

'Like an animal'

NASA astronauts describe noisy, jolting descent

AFP | Houston

SpaceX's crewed capsule isn't called Dragon for nothing.

The two NASA astronauts brought back to Earth on Sunday said they felt they were inside the belly of a beast as it careened into the atmosphere at 17,500 mph.

"It came alive," said mission commander Bob Behnken at a virtual press conference held Tuesday in Houston, Texas.

The thrusters were firing to keep the capsule, called "Endeavour," pointed precisely at its target site off the coast of Pensacola, for the first water landing by a US spaceship since 1975.

"The atmosphere starts to make noise, you can hear that rumble outside the vehicle and as the vehicle tries to control,



Bob Behnken (c) and crewmate Doug Hurley are best friends in real life and both are married to fellow astronauts

you feel a little bit of that shimmy in your body," continued the 50-year-old.

"It doesn't sound like a machine, it sounds like an animal coming through the atmosphere with all that all the puffs that are happening from the thrusters and the atmos-

pheric noise," he added.

Not only was ride down deafening, but each time the vessel carried out descent sequences like jettisoning its "trunk" that contained the

power system and firing parachutes, it was also bone-jarring.

"Very much like getting hit in the back of the chair with a baseball bat, you know, just a crack," said Behnken, describing the sensation.

Behnken and crewmate Doug Hurley, 53, are best friends in real life and both are married to fellow astronauts.

They were addressing journalists, as tradition dictates, two days after their return from a six-month stay on the International Space Station.

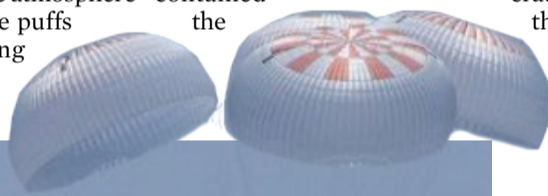
The success of the demonstration mission for SpaceX Crew Dragon, the first crewed US spaceship to achieve orbit since the Space Shuttle era, means it will likely soon be certified for regular service.

The next mission is already planned for September.

"The mission went just like the simulators, from start to finish, all the way there was really no surprises," said Hurley.

Both men are veterans of the Space Shuttle program, which ended in 2011, and they had been training for five years with SpaceX.

Splash down at 15 miles per hour in the Gulf of Mexico felt "pretty firm," said Hurley, but that was expected.



One person who will particularly benefit from Behnken's knowledge: astronaut Megan McArthur, who is slated to make the same voyage in the spring of 2021 on the same spacecraft, and is Behnken's wife.



Nobel laureate John Hume laid to rest in N.Ireland

AFP News

John Hume, whose tireless efforts to bridge sectarian divides in Northern Ireland won him the Nobel Peace Prize, was buried in Londonderry Wednesday as tributes poured in from global icons ranging from Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama to Bill Clinton and Irish rocker Bono.

High-profile figures across the world paid homage following Hume's death on Monday aged 83, lamenting the passing of a political giant.

Hume was a key architect of the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement, which largely ended three decades of violence in Northern Ireland that killed 3,500 people.

"Mindful of the Christian faith that inspired John Hume's untiring efforts to promote dialogue, reconciliation and peace.... His Holiness commends his noble soul to



The wicker casket containing Hume's remains was brought into St Eugene's Cathedral in Londonderry on Tuesday evening

the loving mercy of Almighty God," Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin said in a statement on behalf of Pope Francis.

The Dalai Lama said Hume's "steady persistence set an example for all of us" and that he had

"lived a truly meaningful life".

Northern Ireland's first minister and deputy first minister, Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill, attended the ceremony, along with Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin and Britain's Northern Ireland minister,

Brandon Lewis.

Despite his family asking the public to stay away from the funeral over fears of coronavirus transmission, a few dozen people gathered outside the cathedral.

Hundreds also lined nearby streets applauding as Hume's cortege made its way to a private burial following the funeral.

The family had asked mourners to light a "candle for peace" at their homes -- a suggestion taken up by many people across Ireland, as well as in government buildings in London, Belfast and Dublin.

Hume first became politically active in the movement for Catholic equality in Londonderry -- a city on the front line of the conflict between nationalists who favour being part of Ireland and Protestant unionists who want Northern Ireland to remain in the United Kingdom.

SpaceX: Musk's 'Mars ship' prototype aces 150m test flight



Shortly after the test flight, which lasted just under a minute, SpaceX founder Elon Musk tweeted: "Mars is looking real."

BBC

A prototype of SpaceX's next-generation Starship vehicle has successfully flown to an altitude of 150m (500ft).

The uncrewed test vehicle rose up on a plume of exhaust before deploying its landing legs and touching down softly.

The flight was carried out at SpaceX's test site near the village of Boca Chica in south Texas on Tuesday evening.

It's the first flight test in almost a year for the Raptor engine, which will be used to power Starship.

The stainless steel test vehicle, called SN5, has been compared variously to a grain silo and water tank.

But it could pave the way for a spacecraft capable of carrying humans to the Moon and Mars.

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SN5 took off from Boca Chica at 00:57 BST (18:57 local time) for the brief flight. It uses a single Raptor engine, which is powered by liquid methane and liquid oxygen.

The final Starship vehicle will feature six Raptors, standing 50m (165ft) tall. It could carry 100 people on a single flight.

But in order to overcome Earth's gravity, it will need to be launched by a massive rocket called Super Heavy, which will be equipped with 31 Raptor engines.

Another test vehicle called Starhopper undertook a few brief flights in 2019, also flying to a height of 150m (500ft).

The Starship vehicle is one of three shortlisted candidates to land humans on the Moon in the 2020s for Nasa. A Japanese billionaire, Yusaku Maezawa, who made his fortune in online fashion retail, has booked a trip around the Moon on Starship.

Elon Musk has long harboured plans to settle people on Mars as part of his vision to make humans a "multi-planetary species".

Third of Afghans estimated to have contracted virus: health ministry



More than 18 million people worldwide have been infected with the virus since it first emerged in China late last year.

AFP News

Nearly a third of Afghanistan's population -- or 10 million people -- has been infected with the coronavirus, according to health ministry estimates published Wednesday.

The figure comes from a survey based on antibody tests on around 9,500 people across the country, with technical support from the World Health Organization, health minister Ahmad Jawad Osmani said at a press briefing.

The survey estimated that 31.5 percent of the population had contracted the virus, with the highest infection rate in Kabul where more than half of the city's five million population were thought to have been infected.

But the country of around 32 million people has only limited testing capacity and has officially declared just 36,000 cases and more than 1,200 deaths.

"A second wave of the infection is happening everywhere in the world and we cannot be an exception. We will use the findings of this survey to better prepare ourselves for a possible second wave," Osmani said.

