

Space Shuttle Enterprise Arrives in New York

Saturday, 28 April 2012

For the first time, a space shuttle landed in New York City.

Not under its own power, though, because it never had any power of its own. The shuttle that arrived at Kennedy International Airport on Friday after swanning over the metropolitan area for about an hour was the Enterprise, which was the prototype for the shuttles that rocketed into space.

Enterprise rode on top of a 747 jet that took off from Dulles International Airport near Washington at 9:39 a.m. Less than an hour later, the paired aircraft glided over the harbor, past the Statue of Liberty and up the Hudson River as thousands of New Yorkers and tourists cheered and snapped pictures.

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Gleaming in the sunlight, they circled the suburbs and made another pass by Manhattan, escorted by a T-38 Talon jet, before touching down at Kennedy Airport at 11:22 a.m. "American aviation," one man marveled as he joined dozens of other amateur photographers trying to capture the moment from the end of Pier 84 on the West Side of Manhattan.

Though the flight was the first for Enterprise in more than 25 years, the shuttle's next move might be trickier. Enterprise is ultimately bound for the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum, which is housed on a retired aircraft carrier docked at Pier 86.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration awarded the prototype to the Intrepid last year after ending the shuttle program and giving the three remaining orbiters to other museums.

"It's so sad," said Sabrina Hawkins, 27, a chemical engineer who watched the flyover with her friend, Charles Mason. "It's nice they're giving it final respects, but we don't have a follow-on program."

For nearly a decade, Enterprise had been on display at a satellite location of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. The Smithsonian preferred to have a shuttle that flew in space, so NASA gave it the shuttle Discovery, making Enterprise available.

Though officials in Texas, Ohio and Washington protested that their states were more deserving of such a valuable artifact of the space program, Charles F. Bolden Jr., the administrator of NASA, said he wanted the shuttles to go where they would get maximum exposure.

Speaking at a ceremony to welcome the arrival of Enterprise, New York's senior senator, Charles E. Schumer, summarized the situation. "We won," he said.

Now, the officials of the Intrepid museum are scrambling to validate that decision. Unlike some other museums that had vied for shuttles, the Intrepid did not have a place to put one. Last week, workers cleared some room on the carrier's flight deck to accommodate the temporary shelter they plan to erect for the Enterprise.

That inflated structure, similar to the domes that enclose some tennis courts, is expected to cost about \$3 million, on top of more than \$9 million that the museum has to pay NASA for delivering Enterprise to the city.

Intrepid officials hope to recoup some of that money by selling tickets to the exhibition to see Enterprise up close. First, though, they must get the shuttle onto the ship.

After the shuttle is lifted — or demated, to use NASA's terminology — off the 747, it will stay at the airport until June 6, when museum officials plan to place it on a barge and tug it through Jamaica Bay and up the Hudson. A floating crane will then lift the shuttle onto the Intrepid's flight deck. It will sit there, with its black nose pointed toward New Jersey, for a few years while museum officials work on their ambitious plan to build an annex on land that would serve as the shuttle's permanent home.

They will be fortunate if city residents and visitors remain as eager to catch a glimpse of the Enterprise as those gathered along the West Side were on Friday.

As the aircraft soared over the Statue of Liberty, affording the crowds in Battery Park a clear profile, one spectator from Brooklyn, Peter Vasiljev, turned master of ceremonies, announcing, "Ladies and gentlemen, it's the shuttle Enterprise."

At the High Line park along the West Side, the various languages — French, Italian and others — heard before the plane came into view all melted into the universal reactions of "ooh" and "aah" as Enterprise flew by. After it passed from view, Julian Wu, a 67-year-old resident of Chelsea and self-proclaimed space nut, said wistfully, "I expected to hear a sonic boom."

Then, with duties calling, the gatherings dispersed. Torrey Taralli, 33, who works in digital marketing, packed his camera and began to make his way off the elevated High Line park to 18th Street. "I've got to go," he said. "Got to get back to work."

Several miles away at Kennedy, the controller guiding the flight onto the runway said to the NASA pilots, "Welcome to New York, and thanks for the show."

(The New York Times)