

Discovery shuttle launch sets record for most women in space

Three women on board will join female scientist already on space station during one of orbiter's final missions

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Dorothy Metcalf-Lindenburger, Stephanie Wilson and Naoko Yamazaki will join Tracy Caldwell Dyson at the International Space Station, between them becoming the most women ever in orbit at the same time. Photograph: Gary I Rothstein/EPA

The space shuttle Discovery rocketed into orbit today on one of Nasa's final stockpiling missions to the International Space Station.

The launch – the last scheduled one in darkness for Nasa's fading shuttle programme – helped set a record for the most women in space at the same time. Three women were on board Discovery as part of the seven-member crew, and another is already at the space station. The shuttle should arrive at the orbiting outpost on Wednesday.

But problems with Discovery's main antenna, which emerged as soon as the shuttle reached orbit, could affect the radar needed for the rendezvous, Mission Control said today.

A spokesman stressed there were other tools to work around the situation. "We probably won't have answers for you today about what this means," Mission Control told the astronauts.

The six space station residents gathered around the dinner table to watch the launch on a laptop. "We are absolutely delighted to have our friendly comrades joining us here in a couple of days," said Timothy Creamer.

"Stand by for a knock on the door," Mission Control radioed.

Men will still outnumber women by more than two to one on board the shuttle and station, but that won't take away from the remarkable achievement of having four women in space at one time, coming 47 years after the world's first female astronaut, Valentina Tereshkova, rocketed into space.

A former schoolteacher, Dorothy Metcalf-Lindenburger, is among the female astronauts about to make history, as well as a chemist, Tracy Caldwell Dyson, who once worked as an electrician, and two aerospace engineers, Stephanie Wilson and Japanese astronaut Naoko Yamazaki.

Japan celebrated its own space feat with Discovery's liftoff. Two of its astronauts were circling Earth at the same time, one on the shuttle and the other on the station.

Only three shuttle missions remain after this one. Nasa intends to retire its fleet by the end of September, but is unsure what will follow for human spaceflight. President Barack Obama will visit the area on 15 April, while Discovery is still in orbit, to fill in some of the blanks.

Commander Alan Poindexter and his crew will spend nine days at the station, replenishing supplies. The astronauts will install a fresh ammonia tank for the cooling system – a cumbersome job requiring three spacewalks. They will drop off science experiments as well as an extra sleeping compartment, a darkroom to improve picture-taking from the lab's high-quality window, and other equipment weighing thousands of kilos.

The space station will continue operating until 2020 under the Obama plan. The idea is for commercial rocket companies to eventually provide ferry service for astronauts. Nasa is currently paying for seats on Russian Soyuz rockets. That's how Caldwell Dyson got to the space station yesterday, two days after being launched from Kazakhstan.

- Once combined, the shuttle and station crews will number 13: eight Americans, three Russians and two Japanese.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/apr/05/discovery-shuttle-launch-most-women%20http://www.onenewspage.com/news/Politics/20100407/9876491/Space-Cowgirls-Set-Record-Women-Astronauts-Orbit.htm>