



Aussies, Kiwis Take Mir Deorbit in Stride

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SYDNEY, Australia -- When Russias wobbly Mir hits Earth, ideally it will crash as a line of fireballs in the south Pacifics "space junk graveyard," sinking with little fanfare to the bottom of the sea.

But if the geriatric station veers off course during its final atmospheric cremation, Australia and New Zealand could be two recipients of Mirs metallic bones. At this point, both countries are taking the risk in stride.

"Provided that the Russians maintain some control over the reentry, the likelihood of the final orbit being over New Zealand or Australia is low," says Patrick Helm, chairman of New Zealand's ad hoc Satellite Reentry Committee.

"Any slippage would have to be several complete orbits to pose a problem this far to the west," he said.

In New Zealand, the Satellite Reentry Committee operates at the prime ministerial and cabinet level. In Australia, Emergency Management Australia, the lead agency for natural disasters, is handling preparations.

There's little either country can do right now but watch and wait. While Russian officials put the risk of Mir veering off course and hitting land at around 3 percent, it's a risk worth keeping tabs on.

"For the Mir splashdown, the Russians seem well prepared and are keeping the international community well informed," Helm said. "Our diplomatic representatives in Moscow are being briefed, along with those of other countries."

Australia also seems reassured by what it hears.

"From the information provided thus far, the risk of anything falling on Australia is very minimal," said Brian Flanagan, spokesman for Emergency Management Australia.

Thus far, Mir's return to Earth isn't generating panic. Most denizens of the antipodes these days seem more worried about skin damage from the late summer sun than space junk from the heavens. Perhaps that's because both Australia and New Zealand have been hit before by space junk and everybody survived.

In 1972, New Zealand was hit by the mysterious "Ashburton Balls," named after the South Island hamlet where four 30-pound (14-kilogram), Cyrillic-lettered titanium gas canisters fell onto local farmland. The canisters were believed to be Soviet, possibly from some space probe intended for Venus.

Space law required that the space junk be returned to its national owner, but the Soviets denied knowledge or ownership of the balls. That left the farmer upon whose property the balls fell as the lucky owner, said Graeme Beere, a retired adviser to New Zealand's Defense Ministry who helped conduct the investigation.

In 1979, Australia was hit by America's Skylab, which fell largely over parts of remote Western Australia, albeit with a few chunks hitting suburban Perth. That event caused a manic rush by souvenir hunters. One collected \$10,000 from the *San Francisco Examiner* after becoming the first person to deliver a piece of the space station to the newspaper's San Francisco newsroom.

While neither the Ashburton Balls nor Skylab caused any injuries on Earth, Mir could be a different story. At 135 tons, it's twice as big as Skylab.

At present, the plan is for Mir to pass over the Pacific Ocean from northwest to southeast, beginning to combust from atmospheric friction as it passes over the equator somewhere east of New Guinea at roughly 50 miles (80 kilometers) in altitude.

Mir will then break up as it falls, strewing roughly 40 tons of fire-resistant leftover debris in a line of empty south Pacific ocean from northwest to southeast in which the next potential landfall in its flight line would be Tierra del Fuego.

The Southern Hemisphere ocean between New Zealand and Chile has to be among the loneliest places on Earth. There are few islands, little boat traffic and not much aviation. In short, it's an ideal place to drop something big, awkward and hard to control from space.

For its part, New Zealand realizes it's at the end of the world making its neighborhood a logical one to bring down a beast like Mir.

"To a large extent, there isn't a lot we can do about it," Helm said. "In the past, we've simply alerted civil defense and police, and then we issue instructions on procedures on what to do if something is found."

Happily, Mir doesn't appear to have any dangerous materials aboard, Helm said.

That's unlike in January 1978, when the Russian nuclear-powered satellite Cosmos 954 crashed over northern Canada, spraying radioactive material over the region and causing an expensive cleanup hindered significantly by a mistrustful Soviet Union wary of releasing many details about the craft.

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