

Paper plane to be launched from space

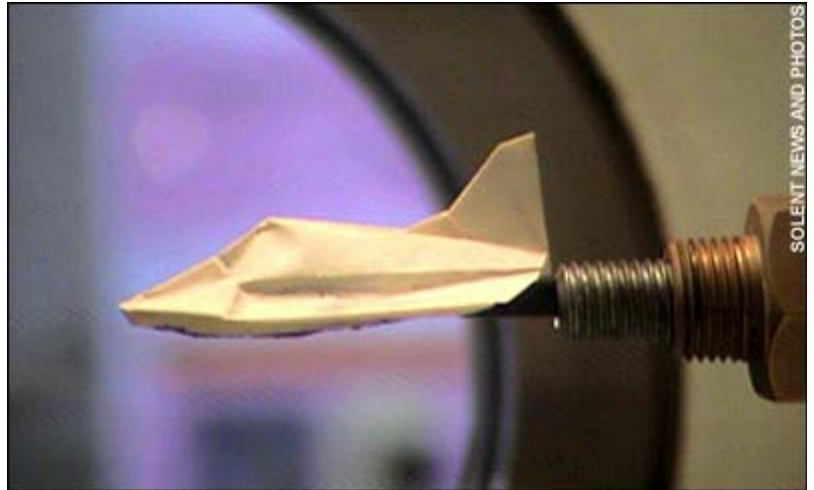
By Roger Highfield, Science Editor
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A paper airplane is to be launched from the International Space Station to mark a new dawn in space travel.

The eight inch plane is the result of an unlikely collaboration between a Japanese professor of aerospace engineering and origami masters to design a novel kind of spacecraft.

Given its rounded nose and that it is made of folded silicon treated heat resistant paper, tests suggest that it could survive the descent to Earth, which would not be fiery.

When released from the International Space Station, which orbits at around 250 miles, it would be travelling at Mach 20, that is 20 times the speed of sound, but should slow considerably to Mach 7, as it falls through the upper layers of the Earth's atmosphere.



A prototype of the plane is tested in a hypersonic wind tunnel

A smaller prototype paper plane was tested up to Mach 7, reaching temperatures of between 200 and 300 °C at the University of Tokyo's Kashiwa campus last Thursday.

The novel project could inspire new designs for lightweight re-entry vehicles, or for planes to explore the upper atmosphere, says Prof Shinji Suzuki, from the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics at the University of Tokyo, who worked on th

"We're gaining confidence (from the successful test)," Prof Suzuki says. "We want to have astronaut Koichi Wakata, who is due to start work on the International Space Station this year, take it with him. The technology from paper planes could be applied in the development of new transport craft."

"We hope the space station crew will write a message of peace on the plane before they launch it," adds Prof Suzuki. "We don't know where in the world the plane will land, but it would be nice to send a message to whoever finds it."

Prof Suzuki plans to write a message on the plane in many languages, asking anyone who finds the pioneering space vehicle to return it to the Japan Origami Airplane Association.

"This origami airplane might some day actually fly," comments Jim Longuski, an expert in aeronautics at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana "I don't think it's crazy at all," he tells New Scientist.