

NASA Astronaut Peggy Whitson Interview, September 1, 2017

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NASA Astronaut Peggy Whitson Shares Thoughts on Extended Mission, Returning to Earth

Record-breaking astronaut Peggy Whitson is set to leave the International Space Station — her home of the past nine months — on Saturday Sept. 2, and return to Earth. Impacts from Hurricane Harvey at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston caused her final in-flight news conference to be canceled, however, she was able to participate via email in the following interview with the Associated Press's Marcia Dunn, acting as a press pool representative.

Whitson and her Expedition 52 crewmates Jack Fischer of NASA and Fyodor Yurchikhin of the Russian space agency Roscosmos are scheduled to land in Kazakhstan at 9:22 pm EDT on Saturday. NASA Television and the agency's website will provide complete coverage of their departure and landing.

What are your thoughts as you get ready to close out your 9½ month mission at the International Space Station? Has the flight hurried by or seemed to have dragged? Are you thrilled to finally be headed back to Earth, or feeling sad that you're leaving your orbital home?

Actually, most of the flight has gone by very quickly. In fact, I would say that it didn't feel any longer than my previous two flights of 6 months in duration. I would say the slowest time has been the last week or so. I think it has to do with switching in your mind where you want/need to be. Once the switch is thrown to go home, time seems to move a lot slower.

You will be arriving back to hurricane-flooded Houston. How has the catastrophe there affected your mindset in the past week? Has it made you more anxious about returning home? How did you and your family home fare?

Our home is fine, but so many friends and co-workers have been impacted. For example, in order to keep mission control running, the team (three shifts of skeleton support crew) were sleeping on cots in the backup mission control rooms. Their sacrifices for the station and keeping things running up here are amazing. And then there were so many others who "called in" to support various meetings and decisions that had to be made to keep the program running, all the while worrying about the sheetrock that needed to be torn out of their flooded house. All this was done because of the caliber of folks we are lucky enough to have working at NASA. Any trepidations I might have about returning in the aftermath of a hurricane are entirely by the all those folks keeping our mission going and physically putting themselves out there to help folks who were less fortunate than us.

Besides family and friends, what have you missed most about Earth? What do you want to eat and do first thing back?

Flush toilets. Trust me, you don't want to know the details.

Pizza has been on my mind for a month or two, since Jack [Fischer] told the ground we weren't a pizza delivery place when he was joking with them.

What will you miss most about space?

Things I will miss:

I know that I will hugely miss the freedom of floating and moving with the lightest of touch, especially those first few days after my return when gravity especially SUCK.

I will miss seeing the enchantingly peaceful limb of our Earth from this vantage point. Until the end of my days, my eyes will search the horizon to see that curve.

I will miss seeing and working within this awe-inspiring creation that we, as a people, have constructed here in space, traveling at 17,500 pmg. I still can't believe the incredible level of detail that was required to imagine this place, let alone to build it!

I will miss being the hands of so many investigators, exploring new avenues in research that can't be accomplished on Earth.

I will also miss the ability to "go for a walk" in a spaceship built for one.

And mostly, I will miss that incredible sense of satisfaction, gratitude and pride that comes from working with the NASA team from on orbit.

Your broke quite a few records on this mission and set a new standard for astronauts everywhere. What are your thoughts about being a space superwomen and breaking so many records?

I have noted in more than few interviews that I am not overly comfortable with the praise about the records. I honestly do think that it is critical that we are continuously breaking records, because that represents us moving forward in exploration. I feel lucky to have been in a position to take advantage of the opportunities that I have had, and yet I do acknowledge that my dedication and work ethic helped put me in those positions. Recognizing all that, it is still difficult for me to come to grips with the fact that I have the potential to be a role model. I am working on paying forward some of the advice and mentoring that I have received on the my journey, in hopes that one day those young people will do the same, and look back on a life in which they leapt at the opportunities and broke their own records.

Looking back on this particular flight, what were your fondest and most challenging moments?

I have been blessed with some really special crewmates. Being able to be a really integral member of the team, no matter what role I was in, was truly special. Some folks describe our common existence up here as like being in a family. While family described some of the everyday part of living and working together up here, it doesn't sufficiently encompass the reliance on our combined skills on complex, technical and even dangerous work. It's family, but so much more.

One of our more challenging events was an SCU (umbilical for the space suit) started leaking just before the start of an EVA [extra-vehicle activity, or spacewalk]. There were a number of little failures leading up to this point, so I was pretty sure that we were not going to be able to go out the door. The ground team and Thomas Pesquet, who was serving as the suit IV [intra-vehicle officer], however, went through some heroic efforts and in the end made it happen. Just another typical NASA day of making hard things look easy.

How did this mission differ from your previous two flights, given its extra length? Do you feel you're returning as strong as ever? How much longer could you envision yourself staying up there, if you had to? An entire year? Longer?

Yes, I do think I could have flown in space longer. The resistive exercise device is much better than the previous versions, and does a fantastic job of keeping us fit from a bone and muscle perspective.

Is this your last spaceflight, in all likelihood? What's next for you? Do you envision staying at NASA? What's your hope for the future of spaceflight?

I am not sure what the future holds for me personally, but I envision myself continuing to work on spaceflight programs. My desire to contribute to the spaceflight team as we move forward in our exploration of space has only increased over the years.