



Of Planets and Pittsburgh

Astronaut Mike Fincke relishes life in space.

By Jennifer Brozak

In the early 1970s, the magic of space flight had captivated American audiences. Families would gather around their TVs to watch grainy images of rockets taking off and of astronauts bouncing around on the surface of the moon.

Emsworth native Mike Fincke was still a toddler when he first saw a black-and-white broadcast of a man walking on the moon. From that moment on, he knew he wanted to be an astronaut.

"I was one of those little kids who knew exactly what he wanted to be," says Fincke, a 1985 graduate of Sewickley Academy.

Several decades later, Fincke, 49, would realize his dream, but his path to life in orbit would first be paved with decades of intense study and service to his country.

With eight brothers and sisters, he knew that he would need a scholarship to pursue the type of education he needed to become an astronaut. After graduating from high school, Fincke attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on an Air Force Reserve Officers'

Training Corps scholarship. He graduated from MIT in 1989 with a Bachelor of Science in Aeronautics and Astronautics, as well as a Bachelor of Science in Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences. This was followed by a Master of Science in Aeronautics and Astronautics from Stanford University in 1990.

Immediately after graduation from MIT in 1989, he attended a summer exchange program with the Moscow Aviation Institution in the former Soviet Union, where he studied cosmonautics. Following his graduation from Stanford, he then entered the Air Force, where he achieved the rank of colonel. He served as a space systems engineer and space test engineer at Los Angeles Air Force Base and as a flight test engineer at both Edwards and Eglin Air Force bases, where he flew F-16 and F-15 aircraft.

In January of 1996, Fincke reported to Gifu Air Base in Japan, where he was the liaison to the Japanese/U.S. XF-2 fighter program. He's accumulated more than 1,100 flight hours and has flown more than 30 different aircraft types.

Fincke, who is conversant in Russian and Japanese, learned that NASA had selected him while he was still living in Japan. The call came in the early morning hours and, after having been immersed in the Japanese culture and language for an extended period of time, he was caught off-guard.

"I got this call from Texas, and when I answered the phone, the person started speaking in English," he says with a laugh. "I thought it was my friends playing a trick on me."

Once it dawned on him that he was being offered a job at NASA, a feeling of contentment washed over him.

"I was thrilled," he says. "It was just such an immense feeling of satisfaction, knowing that I had finally achieved my goal."





Fincke reported to the Johnson Space Center in 1996 to complete two years of training and evaluation. At NASA, he was assigned technical duties in the Astronaut Office Station Operations Branch, where he served as International Space Station Capsule Communicator, a member of the Crew Test Support Team in Russia and as the space station Crew Procedures team lead.

His first mission took place on Expedition 9 in April 2004, when he arrived at the International Space Station aboard the Soyuz TMA-4 spacecraft after launching from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. Fincke and crew spent six months aboard the station, performing numerous maintenance operations and conducting four space walks.

“There is nothing like it,” says Fincke of space flight. “Being able to see our planet—the most beautiful planet in the solar system—from space is remarkable. I’m a lucky guy.”

In 2008, Fincke commanded Expedition 18, which also launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome. On this mission, Fincke and his crew helped to prepare the station for future crews and also hosted two other space shuttle crews. Expedition 18 returned to Earth on April 8, 2009.

Fincke’s last space flight was in 2011, when he served as mission specialist aboard the final flight of the Space Shuttle Endeavor. On this mission, Fincke and crew delivered the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer, a state-of-the-art cosmic ray physics detector, to the ISS.

As someone who has quite literally been around the world, Fincke attributes his success to the work ethic he developed while living in Pittsburgh.



“People from Pittsburgh aren’t afraid to work hard or to get their hands dirty,” he says. “That work ethic definitely contributed to my later success.”

He says that the generosity of Pittsburghers, combined with the extensive educational opportunities the city offers, contributed to his ability to pursue his dream.

“The museums, the schools, the colleges – until you go outside of the area, you don’t really appreciate how great our city is,” he says.

Harking back to his days visiting the former Buhl Planetarium as a child, Fincke remains a staunch supporter of the Carnegie Science Center, where he’s delivered talks to hundreds of local students.

“It’s a small way I can give back, after all the city has done for me,” he says.

Over the course of his career so far, he’s spent 381 days, 15 hours and 11 minutes in space and has completed nine spacewalks. Until NASA astronaut Scott Kelly returned from orbit this past October, Fincke held the record for the

most number of days in space. He’s earned two NASA Distinguished Service Medals and three NASA Spaceflight Medals, among other special honors and awards.

A husband and father of three, Fincke is acutely aware of the sacrifices and inherent dangers that accompany his passion. He even missed the birth of his second child while he was in space.

“It’s not easy what families of military personnel have to go through,” he acknowledges. “We do it to help our country and our planet. We do it for our children, and to keep our planet safe.”

Fincke hasn’t ruled out another spaceflight, and is currently based at the Johnson Space Center, where he’s working with Boeing and SpaceX to design new “commercial crew” spaceships that will eventually travel to the International Space Station.

“Being an astronaut is everything that I thought it would be,” says Fincke. “Not everyone is so lucky to have achieved their life’s goal.” ■

