

Back on Earth Brazil's First Astronaut Pays Tribute to Dumont

Contributed by Newsroom
Monday, 10 April 2006

Lt Col Marcos Pontes, the first Brazilian to go into space, has returned to Earth after a week on the International Space Station.

A capsule carrying Brazil's first astronaut, along with a Russian and an American, landed safely in the freezing Kazakh steppe early Sunday after separating from the international space station and hurtling through the Earth's atmosphere.

American astronaut Bill McArthur, Russian cosmonaut Valery Tokarev and Brazilian Marcos Pontes touched down on target and on schedule.

The TMA-7 landed on its bottom about 30 miles northeast of Arkalyk after what Mission Control officials called a flawless flight. Officials at Russia's Mission Control in Korolyov, outside Moscow, reported that the capsule had been in radio contact for much of the bone-jarring, 3 1/2-hour journey and that all three crew members were feeling well.

Ground crews reached the capsule in northern Kazakhstan, where temperatures hovered around 13 degrees below zero, within minutes of the landing. McArthur, shown on a Mission Control screen as he was still strapped inside the capsule, looked dazed after the 250-mile trip from the space station.

Pontes, seated in a chair outside the capsule, grinned and gave a thumbs-up as his bulky spacesuit was removed. He was handed a Brazilian flag and a Panama hat that was pulled out of the capsule - apparently one that he had carried to the space station in tribute to the Brazilian inventor and aviator Alberto Santos Dumont, to whom Pontes had dedicated his flight. In Brazil, children learn in school that Dumont, not the Wright Brothers, invented the airplane.

"I am very happy," Col Pontes, who had taken a Brazilian football team shirt with him on his mission, said. "I want to say: thank you for everything."

The 43-year-old Brazilian Air Force pilot's mission, which cost Brazil about US\$ 10 million, came less than three years after Brazil's space program met with disaster when a rocket exploded on the launch pad.

The explosion of the first Brazilian rocket, built to take satellites into orbit, killed 21 people at the site in the north of the country.

Col Pontes had been training since 1998 for such a mission, which was originally to have been on a US space shuttle.

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