



A SOMERSET PEAKE — INTO — SPACE

Tim Peake's dream job was being a test pilot at the home of British helicopters in Yeovil. Little did he know that he'd be packing his bags and heading to space. Jeremy Blackmore tells us more about the intergalactic opportunity of a lifetime



Major Tim Peake made history by becoming the first British astronaut to visit the International Space Station and conduct a spacewalk during his six-month mission. But less well known is, in a real sliding doors moment, he almost swapped the chance to fly to space for a life in the Somerset countryside working as a senior test pilot at AgustaWestland (now Leonardo Helicopters) in Yeovil. Tim, who brings his latest tour *Astronauts: The Quest to Explore Space* to Bath Forum on September 6, secured the coveted position at AgustaWestland in 2009 but had to let his new employers know he was waiting to hear if he had been accepted onto the European Space Agency astronaut programme. It was one of the most unlikely conversations ever at a job interview.

Tim had already been working very closely with AgustaWestland in his role as a hugely experienced army test pilot. He was keen to continue flying rather than being promoted to military desk jobs, so when he heard a rare vacancy for a test pilot was opening up in Yeovil he immediately applied.

‘There are only a few test pilots at Yeovil and when they’re in the job, they often stay there for 20, 30 years,’ he says. ‘So, it was a real right time, right place. I went for a chat with AgustaWestland’s chief test pilot Don MacLaine and he said, well, the job’s yours if you want it. I said, thank you, yes, I would. But I said, for full transparency, Don, just to let you know, I am going through this astronaut selection process, which started about three or four months before this conversation, and I’d just like to carry on and just see where it goes.’

As Tim adds in his autobiography, *Limitless*: ‘On reflection, it was an odd conversation to be having in an

office in Somerset. It felt a bit like telling someone, ‘I’ve applied to be a cowboy’. Lord knows what was in Don’s mind at this point. He was probably thinking, ‘Yeah, an astronaut. Right. Well, come back later and tell us how you get on’. Don had no problem with that. ‘Just keep me posted’, he said, even managing to stop himself from laughing as he said it.’

The chances of securing a spot on the ESA programme and making it into space were indeed unlikely. While the selection process had started with some 8,500 applicants, even by the time of Tim’s interview in Yeovil, 4,000 candidates were still in the running. ‘So, I said to Don, look, I’m one of 4,000. This is going nowhere, but it’s a real experience to be part of. He was hugely supportive and said, yeah, just let me know when it all comes to a stop and, of course, it never did!’

Tim first became obsessed with flying as a child when his father took him to air shows, and aged 13, his dream of becoming a pilot became a reality when he took control of an aircraft for the first time. It sparked a lifelong passion. His distinguished military service saw him flying in the former republic of Yugoslavia as part of the NATO unit sent to enforce the peace and provide humanitarian support after the Bosnian War, and in Afghanistan in support of Special Forces operations. Tim fought to become a flying instructor, which would lead to him becoming a test pilot and ultimately an astronaut.

Five months after taking his new job with AgustaWestland in Yeovil, he received a telephone call from the ESA. Even though the candidates had been whittled down to 45, Tim still thought he ‘didn’t stand a cat’s chance in hell of succeeding’.

‘I was blindsided by the call saying, we’d love you to join the corps, can you make it to Paris on Wednesday. Then I had to ring Don MacLaine. I wasn’t quite the shortest serving staff member at AgustaWestland, I was the second shortest!’ It was still a big move because even then there was no guaranteed berth on a rocket. Tim had to debate leaving a job he loved in Somerset and with it a chance to settle down after years of moving around the globe. But it was an offer he could not turn down.

‘My wife Rebecca and I spoke about it at length, but even when we were discussing it, we knew what the answer was going to be. It was almost like, well, we’ll talk about it just because we really should have this conversation. But ultimately, it boils down to, are we ever going to be able to live with ourselves if we don’t take this opportunity? Of course, the answer was no. You’ve got to grasp these things and go for it. It does take a huge amount of potential sacrifice. I could have been giving up my entire test flying career to only ever be an astronaut candidate who’s gone through an awful lot of

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British astronaut Tim Peake gives a thumbs up during suit pressure testing following suiting up on the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, ahead of the launch to the International Space Station. Photo: Gareth Fuller/PA Wire

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training and never flown to space. That was the risk, but I felt it was worth taking.’

After gruelling, punishing training, he was assigned to a long-duration mission to the International Space Station (ISS) and launched into space in December 2015. ‘The mission itself is incredible. Working on the ISS is an amazing privilege. You’re up there to do a job to the best of your ability and there are thousands of people helping you to do that. It’s a fantastic place to live and work. You’re in space and every day you’re touching amazing and cutting-edge experiments. People have been working 10 years to get this thing on board the space station and your morning’s job is to run that experiment or get ready for a spacewalk or to capture a visiting cargo vehicle. Every single day is immense.’

Seeing Planet Earth from space was hugely humbling and a real shift in perspective, he says. ‘Six months is a long time. It allows you plenty of time to reflect and to feel that isolation and remoteness. It gives you a connection to the bigger picture. It also gives you a sense of ownership of the planet. You look at Earth and it’s home. It’s not, oh, there’s Britain, or there’s Europe, it’s like, no, there’s Earth. So, you come back, and it doesn’t matter where you live, where you go, we all sense that Earth is home.’

Since his return, Tim has been passionate about inspiring the next generation of scientists, engineers and explorers. ‘We get to a certain stage in life when it’s about giving back. I think about the people who contributed to me getting where I am, who gave up a huge amount of time and effort. It’s only right you try and do that and encourage young people and give them opportunities as well. I’m a glass half-full person. I know we’ve lots of challenges and problems in the world, but I also do think we’re very capable as a human species when we work together. We’re pretty innovative and ingenious. If you encourage kids to be curious, to focus on science and tech and solving problems, then it’s only going to be beneficial for everybody in the future. So, to encourage that mindset at a young age is absolutely vital.’ ●

Major Tim Peake’s new tour *Astronauts:*

The Quest To Explore Space includes stories from his own journey to space and brings to life iconic and groundbreaking missions. It comes to Bath Forum on September 6. Tickets are available from fane.co.uk/tim-peake



Photo: ESA-NASA



