

Russians take Olympic torch on historic spacewalk

November 9 2013, by Dmitry Zaks

Two cosmonauts took the Olympic torch—unlit—for a spacewalk Saturday in a historic showcasing of Russia's Sochi Winter Olympic Games in three months' time.

Veteran cosmonaut Oleg Kotov ventured outside the International Space Station (ISS) with the torch held ceremonially in his gloved hand and his every move beamed live across the nation by Russian state TV.

The feather-shaped red-and-grey symbol of peace and friendship was tethered safely to his bulky spacesuit to make sure it did not spin away in orbit 260 miles (420 kilometres) above the Earth.

The moment was captured on high-tech video and photo equipment operated by fellow cosmonaut Sergei Ryazansky—out on his very first spacewalk.

"Beautiful," Ryazansky exclaimed as Kotov proudly waved the torch in front of the camera while floating almost directly above Australia.

"It is hard to believe that this is happening," a state television commentator exclaimed. "Something this beautiful has never happened before."

The pair then spent about an hour taking turns holding the torch and posing for dramatic shots with the Earth serving as the backdrop.

But their conversation mainly consisted of complicated space jargon and detailed exchanges with the Russian commander on board the ISS.

Kotov had warned before the spacewalk that he did not intend to make any "grand pronouncement" similar to the one Neil Armstrong delivered when he took his first step on the Moon in 1969.

Saturday's mission marked the very first time the Olympic symbol entered open space—a no-expense-spared triumph for Russia as it showed off its prowess in both science and sport.

Russia has gone to unparalleled lengths to promote its first Olympic event since the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow were boycotted by a bloc of Western nations because of the Soviet Union's invasion at the time of Afghanistan.

Moscow has already sent the torch to the North Pole aboard a nuclear-powered icebreaker. It will soon visit the bottom of Baikal—the world's deepest freshwater lake.

All are extravagant reminders from President Vladimir Putin's government about the breadth of both Russia's ambitions and its natural wealth.

But little compares to the pride Russia has taken in shooting the torch up to the ISS aboard the same type of rocket the Soviets used for launching pioneering spaceman Yuri Gagarin in 1961.

"Taking the Olympic torch to space—only we are capable of that," a state television presenter boasted on Thursday during a news show about the upcoming February 7-23 Sochi Games.

The bold claim is not actually true. Torches also left the planet aboard

US space shuttle voyages ahead of the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta and the 2000 event in Sydney.

But never has a torch been taken out for a spacewalk until Saturday.

'Not a bad idea'

Space officials stressed that safety precautions meant the torch remained unlit while inside the ISS at all times. Flames outside the station are impossible because of the lack of oxygen.

"We do not intend to set fire to anything, including the Olympic torch," cosmonaut Mikhail Tyurin joked on Friday during a video hookup from the space station.

Russia had nevertheless at one point contemplated sending the actual flame up to the station by encasing it in a special lantern.

Vitaly Davydov of the Roscosmos space agency set the debate rolling by remarking in 2011 that such a space shot "is not a bad idea (that) is theoretically possible".

More cautious senior Russian officials eventually decided that lighting a fire aboard a Soyuz rocket filled with tonnes of explosive fuel was not a wise choice.

Internationally agreed rules governing the ISS itself forbid flames from being lit on the orbiting lab because they would burn up the limited supplies of oxygen available to the crew.

But the symbolism of the spacewalk with the unlit torch still received extra global promotion by being aired live on screens at New York's Times Square.

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