Space Station's "doorway to space" scheduled to leave Huntsville, bound for Florida

The Joint Airlock Module -- the gateway from which astronauts aboard the International Space Station will enter and exit the 470-ton orbiting research facility -- is scheduled to leave the Marshall Space Flight Center (MSFC) in Huntsville, Ala. on September 13, bound for Kennedy Space Center, Fla. There, it will undergo final tests and preparation before its scheduled launch aboard the space shuttle next May.

The airlock is 20 feet (6.09 meters) long, has a diameter of 13 feet (4 meters) at its widest point and weighs 6-1/2 tons (5.8 metric tons). Boeing engineers and technicians at MSFC in Huntsville built it.

The airlock has two compartments: the crew lock, from which astronauts will enter and exit the Space Station; and the equipment lock, where spacewalkers will change into and out of their suits and stow all necessary gear.

The airlock is a critical Station element because of design differences between American and Russian spacesuits. Currently, American suits will not fit through Russian-designed airlocks. The Joint Airlock Module is specially designed to accommodate both suits, providing a chamber where astronauts from every nation can suit up for spacewalks to conduct science experiments and perform maintenance outside the Station.

On September 13, the airlock is scheduled to be moved from the space station manufacturing building to the Redstone Arsenal Airfield in Huntsville. There, it will be loaded aboard NASA's Super Guppy transport aircraft for the flight to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

After carrying the airlock into space, the shuttle crew will secure it to "Unity," the American-built connecting node module that currently comprises one third of the completed space station, along with the Russian modules "Zarya" and "Zvezda."

Boeing also built the Unity node at MSFC in Huntsville, as well as the "Destiny" science laboratory module, which is scheduled for launch next January.

The International Space Station is a cooperative endeavor by the United States and 15 other nations -- the largest multinational space construction effort in history. Orbital assembly is expected to be complete in 2005.

For further information:
Jim Keller
Boeing Communications Huntsville, AL
(256) 461-2803