

STAR WATCH: Space travel takes big step

Written by Editorial Staff

Friday, 10 December 2010 12:34

“To go where no man has gone before.” It was the mission of Capt. James T. Kirk and his crew in the 1960s. In the near future, it could be the mission of almost anyone.

This week marked the first launch into orbit of a privately-owned spaceship, Space Exploration Technologies Corporation's, Dragon. It is a welcome step for those who understand that commercialization of space travel is essential to ushering in a time when ordinary human beings can venture into space.

Space Exploration Technologies Corp., or SpaceX, was founded in 2002 by PayPal co-founder Elon Musk. The company has a \$1.6 billion contract with NASA to conduct 12 resupply missions to the International Space Station after the announced end of flights of NASA's space shuttle program. Another company, Orbital Sciences Corp., has a similar contract.

Private companies have been pushing around the edge of space travel for several years. Aviation pioneer Burt Rutan built a spaceship for billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson that has achieved suborbital flights and is scheduled to offer individual flights just beyond the edge of the Earth's atmosphere at some point. Musk reportedly put \$100 million into SpaceX and recently raised another \$50 million from private investors for the company. The company reportedly has several contracts involving its two rockets, Falcon 1 and Falcon 9 and has plans to develop vehicles for carrying even heavier loads to space. On its maiden voyage, Dragon carried eight small nanosatellites and a block of cheese (in homage to a Monty Python skit).

While certainly in its infancy, privately-owned space travel is targeting the day that humans can venture beyond our world. At first, it certainly will be the province of the rich. But like most everything else, through time, costs and affordability will come down. There is even talk of a space hotel.

We've come a long way since the travels of Capt. Kirk. Just imagine where we will be tomorrow.