

Witnessing the STS-130 Launch and the Ending of an Era

COMMENTARY

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The sense of frustration when the STS-130 launch was scrubbed on Sunday morning made me quite skeptical that it would actually happen 24 hours later. Arriving at around 3:00 am Monday at the Kennedy Space Center's Banana Creek Viewing Site, I sat down inside of the Apollo-Saturn museum just below the incredible Saturn V moon rocket suspended above me, and waited. Half an hour before launch the crowd that had congregated to witness the event – many wearing NASA shirts or pins, stocking up on memorabilia at the store, and warming up for the crisp Florida weather that welcomed us - had already wandered outside. As we waited anxiously we tried (and failed) to take a decent picture of the lighted launch pad, and the tiny-looking Shuttle framed against a dark backdrop and crowned with clouds.

A few minutes before the 4:14 am mark, we all cheered: the weather looked good and visibility was not compromised: the launch was a 'go.' From then on, time flew quickly. The 9 minute countdown clock had started, attention from it diverted only while the U.S. anthem was being sung. We then bellowed the 10 second countdown, crossing our fingers and hoping that nothing would go wrong.

Suddenly, the dark backdrop disappeared and it seemed the sun was rising. Creeping up slowly, the ball of flame was followed by a resounding blast as the Shuttle reached Mach 1 speed, looming like a rising star. It was beautiful. The landscape changed so much in a matter of seconds, and the image of light and power impressed me deeply. The crowd was whooping and clapping, many of us involuntarily shouting words (in Spanish too, at least for me), as we watched the Shuttle swivel and swerve to the left. The 'sun' became a comet then a receding star, finally a tiny lighted spot that could have been mistaken for any other in the sky. In a few moments it was gone, and just then I reminded myself that there were people inside of that vehicle, and that their journey was just beginning.

While what I know about rockets and space launches was thus confirmed, it still seemed impossible to grasp what I had just witnessed. When I departed for the hotel I realized that this launch was particularly noteworthy: the last scheduled night launch and only four more launches to go —the last flights of the Space Shuttle. During my stay in Cape Canaveral I could not help but note the deep commitment and long-lived excitement that residents in the area attach to this vehicle, and I reflected on the impact that policies can have in places hundreds of miles away from Washington. The people I met that had seen not one but all the shuttle launches did not fail to exude the same

excitement when they spoke about this one or the next one: the Space Shuttle has truly been an integral part of the life of many.

Regardless of one's own views of the proposed changes to NASA and the long debate over when the Space Shuttle should be retired, having the opportunity to experience the launch impressed me both with awe, pride, and a twinge of sadness. Perhaps the future of U.S. human transport to space looms brighter and we may get to see the night sky lit up many more times as other brave people travel to the International Space Station and beyond, but for now it is clear that the STS-130 launch was not only historic, but also a milestone heralding the end of an era.