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# Tale of sea buff's 13 days in space

By RICHARD MACEY

MEGAN McArthur once entertained visitors at a California marine park by jumping into an aquarium to feed the sharks.

Recently, the oceanographer turned astronaut hooked something much bigger.

Flying aboard the space shuttle Atlantis last May, she used a 15m robot arm to catch the 19-year-old Hubble space telescope and reel it in for a final service.

Seeing the telescope, which is the size of a school bus, looming outside the shuttle's windows was something she would never forget, Dr McArthur said in Sydney yesterday.

"It's big. It looks really big, and you are getting closer and closer."

However, it was something far more ordinary that

took her by surprise during her 13 days in orbit.

As she circled far above the Earth, she looked down to see a night-time thunderstorm raging far below.

As lightning flashed thunderstorms cells would glow with a neon-purple light. One flash would trigger another lightning bolt in an adjacent cell, then another.

"It was like a purple worm," Dr McArthur said.

"It was a light show on the surface of the Earth, for hundreds of miles. It was really breathtaking."

Working inside Atlantis, Dr McArthur served as the crane driver, using the mechanical arm to lift four space-walking astronauts up to replace Hubble's ageing scientific instruments and equipment.

After the work was completed, giving Hubble at least a five-year life extension, the seven astronauts released the telescope and relaxed by watching movies.

"We watched the new Star Trek movie, then we watched Apollo 13," she said, laughing at their second choice.

"Three guys stuck in space, not sure how they're getting home..."

Dr McArthur, who talked about her experiences to school students yesterday as part of National Science Week, said switching from working under the sea to up in space was not that big a career change.

"We're still exploring the ocean. We can't live under water any better than we can in space."

PHOTO: GLOBE PHOTOS



**DR McARTHUR**