



May 25, 2012 - Image provided by NASA shows clouds The SpaceX Dragon capsule attaching with the International Space Station Friday. This is the first time a commercial company has accomplished this type of space operation.

Even before Elon Musk's Dragon spacecraft splashed this morning at 11:42 AM EST, two minutes ahead of schedule, Musk was already promising better things to come. "Thrusters will...fire during reentry to adjust touchdown point," he Tweeted as the spacecraft was preparing to reenter the atmosphere. "Next version will land w helicopter precision."

Today's splashdown, 560 mi. west of Baja California, was plenty precise enough, with spotting planes sighting the spacecraft even through heavy Pacific cloud cover less than 10 minutes after it landed. Idling not far away, was SpaceX's own 135 ft., crane-equipped barge, ready to grapple the spacecraft aboard. From there it will be taken to the company's test facility in McGregor, Tex., where 1,600 lbs. of cargo brought home from the International Space Station (ISS) will be unloaded and the Dragon itself will be examined bolt-by-bolt, chip-by-chip to see how its architecture, avionics and other essential systems survived thereentry. No matter what the shape of the ship turns out to be, however, there's no minimizing the magnitude of SpaceX's achievement.

Prior to last week, only the American, Russian, Japanese and European space programs had

visited the ISS. Prior to 2010, when Dragon notched its first mission, no private entity of any kind had ever orbited and safely recovered a spacecraft. Musk sat serenely in the front row of SpaceX's own mission control in its Hawthorne, Calif. headquarters throughout the reentry today, while NASA flight controllers in the far better known Houston Mission Control tracked the descent, coordinated with the ISS, and dispatched the P3 search planes. When splashdown was confirmed, the live feed caught Musk doing what would have been impossible—and perhaps literally unimaginable—to mission controllers of NASA's long ago golden era, which is to say, Tweeting some more.

"Splashdown successful!! Sending fast boat to Dragon lat/long provided by P3 tracking planes"

Musk could be forgiven those double exclamation points, since he had more than his rep as the coolest, most creative, most Steve Jobs-ian CEO in the space community on the line today. He also had a \$1.6 billion contract with NASA at stake, one that calls for him to make a dozen unmanned milk runs to the ISS, with an option to add four more—for more money, of course—if those go well. Manned flights could come not long after; Musk predicts the Dragon will be crew-rated by 2014. Not only that, SpaceX has an existing \$492 million satellite-launching deal with Iridium communications; another one, with Intelsat communications, was announced just yesterday.

Musk, the 41-year-old, South Africa-born founder of PayPal and Tesla Motors, was hardly a likely choice to make the kind of history he's making. With two undergraduate degrees—a BA in physics and a BA in economics from the University of Pennsylvania—he is largely an autodidact when it comes to rocketry. He learned how to build boosters and spacecraft mostly by reading about them, thinking very hard about them and talking to (and later hiring)engineers who had spent years in the aerospace industry.

That unconventional route is paying off in a big way. The race to replace the shuttle—and to cash in on the access-to-space needs of both NASA and private industry—is still officially a contest. NASA has a similar development deal with Virginia-based Orbital Sciences Corporation, and two others, strictly for crew-carrying vehicles, with Boeing and the Sierra Nevada Corporation, and it is careful to say good things about them all. Just hours before Dragon splashed down, the space agency sent out a press release applauding Sierra Nevada for completing a critical "test milestone" in the development of its spacecraft, and sent out a similar blast a week ago announcing the progressBoeing is making. The timing may have been coincidental, but there was still an everyone's-a-winner, kids' track meet quality to the releases.

NASA may not be allowed to play favorites, but the images from the splashdown site today made any effort at evenhandedness pointless. There was an entirely Apollo-like feel to the pod-like ship descending beneath its trio of 116-ft., red and white parachutes, then bobbing in the Pacific waters to await recovery. Dragon still has a long way to go before it's ready to fly Apollo-like missions, but it got a huge step closer today.

Read more: <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,2116184,00.html#ixzz1wTLWhym8>