

Russian rocket with US grandpa astronaut onboard lifts off for space station

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US astronaut Jeff Williams waves at the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, prior to blasting off to the International Space Station on March 18, 2016

A Russian rocket lifted off from the Baikonur space base Friday, carrying three crew to the International Space Station, including a US grandfather who is poised to enter the record books.

The rocket took off in windy conditions from Russia's [space](#) base in Kazakhstan at 2126 GMT, an AFP reporter saw.

The trio comprise Russians Oleg Skripochka and Alexey Ovchinin, and US grandfather of three, Jeff Williams, a veteran of long-duration space missions.

"The Soyuz rocket took off successfully," the Russian space agency Roskosmos said in a statement, adding that the crewship was scheduled to dock with the orbital outpost at 0311 GMT on Saturday.

The craft is decorated with a portrait of the first

man in space, Soviet hero Yuri Gagarin, whose pioneering orbital flight was made nearly 55 years ago, on April 12 1961.

By the end of his half-year trip aboard the ISS, Williams "will become the American with the most cumulative days in space—534," NASA says.

The previous US record was set by astronaut Scott Kelly earlier this year.

Kelly, 52, spent nearly a year in space and returned to Earth earlier this month with a total of 520 days in space, as part of an experiment to test the effects of long-duration spaceflight on the body and mind ahead of a potential future mission to Mars.



Russian cosmonaut Alexey Ovchinin boards the Soyuz TMA-20M spacecraft at the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome early on March 19, 2016

The all-time record for cumulative days spent in space is held by Russian cosmonaut Genny Padalka, who racked up 879 days over his career and wrapped up his final mission in September 2015.

Williams has so far notched up over 362 days in space, including three spacewalks.

His previous missions were flown aboard the space shuttle Atlantis in 2000, as well as a trip in 2006 when the station was far smaller—with only two modules and three crew members.

In 2009 and 2010, Williams served as a flight engineer for three months and later commanded the ISS for the remainder of his half-year mission.

Williams, Skripochka and Ovchinin will join US astronaut Tim Kopra, Russian cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko and the European Space Agency's British astronaut Tim Peake at the ISS to continue Expedition 47.

The ISS has been orbiting the Earth at roughly 28,000 kilometres (17,400 miles) per hour since 1998 and has been continuously occupied since the first expedition in November 2000.

Space is one of few areas of cooperation between Moscow and the West that has not been disrupted by tensions connected to violence and separatism in Ukraine.

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