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Dreams come true for little boy who wanted to be an astronaut

By Dana Bartholomew Staff Writer Posted: 07/04/2011 03:02:17 PM PDT Updated: 07/05/2011 09:51:14 AM PDT

James Kelly was glued to a black-and-white TV in a house surrounded by cornfields when Apollo astronauts first stepped onto the Moon in July 1969.

Just 5 at the time, the Iowa boy already had dreams of being an astronaut. Thirty-two years later, his wish came true as he piloted space shuttle Discovery into orbit.

"The really neat feeling was when the engine cut off," recalled Kelly, 47, a retired Air Force colonel and NASA astronaut at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. "Silence. Then when you first take a second to look out the window and see the earth.

"It was one of those things you wait for your whole life." Kelly is one of more than 350 U.S. astronauts to fly a space shuttle orbiter before it retires this month after a final mission by Atlantis.

The fastest winged vehicle ever, it has reached an orbital velocity of 17,500 mph - 10 times faster than a high-powered rifle bullet.

It has carried nearly 3.5 million pounds of cargo, including satellites and space station components, into space.

Launched like a spacecraft and landed like a plane, it was also the most complex machine ever built, according to NASA. And a product of Los Angeles County.

"The shuttle program has been absolutely amazing," Kelly, now in charge of the NASA CAPCOM

center which communicates to crews on the International Space Station. "Incredible. One of a kind. Nothing else like it.

"We're all going to miss it." Among its crews were Sally Ride, of Encino, the youngest American astronaut and the first woman in space. Kathryn Sullivan, of Woodland Hills, was also a shuttle astronaut.

The list also includes numerous astronauts who had worked at Jet Propulsion Laboratory in La Ca da Flintridge, including Taylor Wang, Gene Trinh, Stephanie Wilson, Andrew Thomas, Stanley Love and John Olivas.

They had nervously blasted off at Cape Canaveral at a force of 3 Gs, powered by 7 million pounds of thrust from the combined rocket boosters attached to a tank containing 1.6 million pounds of flammable liquid rocket fuel.

Then as it circled Earth, up to seven astronauts performed scientific missions inside and outside the orbiter. "It's like seven people in a Winnebago," Kelly said. "(Except) you don't really cook. You eat rehydrated food."

Landing the 230,000-pound shuttle after re-entering the Earth atmosphere was far different from testing 35 military jets over Edwards Air Force Base, he said.

Most aircraft land at 3 degrees. But gliding the shuttle in at 19 degrees he could never see the horizon. Only the fast-approaching ground, before leveling out at the last second.

Over 30 years, the space shuttle program lost two ships, the Challenger and Columbia, and 14 astronauts. In July 2005, Kelly piloted Discovery on a return to flight mission, 29 months after the tragic loss of Columbia.

"Space flight's never routine," Kelly said. "Especially our second flight, the first one after Columbia."

But he was less nervous, he said, because he'd flown the shuttle before. And because astronauts would check every ince of the spacecraft during a space walk.

Kelly credited Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne for building foolproof main shuttle engines. And for Southern California for building a beautiful space shuttle fleet.

"We focus on the space shuttle and astronauts," he said. "But the real heroes were all the folks that built it.

"I want to thank all the good people of Southern California for making the shuttle program happen."

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