

CAP's astronaut pilots shuttle Discovery on its last flight into space

By Maj. Steven Solomon

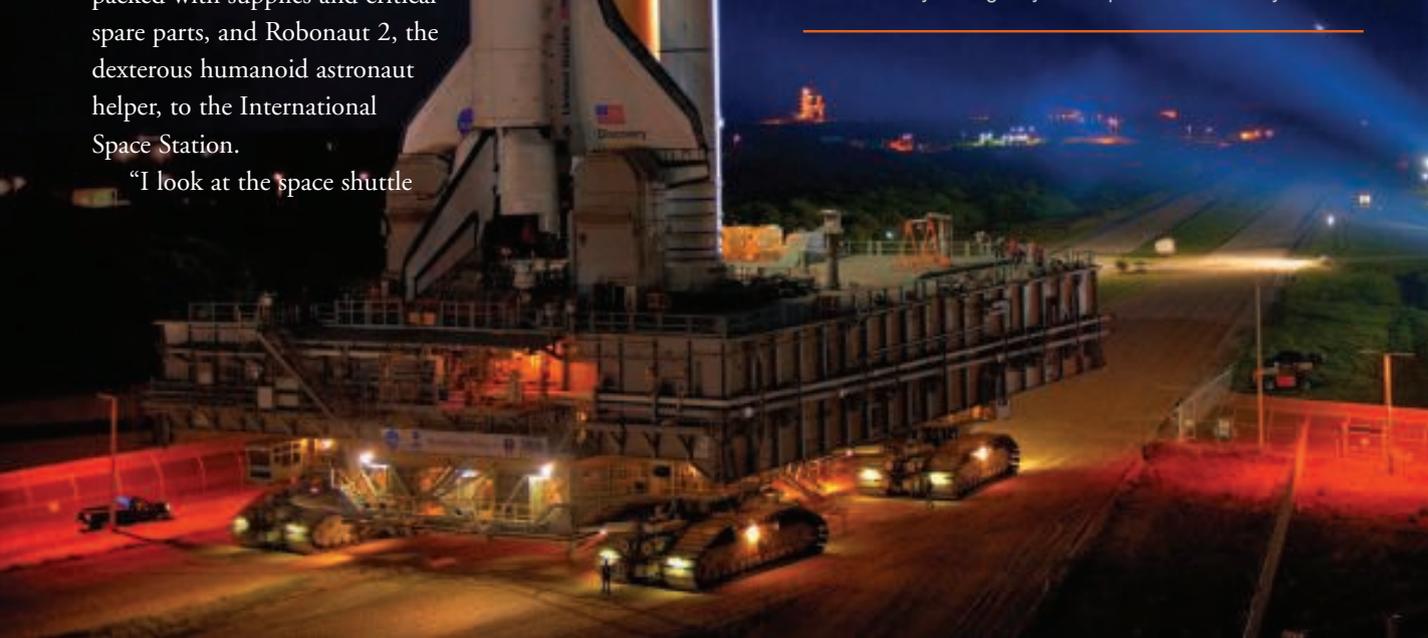
Civil Air Patrol member and U.S. Air Force Col. Eric Boe took NASA's Space Shuttle Discovery into history, piloting it on its 39th and final mission. After numerous delays attributable to technical problems and bad weather, Discovery was launched Feb. 24 to deliver the Permanent Multipurpose Module, packed with supplies and critical spare parts, and Robonaut 2, the dexterous humanoid astronaut helper, to the International Space Station.

"I look at the space shuttle



Photos courtesy of NASA

Eric Boe is strapped into his seat on Space Shuttle Discovery to practice escaping the shuttle, in preparation for an unlikely emergency at the pad on launch day.



and there's nothing as cool in science fiction. I really appreciate that we can take something like this and put it in orbit," Boe said.

Another NASA space shuttle, the Endeavour, which Boe piloted in 2008 on his first flight into space, is scheduled to fly in April, and the Atlantis is scheduled for late June. But, after that, NASA's human space program is "up in the air." The program escaped a death blow with a congressional compromise, but budget cuts may still derail it.

"I'd love to fly in space again," Boe said. "I'd love to get the opportunity to fly one of the new vehicles, but I consider myself very fortunate, especially now that this looks like Discovery's last flight."

For the love of flight

Boe has never met a flying machine he didn't like.

A distinguished U.S. Air Force Academy graduate, he has been a student pilot, instructor pilot, combat pilot, test pilot and now a shuttle pilot. As an Air Force colonel, he has totaled more than 4,000 flight hours in more than 45 aircraft.

"I like them all, all the planes I've flown, each aircraft, spacecraft," he said. "I've never had a bad day flying an aircraft or a spacecraft. They're all fun."

When asked if he prepared any differently for this mission than his first trip into space, Boe answered that there weren't many differences, because the two flights were similar.

"On ascent, you really feel the power," he explained. "You get pressed in your seat pretty fast, but, on entry, you can look out the window until you get closer to the ground [and] things start happening faster and faster."



Space Shuttle Discovery carried Robonaut 2 to the International Space Station. It is the first humanoid robot in space.

A student of the universe

CAP members surely know that Boe credits CAP for his interest in aviation. He learned to fly as a CAP cadet, soloing at a Georgia Wing flight encampment. A photo of Boe in his cadet uniform looking at a large model of the shuttle is as iconic in CAP aerospace history as the photo of teenager Bill Clinton shaking hands with President John F. Kennedy is in political science.

Echoing NASA's website message, Boe sums up an important lesson his shuttle experiences have given him: "Our Earth is just a small ship orbiting in the universe. You really get to appreciate that our Earth is very fragile." ▲

Space Shuttle Discovery, being maneuvered for launch Feb. 24 at Kennedy Space Center, ended its final mission, STS-133, with a safe landing on March 9. With a career that began in 1984 with the STS-41D mission, Discovery is the first of the shuttles to be retired. During its career, it has flown more missions than any other shuttle or spacecraft. It's made more than 5,600 trips around the Earth and, at various times, carried more than 180 people, including the first female shuttle pilot and shuttle commander, Eileen Collins. Discovery also flew the first African-American spacewalker, Bernard Harris, and the first sitting member of Congress to fly in space, Jake Garn, who was a senator from Utah at the time.