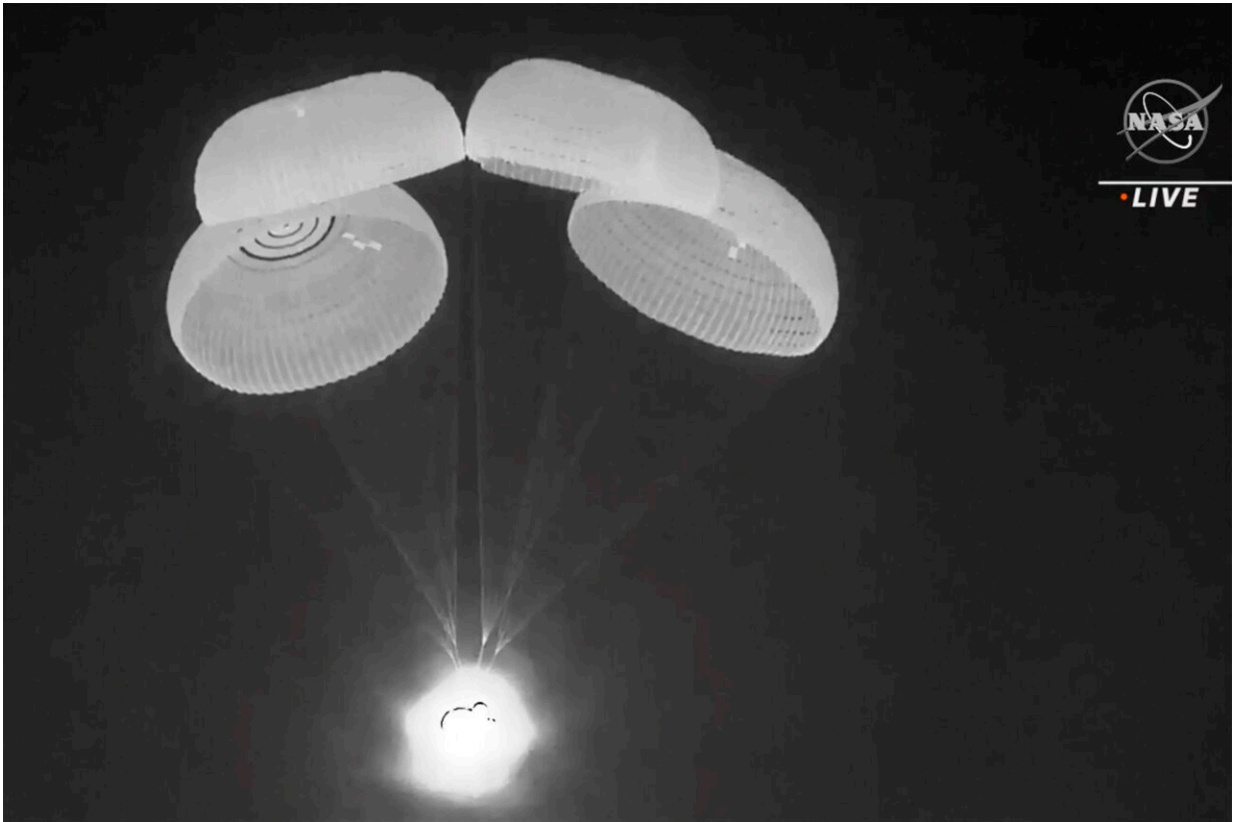
While the war in Ukraine has caused tensions between the U.S. and Russia, the astronauts have stood by their Russian crewmates, and vice versa. Flight controllers in Houston and Moscow also continued to cooperate as always, according to NASA officials.



