

Astronauts arrive at Kennedy Space Center as first crew for Boeing's Starliner spacecraft

April 27 2024, by Richard Tribou, Orlando Sentinel



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

It's not just another ride for a pair of veteran NASA astronauts who arrived to the Space Coast ahead of their flight onboard Boeing's CST-100 Starliner.

Barry "Butch" Wilmore and Sunita "Sunni" Williams, who both joined

NASA's astronaut corps more than two decades ago, will be the commander and pilot for the Crew Flight Test [mission](#) of the much-delayed spacecraft.

It's set to launch with humans on board for the first time atop an Atlas V rocket from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station's Space Launch Complex 41 on May 6 at 10:34 p.m., headed to the International Space Station.

The pair flew into KSC in their T-38 jets, landing at the former space shuttle landing facility Thursday afternoon and speaking with reporters ahead of the vanguard mission.

"This mission going off well? Of course we want it to do that," said Wilmore from the tarmac. "Do we expect it to go perfectly? This is the first human flight of the spacecraft. I'm sure we'll find things out. That's why we do this. This is a [test flight](#). When you do test, you expect to find things. And we expect to find things."

Wilmore, who was part of NASA's 2000 astronaut class, was the pilot for STS-129 on board Space Shuttle Atlantis for an 11-day mission in 2009 and then stayed on board the ISS for nearly five months from 2014–2015. Williams was part of NASA's 1998 astronaut class and had two long-term stays on board the ISS, first flying in 2006 on Space Shuttle Discovery on STS-116 and flying home on Space Shuttle Atlantis on STS-117 in 2007 after 192 days in space. She then flew on a Soyuz in 2012 for a four-month stay on board.

This is the third trip to space for both, but the pair are not resting on their laurels with 11 days to go before launch. Wilmore said the coming days could be summed up in three words.

"Review, review, and review—everything we've been working on.

There's so much into this, there's a fair amount of responsibility, obviously, that we hold," he said. "We are ready. But we want to stay ready. We've got a week to continue to make sure that there's not a single event that we have prepared for that we're not ready for."

This marks only the sixth new U.S.-based spacecraft to carry humans following Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, the space shuttle and the most recent entrant, SpaceX's Crew Dragon. Dragon's first human spaceflight came nearly four years ago, launching May 30, 2020, with its own pair of veteran NASA astronauts, Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley.

Williams said she got a pep talk from Behnken.

"I just got a text from Bob last night, and he was pretty pumped that we were coming down here. He was like, "I'm reliving it in my mind where we were," she said. "He gives us his best and is ready for us to go fly."

SpaceX and Boeing had been running fairly close in development at the end of the last decade as one of two companies NASA awarded contracts for under its Commercial Crew Program. The goal of the program was to replace U.S.-based flights after the end of the Space Shuttle Program in 2011, which forced a reliance on Russia for flights to the ISS on board Soyuz spacecraft.

Starliner, though, ran into trouble on its first uncrewed test flight in December 2019 and was not able to rendezvous with the ISS, forcing a major overhaul of Boeing's program including hardware, software and management changes. That led to the successful redo of that uncrewed test flight in 2022, but further hardware delays have now made it so next month's planned launch will come more than four years behind schedule.

Since then, SpaceX has proceeded full bore, having now flown 50 humans to space onboard its fleet of four Crew Dragon spacecraft on 13

missions, and has three more on the schedule to fly before the end of the year.

Wilmore said Starliner took longer, but it's time.

"We've had a few delays because we weren't ready," he said. "There are literally 1,000 events that are taking place simultaneously as you step up and get prepared to launch and during the launch sequence, and then the spacecraft itself when we're on orbit."

But he's adamant all the parts are in place.

"There's so much going on. It is not easy. I think we make it look easy. That's our goal," he said. "We want the general public to think it's easy, but it's not. It's way hard. We wouldn't be here if we weren't ready. We are ready. The spacecraft's ready. And the teams are ready."

Boeing's CFT mission now aims for about an eight-day stay on board the ISS. The major goals for its crew are to test out both docking backup systems on approach and landing operations when it heads back to Earth, which will feature a parachute-assisted touchdown in the western U.S., unlike the watery splashdowns off the Florida coast taken by SpaceX's Crew Dragon.

If successful, it lines Boeing up to begin operational missions to the ISS as early as February 2025. That first mission, dubbed Starliner-1, has three of its four crew members already named.

Boeing is contracted for six crew rotation mission through the end of the ISS's operation as early as 2030. SpaceX and Boeing would transition to sharing one mission each per year for NASA until the ISS is decommissioned.

For her part, Williams pumped up Starliner's role in the NASA program now, as well as its role with NASA's future Artemis program missions on the Orion spacecraft.

"It has a lot of similar things that Orion has," she said. "So I think if I was a young astronaut, and I was thinking about going to the moon, I think I'd put my hand up and say I want to fly Starliner."

2024 Orlando Sentinel. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Astronauts arrive at Kennedy Space Center as first crew for Boeing's Starliner spacecraft (2024, April 27) retrieved 12 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-04-astronauts-kennedy-space-center-crew.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.