

# A Century of Eagle Scouts

*The Eagles' service project is the single greatest youth-service initiative in history, and one that has touched every community in America in an important way.*

By **MICHAEL S. MALONE**

One hundred years ago on Aug. 1, Arthur Eldred, a 17-year-old Boy Scout from Long Island, became the first person to earn the Eagle Scout rank. Eldred, tall, quiet and with a shock of dark hair, had joined scouting largely at the behest of his widowed mother, who hoped it would give some structure to his life. Yet as Eagle Scouts would continue to do throughout the next century, Eldred caught the scouting world by surprise. He was the first of an extraordinary new cohort of young men who were to prove very different from the classic 13-year-old Boy Scout in short pants.

Eldred's initial accomplishment was to complete the requirements for the rank of Eagle Scout only six months after that supreme award in American scouting was announced in April 1912. The leaders of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), assuming it would take several years for any boy to earn the required 21 merit badges, hadn't yet devised a final review system for Eagle candidates; they hadn't even settled on a design for the medal.

Unsure how to proceed after Eldred qualified for all the badges, the BSA ordered him to come down to its headquarters in Manhattan and put him through what had to be the most intimidating board of review in scouting history—led by the BSA's founders themselves. Eldred apparently passed with ease. And then, as an indication of what kind of remarkable person scouting would now have, while awaiting his award that summer Eldred saved two of his fellow Scouts from drowning.



Out of the more than 115 million boys who have passed through the Boy Scouts of America in the last 102 years, approximately two million have become Eagle Scouts, a 2% rate that has climbed to about 4% of all scouts in recent years. Some may have excelled in outdoor challenges and troop leadership, or while earning merit badges for oceanography and entrepreneurship. Yet all have been changed by the experience of what has been come to be called “the Ph.D. of Boyhood.” And these Eagles in turn have

changed the face of American culture in ways both obvious and unexpected.

Many went on to notable careers and distinguished service to the country. The list of famous Eagles over the last century includes movie and television stars, six Medal of Honor recipients, Nobel Prize winners, novelists, a number of astronauts (including most Shuttle astronauts), Tuskegee airmen and Japanese-American internees, congressmen, senators and governors, an endless number of corporate CEOs and university presidents, a U.S. president (Gerald Ford), and the first man to walk on the moon (Neil Armstrong). But there are other, perhaps less obvious,

Eagles as well: sexologist Alfred Kinsley, Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard and Washington's disgraced ex-mayor Marion Barry.

Two summers ago, during the BSA centennial parade in Washington, D.C., the adult Eagle contingent of official marchers featured a diplomat, a journalist, military officers, a bomb-demolition expert, doctors and a department-store Santa Claus. Despite what you might think, America's Eagles are spread across the political spectrum. They include individuals across all races (scouting was officially integrated from the start) who hold beliefs as diverse as other Americans. What they have in common is that they chose a life of achievement and assumed leadership roles at a very young age.

Scouting as a whole has regularly (and falsely) suffered the indignities of various stereotypes: the ardent escorts of little old ladies crossing the street, the secret paramilitary militia, the synecdoche of all things reactionary.

Yet the image of Eagle Scouts has only risen over the decades in American life and culture—Indiana Jones, like Steven Spielberg, is an Eagle Scout, and so is Will Smith's character in "Men in Black." It is as close to a gold standard of youth as we have, which is why it is regularly noted in the obituaries of octogenarians alongside a lifetime list of other achievements.

And that reputation is deserved. A recent Gallup survey (for Baylor University) of Eagle Scouts, former Boy Scouts and men who never joined scouting found that America's Eagles are far more engaged with the world around them in almost every way—in community service, club membership, churchgoing, outdoor recreation, and the fields of education and health.

Eagle Scouting's biggest contribution to American life is the one most recognized: the service project, the "dissertation" of the boyhood Ph.D. Since the mid-1960s, all Eagle candidates are required, beyond earning the traditional 21 merit badges, to devise, plan, execute and manage a community-service project.

Most of these projects are small: a new bench at the park, painting a school building, collecting blankets for a homeless shelter. But some are hugely ambitious: restoring wetlands, building a library in Africa or a playground at a Russian orphanage, creating an artificial reef—and they consume thousands of hours.

You cannot read a small-town newspaper in America without running across the story of an Eagle service project at least once a month. But it was only recently that the National Eagle Scout Association decided to look beyond the anecdotal and tally up all of the Eagle service projects ever done. It came to the jaw-dropping total of more than 100 million hours of service. Eagle Scouts are adding more than three million more hours each year.

Those numbers likely make the Eagle Scout service project the single greatest youth service initiative in history, and one that has touched every community in America in an important way.

*Mr. Malone, a veteran journalist and Eagle Scout, is the author of a new history of Eagle Scouting, "Four Percent" (WindRush Publishing, 2012).*

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