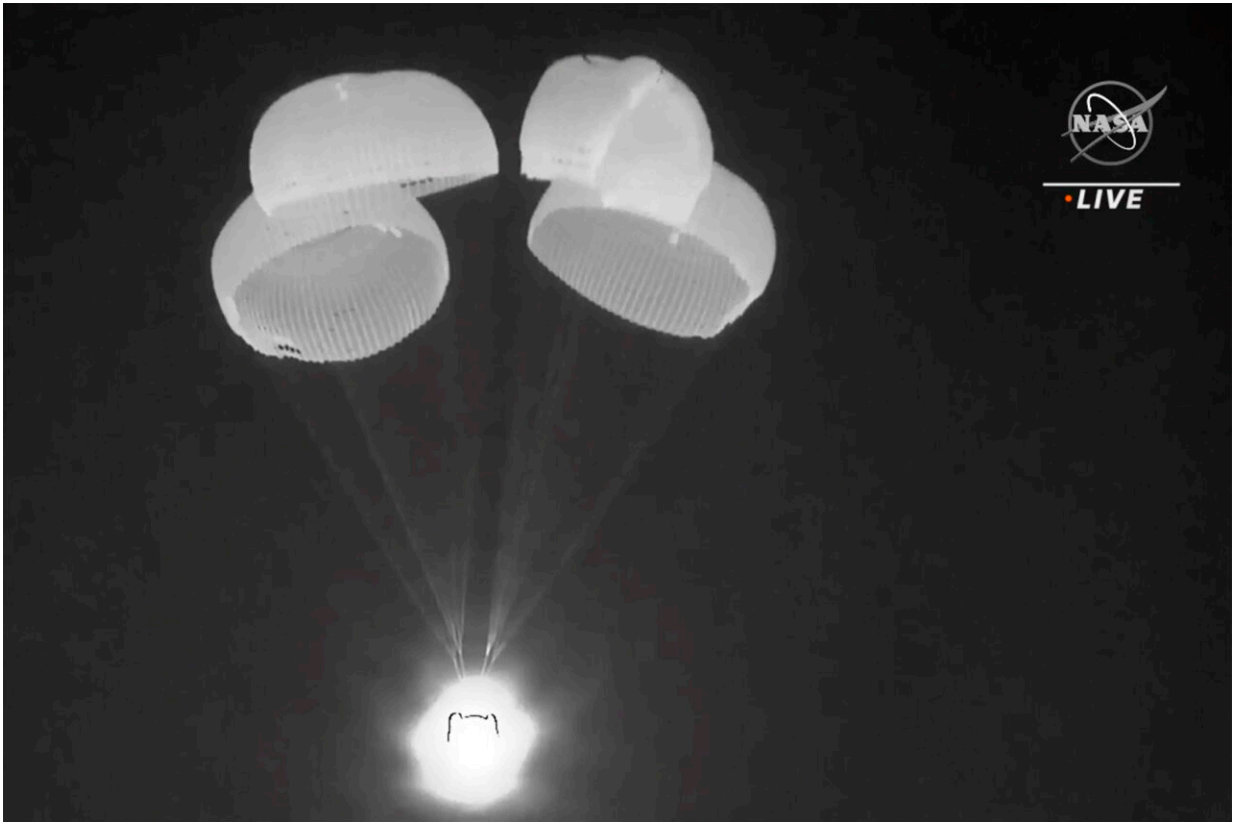
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In this image made from video supplied by NASA, SpaceX Dragon capsule uses parachutes as it descends in the Gulf of Mexico early Friday, May 6, 2022. NASA's Raja Chari, Tom Marshburn and Kayla Barron, and the European Space Agency's Matthias Maurer undocked from the International Space Station less than 24 hours earlier. Credit: NASA via AP



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In a photo provided by NASA, the SpaceX capsule spacecraft lands in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Tampa, Fla, early Friday, May 6, 2022. NASA's Raja Chari, Tom Marshburn and Kayla Barron, and the European Space Agency's Matthias Maurer returned after six months on the International Space Station. Credit: Aubrey Gemignani/NASA via AP

As he relinquished command of the space station earlier this week, Marshburn called it "a place of peace" and said international cooperation would likely be its lasting legacy. Russian Oleg Artemyev, the new commander, also emphasized the "peace between our countries, our friendship" in orbit and described his crewmates as brothers and sisters.

Up there now are three Russians, three Americans and one Italian.

It was Marshburn's third spaceflight, and the first for the three returning with him. Chari and Barron's next stop could be the moon; they are among 18 U.S. astronauts picked for NASA's Artemis moon-landing program. Two others in that elite group are now at the space station.

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