

Shuttle program's final 4 astronauts riding high

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The space shuttle Atlantis astronauts left to right, mission specialists Rex Walheim, 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 Friday, July 8, 2011, in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Atlantis is the 135th and final space shuttle launch for NASA. (AP Photo/Terry Renna)

(AP) -- Four astronauts are taking space shuttle Atlantis for one last spin - the very last one of the 30-year space shuttle era.

It's the smallest crew since the early shuttle flights - usually there are six or seven. The size was necessitated by the need to use [Russian Soyuz](#) capsules in case commander Christopher Ferguson and his crew get stranded aboard the International Space Station.

With the other two shuttles already retired, there isn't another one left to rescue the Atlantis astronauts if their ship were severely damaged in flight.

Joining Ferguson on the 12-day flight are co-pilot Douglas Hurley, Rex Walheim and Sandra Magnus, experienced space fliers all.

"We all want to be able to remember this," Ferguson said. "We want to be able to pass to our children and our children's children that we were fortunate enough to be a part of the space shuttle."

A brief look at the crew:

With only four on board, commander Christopher Ferguson likes to point out that this is a retro astronaut crew. NASA hasn't had such a small space shuttle crew since the sixth flight in 1983.

That explains the black suits that the astronauts wore for their formal preflight news conference. Ferguson couldn't resist, especially given his co-pilot's Project Mercury-throwback flattop cut. (Pilot Douglas Hurley's a Marine.)

"No solemnity with this event," Ferguson insisted. "It's a celebration. Thirty years."

He scoffs at those who said they shunned NASA's last [shuttle launch](#) because they perceived it as a funeral. But he acknowledges it's like mourning a friend.

"We personify the shuttle. It's a living, breathing entity to a lot of us. They have their quirks," he said.

"You hate to let your first car go because it meant so much to you, and it

hurts to let the space shuttle go."

Ferguson, 49, grew up in Philadelphia, delivering the daily Inquirer as a boy. He joined the Navy and became a fighter pilot, attending the famed Topgun school. From there, it was on to test pilot training.

NASA chose him as an astronaut in 1998. This is his third space shuttle flight. The retired Navy captain wants to stick around NASA to help with the next step in human exploration, whatever it may be.

"Space business is in my blood," he said. He would love to see astronauts go to Mars, "the Holy Grail in the near term."

Wife Sandra - "a closet space geek," according to her husband - is a full-time mom to their three teenage children.

Pilot Douglas Hurley says there have been a series of "lasts" in the nine months of training leading up to this final flight of the space shuttle program.

"It's a little bit sobering to really think that, yeah, we're done flying shuttles after July," he said.

Hurley, 44, a colonel in the Marines and former fighter pilot, is making his second spaceflight since becoming an astronaut in 2000.

He's married to astronaut Karen Nyberg, who is training for a six-month mission at the International Space Station in another two years. Their son is 17 months old.

Hurley said he's considering a space station stint himself further down

the road.

In the off chance that Atlantis was damaged seriously at launch, Hurley would be the one to camp out at the orbiting outpost for a year, awaiting a ride home in a Russian capsule. He was chosen to be last because of his robotic arm-operating and spacewalking skills.

Once back on Earth, Hurley wants to help with the new rocketships that will replace the shuttles, either the commercial variety intended to fly to orbit or NASA's proposed heavy launchers that could lift crews and cargo to an asteroid or Mars.

"People talk about this period of transition, but there's a lot of potential with where we're going," he said.

Hurley calls Apalachin, N.Y., home. He enjoys hunting and cycling, and is wild about NASCAR. His cousin is married to NASCAR crew chief Greg Zipadelli.

Flight engineer Rex Walheim knows Atlantis inside and out. Every time he rockets into space - this is the third - it's on Atlantis.

He enjoys taking a whiff when he climbs aboard. "It smells like Atlantis ... it feels good to be home."

An experienced spacewalker, Walheim will direct the single spacewalk planned for this mission, from inside the International Space Station. The two Americans living at the outpost will be the ones to venture out, in a departure from past shuttle visits.

Walheim, 48, a retired Air Force colonel, got his start inside Mission

Control. He worked as a flight controller and operations engineer at Johnson Space Center in the late 1980s, following the Challenger launch disaster.

By the early 1990s, Walheim was studying flight engineering at the Air Force test pilot school and a few years later, teaching there. NASA picked him as an astronaut in 1996. It seemed a miracle to this San Carlos, Calif.-bred son of a B-17, World War II-era pilot. He'd been rejected as a military pilot because of a heart murmur, only to learn years later he was fine.

"I'm a window seat kind of guy. I love riding in a window seat in an airline to this day," Walheim said. "Boy, the best window seat in the world is the space shuttle window."

His graphic artist wife Margie designed the mission patch, which features the Greek letter omega, symbolic of finality.

They have two sons, ages 13 and 14.

"I really want to be upbeat and I want it to be a celebration instead of sad," he said of the shuttle's closing chapter. "The way I like to look at it is that the legacy of the space shuttle lives on. So instead of just looking at the shuttle stopping, you look at what it's done."

Astronaut Sandra Magnus hates whenever someone points out she's the last woman to fly on the space shuttle.

"It's kind of a soft, little milestone, right? The last woman on the [space shuttle](#)," she said. "But I'm not the last woman to fly in space, ever."

Magnus, 46, a scientist from Belleville, Ill. is one of eight women who have lived on the [International Space Station](#), with more to come even as the shuttle program ends. Her 4 1/2-month mission straddled 2008 and 2009.

This is her third spaceflight.

She's the transfer czar, as her crewmates call her, responsible for making sure all the supplies carried up aboard Atlantis get onto the space station, and all the junk ends up on Atlantis for the trip home. She'll rely on a color-coded system for the hundreds of items that need to be moved: yellow for sun and staying aloft, green for Earth and coming home, blue for food.

She also will also be one of the prime robot arm operators.

Magnus said she has no idea whether she'll sign on for another long-term space station mission or whether she'll even stay with NASA after Atlantis returns in two weeks.

"I've always wanted to be an astronaut. I grew up and now I'm an astronaut. And so now that I'm an astronaut, the whole idea of what I want to do when I grow up comes back full circle. It's like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't think about that now,' " she said with a laugh.

She became an astronaut in 1996 after working for McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Co. as an engineer specializing in radar and stealth aircraft systems.

She loves to cook and created her own specialties during her [space station](#) tenure, using available foods. Her male crewmates devoured her Christmas cookies and Super Bowl salsa.

More information: NASA: <http://www11.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/>

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