By Catalin Cache, Science News Editor

Expedition 16 Crew Relieved of Duty

Space station commander hands over control to Expedition 17 crew

Expedition 16 was the first ever to have a female as the commander of the International Space Station. The team comprises astronaut Peggy Whitson, space station commander, flight engineer Yuri Malenchenko and second flight engineers Clayton Anderson, Daniel Tani, Leopold Eyharts and Garret Reisman. In fact, the Expedition 16 permanent crew on board the ISS at any given time consisted of only three astronauts, the second flight engineers being replaced throughout the mission, due to crew rotation. Yesterday, commander Peggy Whitson handed control of the space station to cosmonaut Sergei Volkovn - however, she will still command the ISS until the departure scheduled for Saturday. Withson and Malenchenko will return to Earth along with bioengineer So-Yeon Yi, the first South Korean in space, on board the Soyuz TMA-11 spacecraft, which carried the crew of Expedition 17 to the ISS. The Soyuz spacecraft is expected to land tomorrow at 08:30 GMT. "I'm officially handing over the International Space Station to Sergei Volkov, and I'm very happy to do so. We've had a really great privilege and honor to be here on the station when so much has changed, and we feel like we're handing over a very beautiful station to you guys and look forward to your work," said Whitson in a short video ceremony relayed by NASA TV. She and Malenchenko spent more than six months on board the ISS, since they were flown into space in October last year. During this time, the space station was visited by three separate space shuttles, Discovery, Atlantis and Endeavor, which delivered the Harmony connection module, Europe's Columbus space laboratory, the first section of JAXA's Kibo laboratory and a Canadian maintenance robot. "Thank you so much for such a pretty station, a beautiful station. We wish for you a safe trip back home and good luck," said Expedition 17 commander Sergei Volkov. He along with flight engineer Oleg Kononenko and South Korean astronaut So-yeon Yi, were flow into space on April 8 and arrived to the space station two days later. The second flight engineer, Garret Reisman, was already on the ISS, and will be part of Expedition 17. The ten-day flight in space of astronaut Yi was part of an agreement between Russia and South Korea. Yi had the role of conducting as series of experiments and educational activities, and cost South Korea 25 million US dollars.

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