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NASA & U.S. Navy Join to Celebrate Spirit of Exploration

NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe acknowledged past acts of discovery and heroism, while challenging future generations to continue the American spirit of exploration.

Administrator O'Keefe spoke at a ceremony today on board the historic museum frigate USS Constellation, docked at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md. Constellation Museum Director Chris Rowson joined him in highlighting the connection between the legacy of the USS Constellation's namesake and NASA's Project Constellation, the agency's new family of Crew Exploration Vehicles.

Administrator O'Keefe said, "The proud name 'Constellation' represents the best of progress, valor and the American spirit. First given to one of the finest, most modern sailing ships, a craft built to represent and defend America, the name has been carried proudly by newer, modern vessels and aircraft throughout our nation's history. Today, we help continue that tradition by accepting the spirit of the original Constellation and proudly transferring it to the class of space vehicles that will carry humankind back to the moon, Mars and beyond."

"There have been three ships called USS Constellation in our history, each incorporating the cutting-edge technologies of the time. We've gone from the age of sail, through steam, to the age of nuclear power with these proud ships. With that same spirit, we're going to advance our nation's exploration horizons in space, one step, one mission at a time. Each new space vehicle developed under Project Constellation will showcase the latest technological developments," Administrator O'Keefe said.

Rowson presented NASA with two historic pieces of wood planking from the USS Constellation. One piece will fly into space on a future mission and one will be displayed at NASA as yet another reminder of the legacy of exploration. He also presented NASA with the U.S. flag flown on board the Constellation, commemorating its 150th anniversary and its first return voyage to Annapolis in 111 years.

Administrator O'Keefe presented the museum U.S. Navy and American flags flown aboard the Space Shuttle Atlantis during a mission to the International Space Station in April 2002 (STS-110). The flags have special significance, as they were part of the "Flags for Heroes & Families" commemoration dedicated to the victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Administrator O'Keefe also acknowledged the strong ties that exist between the Naval Academy and NASA. The Academy has provided more astronauts to NASA than any other university or college. Fifty-three Academy graduates, including 16 currently on flight status and six NASA managers, earned astronaut wings.

Commander William "Willie" McCool, a 1983 Academy graduate, was the pilot of the ill-fated Space Shuttle Columbia, lost Feb. 1, 2003. A long-time runner, he was honored during the first event of the day, the annual "Willie McCool Memorial" running of the goats road race. The running event reinforces the spirit of leadership, fitness, professionalism and exuberance so important to serving military officers, and so personified by McCool.

The name "Constellation" has been an important part of American history. On June 14, 1777, to establish an official flag for the new nation, the Continental Congress passed the first Flag Act: "Resolved, That the flag of the United States be made of thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation."

The first U.S. Navy ship to bear the name Constellation, for the "new constellation of stars" on the American flag, was launched in Baltimore on Sept. 7, 1797. It was the second frigate built for the Navy, and was decommissioned in 1853. In 1855 the second generation Constellation was commissioned. It saw service in the Civil War, and was the stand-by or relief flagship of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet in World War II. Since 1955 it has been on display in Baltimore. In 1961 the aircraft carrier USS Constellation was commissioned, also known as "America's Flagship." It was decommissioned August 7, 2003.

From the viewpoint of American history, aviation history and astronomical associations, it is appropriate NASA's new Crew Exploration Vehicle project be named "Constellation." As three generations of Constellations ventured into Earth's oceans, we venture on the new oceans of space. The project represents a whole constellation of vehicles with many functions, to journey to multiple destinations, including the moon, Mars and beyond.

Perhaps Commander McCool put it best, when he wrote from the Shuttle Columbia on Jan. 29, 2003, "From our orbital vantage point, we observe an Earth without borders, full of peace, beauty and magnificence, and we pray that humanity as a whole can imagine a borderless world as we see it and strive to live as one in peace."

For information about NASA, Project Constellation and other agency programs on the Web visit:
<http://www.nasa.gov>

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