

April 11, 2005
Washington, DC

Return to Flight Teammates:

This past week was quite an eventful one for the Nation's human space program!

At the Kennedy Space Center on Wednesday, another major milestone on the path to Space Shuttle Return to Flight was accomplished when the STS-114 stack rolled out of the VAB. Leroy Chiao even snapped a photo from ISS of the stack on the crawler way enroute to the pad. Discovery is now sitting proudly on launch pad 39B, just as she did in September 1988 for STS-26. Tanking test and Terminal Countdown Demonstration Test await. Crew training continues, as do intensive engineering design verification and certification reviews.

At the Johnson Space Center on Thursday, we successfully completed the Flight Readiness Review for ISS Expedition 11. The entire ISS team has performed magnificently. You had to come away impressed with the ISS team's professionalism, preparation and diligence. They've demonstrated both initiative and ingenuity on a truly international scale dealing with a severe logistics shortfall over the past two years.

Afterwards we visited the ISS Flight Control Room in Mission Control. The sense of commitment to continued presence aboard the ISS and space exploration was palpable. Despite all the challenges, the Space Station is in maintaining its readiness to resume assembly with its current crew. Without fear of overstatement, our ISS colleagues are counting on us to get ahead of the consumables and supply curve and enable a return to three permanent crew.

Then we toured the new Mission Management Team conference room. Literally the 'signs' are all over the place that the approach has changed since Columbia. There are posters on the perils of groupthink, the trip to Abilene, and one by Walt Williams, former X-15 and Mercury Program Manager, about no one will remember how 'late' you were, or how many times you slipped, but that everyone will remember an 'on time' failure...

At the National Air and Space Museum back in Washington, DC on this past Friday Veteran flight controller, Gene Kranz, spoke to a packed house. His themes were familiar ones that still ring true today. 'Tough and competent' -- a renewed diligence following the Apollo 204 fire surely led to the successful landing of the 'Eagle' on the lunar surface. 'Failure is not an option' coupled with ironclad discipline when faced with imminent disaster on Apollo 13 enroute to the Moon led to the crew's safe return to Earth and subsequent successes of Apollo 14 through 17.

Both Apollo One and Challenger demonstrated that out of great tragedy can come great triumph IF we collectively embrace a rededication to the fundamentals of spaceflight, to a renewed diligence in all we do, and towards becoming an organization that's not afraid to question itself and to learn -- to come back smarter, stronger and safer. Those are the hallmarks we strive for as we approach STS-114. We owe that to those that have perished in the cause of space exploration, to future crews and to ourselves.

I'm very proud of what I've seen in my visits to the field centers. Over the past two years you've shown a willingness to learn from our NASA colleagues, industry partners and external advisors alike. You're not shy about self-criticism or voicing minority opinions. You've shown a grace under pressure, withering criticism and unprecedented public scrutiny that has been impressive. No matter how daunting the challenges, on each and every occasion you have rallied as a team and come through with determination, dedication and diligence.

You can also be very proud of the technical progress that has been made. The bipod ramp foam insulation, the proximate cause of Columbia accident has been eliminated. There are many scores of other design improvements across the entire Space Shuttle, not simply to the hardware, but to the management team and more broadly across the agency to address the Columbia Accident Investigation Board recommendations.

Although we know *much* more than ever before in the history of the Space Shuttle program about the previously unknown or unappreciated risks and we've reduced the risk substantially, we must accept the fact that we can never eliminate all the risks. There can be no 'singing ourselves to sleep' that we've fixed everything possible, nor could we ever. Spaceflight, even more than aviation, has been terribly unforgiving of carelessness, oversight or neglect. So we must remain diligent, disciplined and vigilant.

In that regard, we're far from alone in this effort. Serving as our external advisors for the past two years, the Stafford-Covey Task Group has provided tough and pointed, but necessary, advice on our progress towards Return to Flight. To be sure, they have been extremely demanding, but fair in their assessments along the way, setting a very high bar for closure. Additionally, the Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel members are our present and future partners in helping us assure diligence and discipline while avoiding future complacency.

Withstanding the RTF crucible is making us all tougher, more competent and more confident in our hardware, but more importantly in each other as members of this team.

We're not done yet – nor will we be done until our mission of ISS assembly is completed and all the Orbiters safely retired at the end of the decade and enroute to the Smithsonian. Each and every mission – first one through the final one – each and every one must be approached with the same diligence and discipline.

We're tough and competent and smarter – less technically arrogant, more humble, but still confident and ready to return to flight. Having survived/withstood/grown during this crucible period, no doubt you'll form the nucleus of the team that will take us into the next decade of human space exploration.

When Discovery lifts off with Eileen Collins and her crew, riding along with them will be the hopes and dreams of our fellow Americans and international partners around the globe. I'm confident that you all, together as a team, will prevail.

Hang in there! Dawn's comin'...

With the utmost personal and professional respect,

Reads

“Greatness is not in where we stand, but in what direction we are moving. We must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it -- but sail we must and not drift, nor lie at anchor.” Oliver Wendell Holmes