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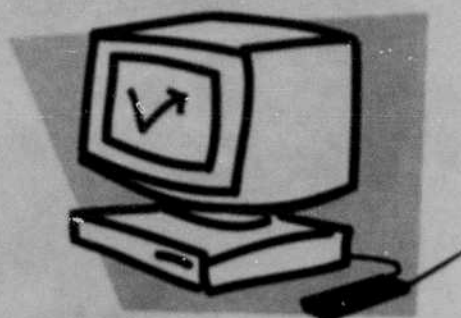


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NATIONAL

NEWS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

Astronauts rocket away with inflatable antenna

■ **NASA:** The shuttle's crew will also work on metal, crystal and biomedical experiments

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Space shuttle Endeavour and its crew rocketed into orbit Sunday and quickly began preparing for the big event: release of an inflatable antenna that will swell to the size of a tennis court.

The six astronauts will deploy the experimental antenna Monday morning; their first major task 177 miles up. Once free of Endeavour, the antenna will be filled with nitrogen gas, becoming the largest inflatable structure in space since the 1960s.

NASA's newest shuttle roared from its seaside pad at 6:30 a.m. — right around sunrise and right on time.

By early afternoon, Casper and his crew had begun work in a mini-laboratory filled with crystal, metal and biomedical experiments, squirted sea urchin sperm on up to 32,000 sea urchin eggs for a developmental study and practiced moving the shuttle robot arm in preparation for Monday's antenna release.

The antenna, mounted on three inflatable struts, will resemble a parachute once it pops out of a box the size of a kitchen table and is fully inflated.

It should expand to nearly 50 feet in diameter, and the struts should extend 92 feet. Depending on how long it remains in orbit, the reflective antenna may be visible from the southern half of the United States and elsewhere around the world at sunrise and sunset.

NASA hopes the \$14 million experiment will demonstrate the feasibility of launching spacecraft with inflatable antennas, sun shades and other major parts. Inflatable structures are much lighter — and cheaper — than traditional mechanical systems, and should be more reliable because of the lack of moving parts, officials said.

The antenna, made of thin Mylar, will be jettisoned from its reusable platform 1 1/2 hours after being inflated. It won't last long — researchers expect the antenna to plunge through the atmosphere and burn up within seven to eight hours, maybe a little longer.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration insists neither the shuttle nor astronauts will be in any danger as they observe the antenna from at least 400 feet away.

The last time shuttle astronauts flew an inflatable object, a rendezvous target in 1984, it burst. This time, there are vents, which should prevent such a problem, researchers said.

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