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FORMER SHUTTLE PILOT OEFELEIN SPEAKS TO PA. UNIT

August 24, 2009



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(Top)

(From left) Retired Navy Cmdr. William Oefelein; retired Air Force Capt. Colleen Shipman; 1st Lt. James Longan, Beaver County Composite Squadron 704 commander; Col. Mark Lee, Pennsylvania Wing commander; and Maj. Gary Fleming, Group 6 commander.

(Bottom)

(From left) Retired Navy Cmdr. William Oefelein and retired Air Force Capt. Colleen Shipman prepare to sign autographs for a line of cadets – including Cadet Airman Chris Good, Cadet 2nd Lt. Joshua Cripe, Cadet Airmen Dakota Lee and Austin Schrauder and Cadet Staff Sgt. Tyler Gualtieri -- as Capt. Mike Lopez, Beaver County Composite Squadron deputy commander, takes photographs.

Capt. Mary Ellen Stanley
Public Affairs Officer
Beaver County Composite Squadron 704
Pennsylvania Wing

PENNSYLVANIA – Members of Beaver County Composite Squadron 704 heard recently from former space shuttle pilot and retired Navy Cmdr. William “Billy O” Oefelein, who spoke to the unit with his fiancée, retired Air Force Capt. Colleen Shipman.

Shipman, originally from neighboring Center Township and a graduate of Penn State, where she participated in ROTC, wanted to surprise her nephew, Cadet Airman Basic David Shipman. She and Oefelein met at NASA, where he was training for a shuttle flight and she was involved in launching satellites.

Oefelein, who joined Civil Air Patrol in 1977 as a cadet in the Alaska Wing and soloed at that wing's glider encampment at age 14, piloted Space Shuttle Discovery on its mission from Dec. 6-Dec. 22, 2006.

His presentation to the squadron included a video narrated by different crew members from the mission. The video took viewers through the shuttle from launch, then into the International Space Station and finally on the trip back to Earth, including the landing.

Oefelein answered such questions as “What scared you the most and what was the coolest thing?” He replied that he wasn't scared but was nervous, since he had to “choreograph” the mission's extravehicular activity – the EVA, or spacewalks -- and didn't want to make any mistakes.

Most enjoyable, he said, was being in the pilot seat during launch. The view was spectacular, and he kept trying to describe it to his crew mates, who did not have a “window seat,” Oefelein said.

Asked what the food was like, he described the fare as “pretty good.” From a culinary standpoint, Oefelein said, “being in space is like a camping trip.”

To the query, “What was harder -- adjusting to weightlessness or readjusting to gravity?” he answered by choosing the latter. “It's so easy to move things in space that I forgot a few times” back on Earth, Oefelein said. “It was a shock to have to pick up a bag and hand it over, instead of giving it a little tap.”

During his talk Oefelein stressed teamwork. The space program is not just astronauts or crew for the space station, he noted -- there are also mission control staff, engineers, mechanics and a wide variety of support personnel.

Everybody has a job to do, he said, and on board the shuttle the crew members were trained in several jobs, noting that he fulfilled the roles of pilot, medical officer, electrician and EVA coordinator.

Along with Oefelein's account of his career before and during his stint in NASA, Shipman spoke of the many jobs in the space agency that might interest cadets.

Also present during the presentation were special guests Col. Mark Lee, Pennsylvania Wing commander; Maj. Gary Fleming, Group 6 commander; Maj. Charles Wedge, Group 6 deputy commander, and Capt. Tina Wedge, Group 6 historian.

The Beaver County squadron's commander, 1st Lt. James Longan, presented Oefelein, Lee and Fleming with a package of Air Force lithographs, while Lee presented the former astronaut with a Pennsylvania Wing.

In turn, Oefelein provided pictures he had signed and patches, pencils and stickers to be given out. Everyone got the chance to talk to Oefelein and Shipman, obtain autographs and thank them for coming.

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