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“I was in Cape Canaveral; it was an indescribable feeling.”

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"There was disappointment, **there's no denying it**. But the thrill of that moment was priceless." **Marco Airaghi**, from Saronno, was present in Cape Canaveral last weekend, when **the Shuttle should have taken off, carrying the Italian astronaut Roberto Vittori** to an orbiting space station.

Airaghi, who, last January, was appointed, by merit, **Major** of the Aeronautical Corps by the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, was present in his role of **Vice Chairman of the Italian Space Agency**, and advisor to the Minister of Defence.

After a technical fault, the **launch was cancelled and scheduled for May 8**. "Even though I think it's **unlikely we'll be able to take off on that date**," Airaghi explains. "When I spoke to him, Vittori also seemed rather doubtful. The fault, which was possibly due to lightning that struck the Shuttle the night before the launch, is serious; **one of the command boxes of the Shuttle's stabilisers** was damaged. There were the reserves, but the security procedure forced us to postpone the launch. The tests on this equipment need time, I don't think we'll be ready for May 8."

It is not the first time that Airaghi has gone to NASA: "It's the fourth time," he says. "I had **already seen the launch of a shuttle a few months ago**. It was an unforgettable experience, an event of such power. It was night-time, suddenly the sky turned blue, even though it was six kilometres away, then I heard the noise and felt the pressure wave. A huge thrill. It would have been fantastic to repeat that sensation the other day, also when I think that **there was a**

personal friend, and qualified Air Force officer on board."

Airaghi, has always remained in contact with Vittori. "I spoke to him two hours before the flight, he was ready and, as the time of the flight drew near, he became tense, **because a launch is always risky**. There are the first two minutes, when the shuttle **is without human control**. He was tense, but calm and convinced. The day after the postponement, I could hear he was **drained, and subdued**. Evidently the fall in adrenaline was being felt. He hoped to see his family soon."

Over the last few days, Airaghi, who has returned to Italy, and Vittori, who has stayed in the United States, have communicated only with text messages. "I'd like to see Roberto **go to the orbiting space station**," he explains, "but we still don't know the date with any certainty; I don't know if I can be there. But **it's only a wait, a postponement**. "

However, there is **a small disappointment**, due to the fact that there is another Italian astronaut in space, Paolo Nespoli, and **he should return on 25 May**. "It would have been fantastic to be one of the few countries in the world to have two astronauts in space at the same time. But it's a small point. **We're looking forward to the new launch**."

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