

The Good Life Local Sports

Astronaut Jon McBride Visits NJ School

By: Michael Vandenberg

Students at Old Bridge’s McDivitt Elementary were given a rare treat recently when Captain Jon McBride, a NASA Astronaut, came to visit as part of the school’s 50th anniversary celebration. The children, grades K-5, were visibly fascinated by Jon’s 45 minute assembly in which he described his background, all things NASA, and how they shouldn’t be afraid to dream big.

Principal Lauri Coletti reached high herself when she was planning the day’s events. Earlier in the day, the students got to open a time capsule originally assembled in 1973 by students celebrating the school’s fifth anniversary. But it was important to Lauri, for the school’s 50th, to get an astronaut to commemorate the truly special nature of the occasion. After all, McDivitt Elementary owes its name to James McDivitt, who is famous for his participation in both the Gemini and Apollo space missions.

Fortunately, the school was able to book Jon, who not only knows James personally but is good friends with him too. “He’s one of the most outstanding individuals I’ve ever met. His only problem is that he was in the Air Force,” joked Navy guy Jon, having some fun with the rivalry between the two branches.

Before the Navy, Jon grew up in a small

town in West Virginia. One day when he was in high school, Senator John F. Kennedy stopped by during his presidential campaign. “I heard he was going to be in our courthouse, so when I got out of school I ran across town and I was the first person in there. I got to spend about ten minutes with Jackie and John Kennedy, which turned out to be one of the highlights of my whole life.” A year later, President Kennedy promised the moon by the end of the decade, and Jon knew he had to be an astronaut.

As you know, the astronaut field has never exactly been a cakewalk to get into. But Jon knew from the few that had done it before him that they all tended to have experience flying a lot of different varieties of planes in the Air Force or Navy. Jon joined the Navy as a fighter pilot and ended up at the controls for over 600 missions, most originating from an aircraft carrier. He also went to test pilot school and flew as many airplanes as he could, just as astronauts like John Glenn did. Finally in 1977 NASA was looking for new applicants to fly on its new ship called the Space Shuttle. After two years, Jon was one of 200 finalists out of 18,000 applicants invited down to Houston to go through the intense, week-long final portion of the process. When it was all said and done, Jon had made it into the first group

of Space Shuttle astronauts.

Before he was selected for his mission, Jon was chosen as the emergency chase pilot for Columbia’s inaugural liftoff on April 12th, 1981 from Cape Canaveral and landing two days and 35 orbits later in California. “What a wonderful for day for NASA, for the space business, and myself to be there and witness that very first landing of the Space Shuttle, hoping to get to fly the Space Shuttle myself.”

Jon finally got that chance with mission STS-41-G, the 13th Space Shuttle mission and sixth flight for Challenger. The crew of seven (a record number at the time) also included Sally Ride on her second mission, first Canadian in space Marc Garneau, and first Australian in space Paul Scully-Power.

Once they were chosen, the crew had to go through intensive training only familiar to the 300 people who have ever gone to space. That includes a few flights on a retrofitted Boeing 707 not-so-lovingly nicknamed the “Vomit Comet”. Trainees don’t stay at cruising altitude for very long: the plane ascends vertically as high as possible and then purposely drops out for about 30 seconds in order to provide weightlessness much the same as that in zero-gravity space. The plane levels off significantly closer to the ground, and then goes up again. This process repeats for two hours so that the astronauts-to-be can get enough weightlessness experience as possible. “Don’t eat a big meal before you go for a flight in that,” warned Jon.

As a pilot, Jon also practiced in a special plane specifically designed for Space Shuttle training. The plane’s architecture and handling resembled the shuttle, while the inside had a unique cockpit configuration: “The left side looked like a Space Shuttle cockpit, while the right side looked like a regular airplane. My instructor would sit on the right and I’d sit on the left.” The teacher would take the plane eight miles up and then point it at the ground. At that point, Jon would have to take over the controls and fly the rest of the way as if it were the shuttle. He had to do this 600 times.

There are plenty of other fascinating aspects of astronaut training, but one more of particular note is NASA’s gymnasium-sized diving tank in Houston. Here the trainees had a full scale model of a Space Shuttle and, with specialized suits, could practice tasks in “zero gravity” (actually neutral buoyancy) for hours at a time.

Finally, the day came: liftoff. Sitting there, strapped in his chair, looking straight up at the night sky through the cockpit

window, Jon thought, “I better not mess up.” He remembers seeing the sunrise off the eastern coast of Florida as he took off. Well, the first one: as he orbited the Earth, he witnessed a sunrise every 90 minutes, about 16 per day. Another fun fact about being in space, Jon remembered, is that his body changed during the journey. His fluids, no longer tied down by gravity, moved up into his head and made his face look puffier. The body stretches out in this environment as well: when Jon came back to Earth, he was briefly two inches taller.

In space, they had plenty of work to do: they had 16 hour workdays participating in experiments and other important projects for NASA. Two crewmembers performed an EVA, more commonly known as a spacewalk. He spent almost all his waking hours working, but Jon wouldn’t have it any other way.

Although they had a lot of work, they still found some time to have a little fun. There is a common routine where the whole crew will fly past the TV camera and mission control will do a quick headcount. Someone had an idea. They’d all go past the camera, but then go up to the top deck, take off their flight jackets, and then go past again. “So the first seven people came by with their flight jackets on, but then all of a sudden here comes numbers eight, nine, and ten.” They fooled the flight administrator, making him think there were suddenly 14 crewmembers.

Of course, nothing beats the work environment. Actually being in space himself was a truly humbling and awe-inspiring experience. “The biggest impression it made on me was the beauty of this planet from space and the universe.” Not having to look through the filtered atmosphere or in pictures and just seeing the Earth as one little ball floating in space puts things in perspective. “It’s indescribable, really. You can talk and talk and show pictures and movies, but until you’re up there and experience it yourself, and the awesomeness of being able to look out and see thousands of miles of our Earth and at the same time living in weightlessness,” was something he’ll never forget.

Although he’s done otherworldly things, he’s not superhuman. Jon tried to emphasize that he’s a regular guy, just like the kids in the room. “I came from a little town in West Virginia. The rest of the astronauts all came from a regular American background,” said Jon. They’re all normal people who worked really hard and answered the call.

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