SLATE: Do you feel like you have a place in history as commander of the last shuttle mission?

FERGUSON: I'm still pinching myself over that one. You know, it's good to be last, it would have been wonderful to be first and if I had to hold up a few people or a few missions that really stick out in my mind for the space shuttle, gosh, STS-1 was just incredible. To, you know, here's this vehicle we've never really test flown in the vertical position before with its rocket engines and we're not going to do it, we're going to put two people on it and we're going to send it into space.

It's historically significant in that it's the end of the program. We've learned a lot of lessons through the 30 years that we've flown it and the space shuttle's a much safer vehicle now and we don't take those dramatic risks like we did with STS-1. So, like I said, historically significant because it's the last, but I don't consider it to be the dramatic moment from a personal achievement.
standpoint that or any technical achievement like STS-1 really was.

SLATE: What made you want to become an astronaut?

FERGUSON: Well, I don't think there was really a moment, I mean, I like a lot of people my age, I watched the men walk on the moon when I was just a youngster, you know, 8, 9, 10 years old. I remember being enthralled by it, I'd draw little pictures of the rocket and it was amazing to me.

Now I don't think my interest stayed at that level. But as I reached high school I realized that I'd like to fly and the Navy always intrigued me so I went into the Navy, learned to fly, became a carrier pilot and then learned that a lot of the early astronauts were Navy and Air Force test pilots. Tried to go to test pilot school and things just started to flow in a direction that the next natural step was to apply to be an astronaut.

SLATE: Describe building the International Space Station such as during your STS-126 mission.

FERGUSON: There was a theme to the 126 mission. In the MPLM we had living
stations, sleep stations, we had a kitchen, we had a bedroom, we had a kitchen,
we had a bathroom, we had a gym. I mean, it was really amazing if you looked at it,
we had the space-based version of the American dream.

It was great to be a part of that. It was great to turn the space station from,
you know, this modular tube-like structure into a home that people can live in for,
you know, it'll be 15 years by the time the space station program runs out in 2020.
It was good to be a part of that, plus we did a lot of what we think was great work
restoring the solar alpha joint over on the right side had kind of ground to a halt.

We got that thing up and running so it was very rewarding after that flight.

SLATE: Do you remember the first time you flew a shuttle simulated landing
the Shuttle Training Aircraft?

FERGUSON: It was kind of one of those gee-whiz moments in spaceflight
I kind of call them now but, you know, of course, I hadn't been in space at the time
and I thought to myself, wow, I'm really here flying the shuttle simulator,
I mean it was a, it was just a wild moment for me as a pilot.

00:03:15,719 --> 00:03:18,539
You know, pilots always aspire to fly the newest, greatest thing out there.

00:03:18,539 --> 00:03:22,699
This is my first chance to fly a real shuttle approach, I was just in heaven, it was,

00:03:22,699 --> 00:03:24,889
it was spectacular, yeah, so I remember it well.

00:03:24,889 --> 00:03:27,549
SLATE: What stands out about that first Shuttle Training Aircraft flight?

00:03:27,550 --> 00:03:32,710
FERGUSON: Boy, I'll tell you, what I do remember, a moment from that was,

00:03:32,710 --> 00:03:36,890
you know you fly to a position that's abeam the runway, it's 28,000 feet and I looked

00:03:36,889 --> 00:03:40,649
down and I thought, 'There is absolutely no way we can possibly land on that runway

00:03:40,650 --> 00:03:44,490
right there. And, you know, of course it got proved to me about a thousand times since

00:03:44,490 --> 00:03:49,150
that it's entirely possible, but it is a largely unnatural act that we've just gotten

00:03:49,150 --> 00:03:53,939
used to over time.

00:03:53,939 --> 00:03:56,349
SLATE: What do you tell people who want to become astronauts?

00:03:56,349 --> 00:03:58,519
FERGUSON: For me it was always something that was impossible, you know?

00:03:58,520 --> 00:04:02,719
You just didn't even ask to do something like that because guys like you don't do things

00:04:02,719 --> 00:04:07,359
like this. That's a message I try to take out there, especially to the youngsters,
who, you know, maybe aspire to do great things but perhaps are unwilling or unable to
take that initial step. You know, don't sell yourself short, get out there and,
you know, I made it, you can make it. I was just an average dude growing up.