



The Astronaut Scouter

Distinguished Eagle Scout Mike Fossum Balances Scouting Involvement With a Job That's Literally out of this World.

By Mark Ray

The Eagletter

Spring 2008

Just before his interview to become an astronaut, Mike Fossum decided to review the application he'd submitted months earlier. He couldn't find his copy, so he stopped by the astronaut selection office to look at the original from his file.

"I noticed that two things had been underlined: distinguished graduate from Air Force Test Pilot School and Eagle Scout," he said. Although he never found out who underlined those items—or why—he's not surprised that the Eagle Scout award would stand out. "It says something about who you are and the kind of journey you've been on," he said.

Fossum's Scouting journey began when he joined a Cub Scout pack in McAllen, Texas, and it continues to this day. The father of one Eagle Scout and two Eagles-to-be, Fossum serves as Scoutmaster of Troop 1598 in Webster, Texas, when he's not orbiting the earth at 17,500 miles per hour.

His life might have followed a different trajectory, however, if his Webelos Scout leader, Mickey Alleyn, had not been persistent, even pesky. Fossum's Boy Scout troop was having some leadership issues when he joined, and the new Scout quickly became disillusioned and quit the troop. When Alleyn (who'd moved on to a different troop) learned that Fossum had dropped out, he began a one-man campaign to get him back into Scouting. "He kept hunting me down, trying to talk me into going back and giving it another try," Fossum said. "I found out years later he was talking to my parents when he knew I was not at home, and he was talking to the leaders of my troop about the problems they must have if a kid like Mike was quitting. He was real serious."

After six months, Fossum agreed to return to Scouting, a decision he's never regretted. "Scouting very likely saved my life literally and figuratively," he said. "I had a lot of energy; I liked excitement. Scouting gave me a positive way to get challenged, to get some excitement."

Much of that excitement came in the Order of the Arrow. As ceremonies chairman of the OA's Wewanoma Lodge, Fossum spent a lot of his spare time at Camp Perry, working on the OA ceremony ring with his buddies. He also spent the summer of 1975 on camp staff, teaching several merit badges, including astronomy. He loved learning about space, although by then he'd given up on becoming an astronaut. After all, that was "crazy talk," something that didn't happen to normal people.

That same summer found him at Philmont Scout Ranch, where he participated in the Kit Carson Man program, now known as the Rayado Trek program. "That was a life-changing experience," Fossum said, combining a rugged schedule of backpacking with such challenging activities as rappelling.

Fossum became an Eagle Scout and Vigil Honor member of the Order of the Arrow during high school. He then left for Texas A&M, where he eventually became a commander in the Corps of Cadets. (His two brothers are also Eagle Scouts.)

After graduation, Fossum joined the U.S. Air Force, which sent him to graduate school in Ohio and then loaned him to NASA, where the space shuttle program was just beginning. Fossum's office at the Johnson Space Center was just down the hall from the astronaut office, and as he got to know the men and women who were training to fly in space, he rekindled his childhood dreams of taking flight himself.

One astronaut, Eagle Scout Ellison Onizuka, convinced Fossum that the best way for him to become an astronaut was actually to leave NASA and complete the flight test engineering program at Air Force Test Pilot School. He followed his friend's advice, graduating from the school in 1985—the year before the Challenger accident killed Onizuka and six other astronauts.

Fossum returned to NASA in 1993 and worked as a systems engineer until he joined the astronaut corps in August 1998. On July 4, 2006, he blasted into space aboard Space Shuttle Endeavor as part of the STS-121 shuttle mission. He logged more than 306 hours in space, including 21 hours spent on three spacewalks. He was scheduled to return to space this May on shuttle mission STS-124.

As he moved between Texas, Ohio, and California, Fossum tried to stay connected with Scouting. He and his wife led a co-ed Explorer post at their church in Ohio, and he served as an assistant Scoutmaster in California until his second son was born. "At that point, my wife kind of put her foot down and said, 'Okay, you're not leaving me at home outnumbered while you're out camping with other people's kids,'" he said.

Once his sons were old enough for Scouting, however, Fossum was back in full force. In fact, when his two older sons joined different Scout troops, he did, too. "I was an assistant in both of them for about four years," he said. "That hurts."

Considering himself "a normal guy with a pretty outrageous job," he rarely talked with people in Scouting about what he did for a living. But then someone at an OA event found out, and a young Arrowman asked for his autograph. "A couple of the

long-time Scouters that I'd been working with for years wanted to know why in the world that kid wanted my autograph," he said. "It was all over then. My cover was blown."

Fossum may have kept quiet about his day job, but he has never hidden his passion for Scouting from his colleagues at NASA. And his Scouting background has paid off in some surprising ways.

As Fossum's crew prepared for STS-121, shuttle engineers became concerned about the Velcro straps that would hold down a piece of equipment in the payload bay as Endeavor returned to earth. When someone suggested tying a knot, Fossum said the clove hitch is what the Boy Scouts would use. In typical NASA fashion, the engineers convened meetings, researched knots, conducted pull testing and materials testing, and finally settled on the appropriate knot—the clove hitch.

And so, on his final spacewalk 220 miles above the earth, Fossum tied down the equipment using clove hitches. "I had fun with that," he said. "I actually made a note while I was outside doing it that I'd better get this right or my Boy Scouts will never let me forget it."

Fossum's first spacewalk also had a Scouting connection. As he stepped out of the International Space Station, connected to it by nothing but a slender cable, he thought back to his experience at Philmont. "To me it was the same sort of feeling I had when I went off the lip of the first cliff I rappelled off of at Philmont, saying, 'Boy, I hope this thing works,'" he said. "It was good mental preparation for me many years later to slide out of the airlock hatch."

After his shuttle flight, Fossum took over as Scoutmaster of Troop 1598. Although his work schedule sometimes conflicts with his Scouting duties, he said he's supported by a great group of adults who can fill in for him when he's out of town—or out in space.

He's also driven by his firsthand knowledge of the difference Scouting can play in young men's lives. "Next to my father and my pastor, my Scoutmasters and other Scout leaders were the most influential male role models in my life—and they literally may have saved my life," he said. "There's no way I can pay them back for the difference they made in my life, so I do my best to pay it forward so another generation might enjoy the adventures and promise of Scouting."