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NASA'S LITTLE HELICOPTER ON MARS HAS LOGGED ITS LAST FLIGHT

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In this image made available by NASA, the Mars Ingenuity helicopter hovers above the surface of the planet during its second flight on April 22, 2021. On Thursday, Jan. 25, 2024, NASA announced that the 4-pound chopper can no longer fly because of rotor blade damage, and its mission is officially over. | Photo Credit: AP

NASA’s little Mars helicopter has flown its last flight.

The space agency announced Thursday that the 4-pound (1.8-kilogram) chopper named Ingenuity can no longer fly because of rotor blade damage. While it remains upright and in contact with flight controllers, its $85 million mission is officially over, officials said.

Originally intended as a short-term tech demo, Ingenuity logged 72 flights over three years at Mars. It accumulated more than two hours of flight time, traveling 11 miles (18 kilometres). That's more than 14 times farther than planned, according to NASA. It soared as high as 79 feet (24 metres) and hit speeds of up to 22.4 mph (36 kph).

"While we knew this day was inevitable, it doesn’t make it any easier” to announce the end of the mission, said NASA's Lori Glaze. “It’s almost an understatement to say that it has surpassed expectations.”

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Ingenuity hitched a ride on NASA’s Perseverance rover, landing on Mars in 2021. It ended up serving as a scout for the rover and proved powered flight was possible in the thin Martian atmosphere.

Images beamed back this week from its last flight showed that one or more of its rotor blades suffered damage while landing and may have hit the surface. The blades are no longer usable, according to NASA.

The helicopter ascended to 40 feet (12 metres) on its final flight last week, hovering for a few seconds before descending. It mysteriously lost contact with the nearby rover — its communication relay — while still 3 feet (1 metre) off the ground. Once communication was restored, the damage was confirmed. The reason for the loss of communication is under

investigation.

Ingenuity's success prompted NASA in 2022 to add two mini helicopters to a future Mars mission.

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