

American given go on spacewalk

■ NASA approves Mir mission as the second Russian-U.S. exploration.

MOSCOW (AP) — An American astronaut who endured the worst crash in the history of space exploration — and lots of other cosmic headaches — got long-awaited good news Thursday: He gets to cap his thrill-a-minute stay on Mir with a spacewalk.

NASA approved Michael Foale's participation in Saturday's mission barely a day before he is to float out of the Russian space station. Foale will assist Anatoly Solovyov on what the agency described as a six-hour reconnaissance mission.

Making only the second Russian-U.S. spacewalk, the two men are to look for punctures in the damaged Spektr module, pierced by a cargo ship in a June 25 collision with Mir.

Even though the decision had been expected for weeks, it had to be a relief for Foale. He was openly disappointed at the scrubbing of his first scheduled spacewalk — Mission Control called it that although it was inside the station — into the airless, sealed-off Spektr in July. Russian officials opted then to

leave the job to a replacement crew of freshly rested cosmonauts.

With Mir safety conditions under intense scrutiny after a months of mechanical breakdowns, accidents and a fire, NASA waited until almost the last possible moment before approving the plan during a meeting with Russian officials at Mission Control outside Moscow.

Frank Culbertson, director of NASA's shuttle-Mir program, said everyone involved in the reviews, in both countries, made sure "that we've covered all the bases and that we understand the levels of risk."

Speaking from Johnson Space Center in Houston, Culbertson described the spacewalk as being of "moderate risk" and "not very complicated."

The main hazards of the walk are sharp edges on the exterior of Mir that could rip spacesuits, said Gregory Harbaugh, acting manager of NASA's spacewalk projects office.

However risky, the task is unlikely to faze Foale, who since arriving on Mir in May has lived through the near-catastrophic June collision, a power blackout, malfunctions in the oxygen generation system and a computer crash.

The 40-year-old Foale is no

rookie, having done a spacewalk outside a shuttle in 1995. He has had 44 hours of spacewalk training inside Mir and 148 hours of Russian training before his launch to Mir, according to NASA.

Still, American officials requested that he be paired with the veteran Solovyov.

The much-decorated 49-year-old cosmonaut is without peer in open space, having logged more than 41 hours there on nine walks. He also performed vital repairs in an interior spacewalk with Mir engineer Pavel Vinogradov last month.

The original plan for Saturday was to have Foale and Solovyov patch any holes they could find in Spektr. But after Thursday's planning session, NASA said the agenda was full even without repair work and that patching will be left for future spacewalks.

The spacewalkers will closely inspect the Mir hull and videotape any damage, searching in particular for holes in a radiator that was hit by the supply ship, as well as around a solar array on Spektr that got mangled.

They also will try to realign at least one of the three undamaged solar panels, positioning it to collect more sunlight.

If there's time, the men will also attach a cap on the core module to serve as a vent valve for another carbon dioxide-removal system, and will try to retrieve a radiation gauge that was placed outside by Jerry Linenger during the previous U.S.-Russian spacewalk last spring.

Russian space officials, meanwhile, argued on in the often harsh debate about who caused the June crash.

A space commission reportedly issued findings that ground controllers share responsibility for the collision with the Mir's former crew, contradicting an earlier verdict that blamed only cosmonauts Vasily Tsibliyev and Alexander Lazutkin.

A third, inter-agency commission will have the final say.

Another former Mir cosmonaut jumped in to back Tsibliyev and Lazutkin, saying the 11-year-old station is full of delapidated equipment.

The Mir's equipment is used "until it's completely worn out and this always has very dangerous consequences," former Mir flight engineer Gennady Strekalov told Associated Press Television. "It's all down to a lack of funding. And the crew can't be blamed.

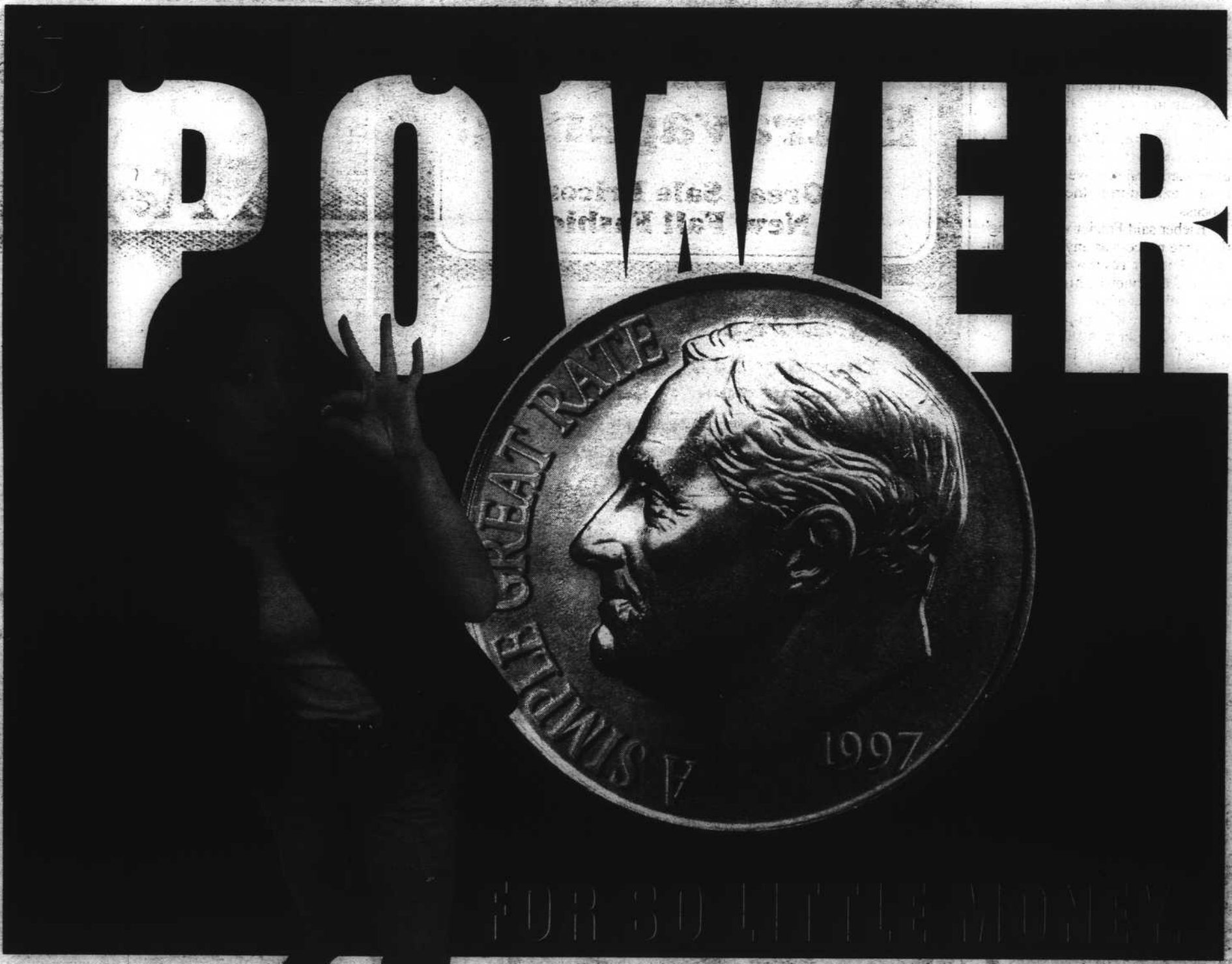
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