

Mission to Mars

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(Adapted by ReadWorks)



It had taken many years of hard work, but at long last the day arrived. Humans were finally going to Mars. Hundreds of people were gathered at NASA's Kennedy Air Force Base to watch the spacecraft named Orion 254 shoot up into outer space. Almost everyone in the world had tuned in to watch the launch on their smartphones or on TV. Onboard the spacecraft, two astronauts were dressed in puffy white spacesuits. Their names were Roy and Ciara Thomas. They were a married couple. They had been specially chosen for this dangerous mission. In just a few minutes, they would blast off into outer space. They were about to travel farther away from Earth than anyone had traveled before.

A voice came over the speakers at the air force base. The crowd suddenly hushed. "In 1969, human beings walked on the moon for the first time," said the deep voice. "And now, in 2020, we expand our frontier to Mars. Please send your best wishes to our brave astronauts as they embark on this groundbreaking mission."

Everyone began to cheer and whistle. Ciara and Roy heard the cheering over their radio and smiled. Family and friends of the astronauts stood at the front of the crowd. Tears streamed down their faces. They were proud of Roy and Ciara, but they did not know when or if they would ever see them again. The mission was very risky. It would take at least one year to get to Mars. Earth was now as close as it ever got to Mars, but the Red Planet was still millions of miles away. Landing on the moon seemed a walk around the block by comparison.

The voice on the speakers started counting down to blastoff. "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one!" And with that, white-hot fire shot out of big fuel jets attached to the

spacecraft. The spacecraft shot up into the sky. In order to shoot the spacecraft from the Earth's surface all the way into outer space, the fuel tanks had to send a huge amount of force against the ground to fight against the force of Earth's gravity. That was why the jets had to be so big and powerful.

Within minutes, Roy and Ciara passed through the top layers of the atmosphere. Now that the spacecraft had escaped the Earth's gravitational pull, the fuel jets were no longer needed. They broke away from the spacecraft and drifted off into the vastness of outer space. Roy and Ciara began to float inside the craft. This was because they were no longer weighed down by Earth's gravity. Oxygen tanks fed air into the craft so that they could breathe. Roy and Ciara took their first deep breaths in space and gazed out the window. A blue sphere rose before them like a giant, shining jewel. That was the earth, and they were now flying away from it at 75,000 miles per hour.

"Ground control to Roy and Ciara," said a happy voice on the radio. It was Mission Control.

"Roy Thomas to Mission Control," said Roy.

"That was a perfect takeoff," the officer said. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks," said Roy. "We'll keep you posted as we move along."

NASA chose Roy and Ciara for the Mars mission because they were both very intelligent and physically fit. Roy was tall and broad-shouldered. He had been an Air Force captain before joining the team at NASA. Ciara was a small, thin woman. She had worked as a scientist before she became an astronaut.

NASA also chose Roy and Ciara for the mission because they were happily married. Over such a long trip, NASA felt it was better to send people who got along well. If anything went wrong during the mission, Roy and Ciara would have to work as a team to fix the problem. There would be many challenges. They had a limited number of oxygen tanks, which meant a limited amount of air. If the mission went on for too long, Roy and Ciara could run out of air to breathe. All their food was stored in vacuum-sealed packs and tubes. They would have to live without freshly-cooked meals. To maintain a good attitude amidst these challenges, the two astronauts really had to enjoy each other's company. But the risks of the mission did not seem to worry either Roy or Ciara. They were excited to learn more about the universe and push the frontier of human knowledge further.

For one quiet year, the couple sailed across the vastness of space. Every now and then Roy started to feel cramped inside the small craft. When this happened, he exercised on the special fitness machines. Or else he put on his spacesuit and climbed outside of the spacecraft to check that all the parts were running smoothly. Ciara wrote in a journal about the beautiful sights she saw out the window. She saw distant galaxies and stars as well as a giant asteroid not so far away. By the time Roy and Ciara were getting close to the dry, red planet of Mars, people on Earth had almost forgotten about them. But then the news reminded them. The headlines said, "Humans on Mars! Another giant leap for mankind!"

Finally, it was time for Roy and Ciara to land on Mars. Roy steered the spacecraft toward a flat plain on the surface of Mars, just between two deep craters. He was an expert pilot, and he landed the spacecraft with a gentle thud.

"Bravo!" shouted Mission Control. Everyone was clapping in the background. "You're about to make history!"

The astronauts carefully put on their spacesuits. They strapped an extra layer on top of the suits to protect themselves against radiation. Unlike Earth, Mars does not have a very thick atmosphere or an ozone layer. Because of this, the radiation from the sun is many times stronger on Mars.

In a pouch attached to her spacesuit, Ciara carried jars and a small shovel to collect Martian soil. She would be the first person to bring Martian soil back to Earth. What would they discover in it? Alien bacteria? Some strong new metal?

Roy switched on the cameras outside the spacecraft, so people back on Earth could watch them take their first steps on Mars. The two astronauts fixed microphones to the insides of their suits. The microphones would allow them to talk to each other, Mission Control, and other people on Earth. Then they connected their spacesuits to cords inside the craft. Finally, they stepped out into the swirling dust on the surface of Mars.

As he took his first steps, Roy saw a flicker of silver out of the corner of his eye. It seemed to move through the air and land behind a rock to his right. Roy forgot that he had to move slowly and ran forward to get a better look. In that moment, the cord attaching him to the spacecraft suddenly snapped. There was not enough gravity on Mars to hold Roy steadily on the ground, so he started to float into the air. People watching from Earth gripped their chairs in fear.

Ciara saw what happened. Right away she shouted, “Throw something out in front of you! As hard as you can!”

Roy knew when to listen to his wife. He took a big hammer from his tool belt and threw it in front of him with all his might. The force of his throw created an equal and opposite force that sent Roy flying backwards. He flew right back into the spacecraft. He grabbed hold of the doors of the craft to steady himself and then looked at the broken cord. Luckily, they had the materials to fix the tear, and Ciara and Roy worked together quickly to patch it up. Within fifteen minutes they were back out on the surface. Mission Control and most of planet Earth cheered them on.

“Mars landing, take two,” said Roy.

“What happened?” asked the commander at Mission Control. “Why did you run forward like that?”

“You’re not going to believe this,” said Roy. “But I swear I saw something silver moving behind that rock just ahead.”

“Are you saying . . . are you saying that you might have seen a life form?” asked the commander in a serious, quiet voice.

“Could be,” said Roy. “We won’t know for sure until we explore a bit.”

“Indeed,” said Ciara. “We’ll have to be very quiet and slow.”

Side by side and tools in hand, Roy and Ciara walked together into the mysterious red landscape.