



Mechanical Engineering
Academy of Distinguished Alumni

Kenneth D. Cockrell

Charter Member, 2000

BSME, The University of Texas at Austin, 1972
MS Aerospace Engineering, University of West
Florida, 1974

Astronaut (Retired)

NASA

Test Pilot

Safran, USA

From the age of five, Kenneth Cockrell knew what he wanted to do in life. He wanted to be a pilot, and he wanted to fly something really cool, and really fast. The best way to accomplish that seemed to be with the military; that's where the exciting jets were.

When he researched the way to become a jet pilot in the Air Force, Navy, or Marine Corps, the unavoidable starting point was an undergraduate degree. The questions were what degree, and where to get it?

He had enjoyed physics and math courses in high school. As he seemed to grasp the concepts associated with various machines and, of course, with airplanes and flight, he decided to pursue mechanical engineering. Having spent much of his life in central Texas, UT Austin was an easy choice. After graduating in August of 1972, he signed up with the Navy and began his flight training. The ME degree gave him an edge during the academic training, and the study skills he'd developed at UT served him well as he prepared to fly more and more complex airplanes during pilot training.

While in training, he completed a Navy-sponsored master's program in aeronautical systems at the University of West Florida in Pensacola. After flying jets from aircraft carriers for three years, he applied for the Navy's Test Pilot School (TPS). Without an engineering degree, the school would not have accepted him, and the course of study would have most likely been insurmountable. It was a clear indication that university work, despite the occasional sense of irrelevancy along the way, could open doors and facilitate advancement.

After completing TPS, Cockrell participated in the flight test program of the Navy's newest fighter, the F-18. He also became aware that, with his test pilot training, he was qualified to apply to be a Space Shuttle Astronaut. He submitted his first application in 1979. The Navy approved his application and forwarded it to NASA, which did not select him. He continued his work at the Naval Air Test Center, after which he returned to the fleet, flying F-18s on their first operational deployments in 1985 and 1987.

He continued applying for the Astronaut Office and, on the fourth attempt, was offered a job as a research pilot at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. After three years in that position, he made his fifth application for Astronaut. Ten years after his first attempt, he was selected to the 13th group of Astronauts, and began training in the summer of 1990. The lesson learned: If you care about something deeply, and want it badly, you should not give up. He flew five Space Shuttle missions. One as the flight engineer, one as the pilot, and the last three as the commander of the spacecraft. On the last two, he flew to the International Space Station on assembly, repair, and crew exchange missions.

As the Space Shuttle Program came to an end, Cockrell returned to the research pilot position until his retirement in 2014. He now works as a test pilot on a new business jet engine certification program. He is also building an experimental airplane. He firmly believes that his BSME from UT was the first, and crucial, step towards a rewarding career.