

This Day in History... May 7, 1992

First Flight of the Space Shuttle *Endeavour*

On May 7, 1992, the Space Shuttle *Endeavour* embarked on its first mission, STS-49.

Following the *Challenger* disaster in 1986, space shuttles were grounded for two years, but plans for a new shuttle began. On August 1, 1987, the construction of a new shuttle to replace the *Challenger* was authorized.

For the first time, the shuttle's name was decided through a national competition in elementary and secondary schools. Children submitted essays about the name, the story behind it, and why it would be fitting for a NASA shuttle. *Endeavour* was the most popular entry by a wide margin. It was named after the ship that Captain James Cook took on his first voyage of discovery, the HMS *Endeavour*. Because they used the British spelling (rather than the American "Endeavor") the shuttle's name has often been misspelled. For instance, the Priority and Express Mail stamps above have hidden "scrambled indicia" of the names of six NASA space shuttles. However, *Endeavour* is misspelled Endeavor.



Stamp image based on a photograph of the *Endeavour*'s liftoff for the STS-57 mission.



Stamp pictures the *Endeavour* landing with its parachute open at Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

After construction was complete, the *Endeavour* arrived Kennedy Space Center's Shuttle Landing Facility on May 7, 1991. Exactly one year later, the *Endeavour* embarked on its first mission, STS-49. One of the major goals of this mission was to capture the INTELSAT VI satellite. It had been orbiting, but not functioning, and the crew was tasked with replacing its rocket motor. However, the shuttle hadn't been designed to retrieve the satellite, so a plan had to be developed. In the end, a three-person spacewalk was staged to get the satellite. It was retrieved, the motor replaced, and put back into orbit.

In addition to that mission, the crew had several other objectives. They performed medical tests to study how the human body performed in microgravity. They also put together footage for a video comparing their mission to Captain Cook's voyage. During their mission, the astronauts also conducted four spacewalks, the first time that many had been done in a single mission. One of these was also the longest spacewalk to have taken place up to that time, lasting over eight hours. It wasn't surpassed until nine years later and is still the second longest spacewalk.

Because of the successes of the mission, STS-49 was extended by two days to give the crew time to complete more objectives and prepare to land. When they returned to Earth on May 16, they were the first shuttle to use a drag chute to land.

Endeavour would go on to perform a total of 25 flights. During its second mission that September, the *Endeavour* carried the first African American woman into space, Mae Jemison. The following year, it flew the first servicing mission to the Hubble Telescope. Then in 1998, the *Endeavour* carried the Unity Module to the International Space Station.

The *Endeavour*, the fifth and final of America's operational shuttles built, made its last mission (STS-134) in May 2011. Over the course of its career, the *Endeavour* flew 122,883,151 miles and spent 299 days in space. After it was decommissioned, the *Endeavour* was sent to the California Science Center in Los Angeles. The shuttle was flown over several NASA and civil landmarks before arriving in Los Angeles. It was then slowly transported through the city streets. Its exhibit officially opened to the public on October 30, 2012. It remained on display until 2023 and will be moved to the Samuel Oschin Air and Space Center.



Stamp shows the space shuttle carrier aircraft taxiing to the runway to deliver the newly built *Endeavour* from Rockwell's factory in Palmdale, California.

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