

Brazil's 20-Million-Dollar Man, Astronaut Pontes

Contributed by Cecilia Jorge
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So far the Brazilian government has spent around US\$ 10 million on the training of Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Marcos Cesar Pontes. For the Brazilian astronaut to join the Russian Soyuz spacecraft crew, another US\$ 10 million will be required. This information comes from the president of the Brazilian Space Agency (AEB), Sérgio Gaudenzi. "He was on the [NASA] flight waiting list, but the flights were cancelled. Then there was another problem on the most recent launch. As a result, the line became enormous, and we faced the prospect of having used these funds to train an astronaut who never got off the ground," Gaudenzi said.

The estimated budget covers the cost of the flight to the International Space Station, including the weight of material to perform experiments and the voice channel that will be used to maintain contact with Brazil during the mission.

Pontes will transport scientific experiments from Brazilian universities and companies, such as Petrobras. The AEB is expected to conclude the selection of the experiments in January.

15 kilograms of material for experiments will accompany him on his way to the Station, and only 5 kilos can be brought back to Earth. "He will return with five kilos, the ones that must be examined here to see how they behaved." The rest will have to be ditched as space garbage.

Lieutenant Coronel Pontes was chosen by the AEB in July, 1998, to participate in the NASA astronaut training program at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas (USA). Pontes competed in a group composed of 32 candidates, including six foreigners - a Brazilian, two Italians, a German, a Frenchman, and a Canadian. After the initial phase of training, he became a NASA crew member.

Pontes, who is a native of Bauru (SP), has a masters in Systems Engineering from the Naval Postgraduate School, in California (USA). He began working when he was a 14 year old student in the National Industrial Apprenticeship Service (Senai), as an electrician for the Federal Railway System (RFFSA).

He entered the Air Force Academy in 1981 and served in the Fighter Squadrons until 1988, earning credentials as instructor, squadron leader, and aeronautical engineer, with a degree from the Aeronautical Institute of Technology (ITA).

Pontes was a test pilot for the Aeronautics and Space Institute (IAE) and logged over 1900 hours of flight time in 25 kinds of aircraft, including the F-15, F-16, F-18, and MIG-29.

He has 16 years of experience in the area of flight security and participated in countless prevention campaigns and air accident investigations, including the one in the aftermath of the Columbia space shuttle disaster.

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