

Return to Flight



NASA

Eileen Collins was the first female shuttle commander for NASA.

As a little girl, Eileen Collins dreamed of becoming an astronaut when she grew up. "I wanted to fly the space shuttle," she said. "When I was very young and first started reading about astronauts, there were no women astronauts."

After many years of hard work in college, flight school, and the military, Collins's dream came true. She made history in 1995 as the first woman to pilot a space shuttle. In 1999, she made history again when she became the first female shuttle **commander** for NASA, the U.S. space agency. A commander is someone who leads a crew.

Collins may enjoy the **distinction** of being the first female shuttle commander, but she hopes it's "not for long!" A distinction is an accomplishment that sets a person apart from others. Collins wants more women to follow in her footsteps. "The young people are going to be the ones to take us on to more exciting adventures," she said.

Grounded Fleet

NASA's space shuttles have been **confined**¹ to Earth since February 1, 2003. On that tragic day, the space shuttle *Columbia* exploded after a 16-day mission. All seven astronauts aboard were killed.

During liftoff, a piece had broken off *Columbia*'s fuel tank and smashed a hole in the wing's heat-resistant tiles. Those tiles protect the shuttle from the very high temperatures that the craft experiences when speeding back into Earth's atmosphere. The damage went undetected, and *Columbia* unexpectedly exploded.

¹ **confine:** hold within a location

Reading Passage



NASA

The space shuttle Discovery.

Ready to Fly

After the accident, space travel seemed riskier than ever. Because of the dangers, some people wondered whether NASA's shuttles would return to space.

Now NASA officials say it's time. Collins will lead the historic return-to-flight mission. The mission is scheduled for May or June on the space shuttle *Discovery*. [The mission actually took place from July 26-August 9, 2005.]

Although NASA's shuttles have been grounded, they haven't been collecting dust. In fact, Collins and her crew of six

astronauts have been very involved in updates to the shuttles to prevent another disaster.

Collins and NASA officials are confident that the shuttle is safer than ever, and the crew is ready for the upcoming mission. "It's time for us to go fly," said Collins. "If [the shuttle] wasn't safe, I wouldn't get on it."

Success in Space

The crew of *Discovery* will be busy on the mission. The shuttle will deliver supplies and equipment to the **International Space Station**. That is a research laboratory being built in space.

Collins also plans to guide *Discovery* through a slow somersault called a flip. This will be the first time this **maneuver**, or move, will be done. The flip will help the crew check for any damage to the heat-resistant tiles.

The mission's success will be measured on how the safety improvements made to *Discovery* work. Collins views a successful, safe mission as a chance to prove to the world that NASA has reduced the risk of space travel.

To Collins and the crew, there is more than success at stake. They believe the mission will honor the lost astronauts of Columbia. "It's their legacy we're continuing," said a crew member.