

**Transcript of Scoutmaster's Minute
Michael McFall's Eagle Court of Honor
Saturday, November 30, 2002
Miami Valley Country Club**

I told Mike McFall when I walked in today, "I'll tell you what buddy, I think heck froze over. You made your Eagle and its ice cold outside."
[Audience laughter]

My name is John Combs and I am Scoutmaster of Boy Scout Troop 325. When Mike McFall asked me to speak at his Eagle Court of Honor, I in turn asked him what subject he wanted me to speak to. Mike said, "Well John, you've been doing this for a lot of years, you don't have a son in the troop so I'd like for you to tell us why you've put forth all this time and effort."

Now that's a pretty strange request for an Eagle Court of Honor, but I guess you have to consider the source. [Audience laughter] So I decided to honor Mike's request. I thought about it long and hard and basically have come up with the conclusion that I don't know why I do any of this. [Audience laughter] That concludes my speech. Does anybody have any questions? [Audience laughter]

I'm just pulling your leg Mike. Actually I have several good reasons, but I've got to admit to everybody that it is difficult for me to talk about myself in front of a group of people. I am not comfortable in the limelight. As a matter of fact, I am a very humble person..... ruggedly handsome, highly intelligent [Audience laughter], the fate of the free world rests in my hands every day at work at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, my wife will also tell you I am an awesome kisser, and Mike I am a very humble man. [Audience laughter]

However, to help you understand what motivates me, you have to go back pretty far back in my long and boring history. I'll start at the very beginning. I was born naked, as were most of the people in my family. [Audience laughter] That's probably too far back isn't it? Let me fast forward a little bit. Let's see..... I'll became a Cub Scout at the age of nine. A year later, I went into Webelos. Now Webelos was a lot of fun, but I must admit I got a little bit bored. And I got so bored in fact, that I caused a few problems. And I caused so many problems in fact..... that I

made my Webelos leader to quit. [Audience laughter] I still remembered some of the names he called me: hellion, rapsallion... oh here's my favorite, "John Combs, you are nothing, but a guttersnipe." I love it! That is so cool! Guttersnipe...that is awesome. [Audience laughter] Mike, maybe that is why I have been doing this for all these years. I am sitting in Scout purgatory atoning for my sins against my Webelos leader. [Audience laughter]

Fortunately for me, my father took over. He was with me throughout my entire scouting career. Not there beside me, but close by, giving me room to grow, but also helping me whenever I needed assistance. He was an awesome role model and a great father figure. Mike, without a doubt, he is one of the reasons I am still here after all these years.

Next, I went into Boy Scouting. Initially, I had the concept a lot of us do that Boy Scouts are these geeky little kids, wearing Coke bottle thick eye glasses, sitting around the fire, singing silly songs and roasting marshmallows and in their spare time helping little old ladies across the street. I am glad to report I was wrong. I loved the camping, hiking, cooking and the independence of being away from home.

I remember being introduced to my Scoutmaster for the first time. His name was Don Held. However, I didn't hear the "D" at the end of his last name. [Audience laughter] I went back to my patrol members and said, "Hey guys! The name of our new Scoutmaster is Don Heck. I guess we are going to be in for a bunch of heck over the next few years!" And they just joined right in. "Come heck or high water, I'll outlive this guy."

As it turned out, he was a great guy. He was a young man with a young wife. He was a master sergeant in the Marine Corps. He acted like a big kid. However, we thought he was a little strange. Here was a Scoutmaster who didn't have a son in the troop. We thought this was odd. I still think this is odd today, very strange indeed. [Audience laughter] But we liked him, had a lot of fun and did a lot of great activities.

I remember one of the first hikes we went on. Of course, we all had to march in step as he called out cadence. He had us check for bombs underneath the footbridges. Later in the hike, he would disappear. We looked for him, but couldn't find him. Suddenly, we would hear, "BANG,

BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG!!!!" We would look up and there he would be up in a tree, shooting at us with his finger. [Audience laughter] He would then scamper down the tree, get right up in our faces and scream, "I told you a thousand times, when you are hiking in the jungle, you are to watch your back, you are to watch your buddy's back! There are snipers here! Do you understand me?" [Audience laughter] And we would stand there at attention, chest out, eyes forward, yelling, "Yes sir!!!!" [Audience laughter] We loved that! It was great fun!

It was under that man's leadership that I earned the rank of Eagle Scout. I remember not long thereafter, he sat down with me and said, "John, this is not the end of your journey. It is really the beginning. You need to make some bigger goals for yourself. I will do whatever I can to help you. You are a good friend and I love you." Now this was pretty cool since I never had anyone outside my immediate family tell me they loved me. He was a great man and a great role model for me. Mike, without a doubt, he is another reason why I'm here after all these years.

Unfortunately, the military transferred him not long after that. The new Scoutmaster...well I'll just say he was kind of like a jellyfish. I had all these new goals and I just couldn't seem to interest him in them. So I left that troop along with two other scouts and we started this troop in May of 1975. Again, I had these goals and was ready to make them happen. The new Scoutmaster...well let's just say it was like running through quicksand wearing lead boots. I just wasn't getting anywhere. I felt very confined and was getting very frustrated.

It wasn't until I turned eighteen and became an adult leader myself that I decided now was the perfect time to implement my goals. Mike, if I didn't succeed, I would only have one person to blame now.

I had four goals:

1. If it isn't fun, it isn't Scouting. There is no way to get these guys to leave their video games and warm beds unless it's fun.
2. I got a lot out of Scouting and I wanted to put something back into it. For me, it was pay back time for me.
3. Not a lot of people know this piece of trivia about me. I always wanted to be a teacher. However, my chosen career field didn't reflect this, but through Scouting I could be a teacher.

4. This goal was the biggest, the toughest, the farthest reaching of them all. It was to create a super program. I believed that a super program would cure a lot of the ills that Scout troops had.

Now that fourth goal was broken down into three parts.

1. We would have a great program for every Scout regardless of age. Rick, [speaking directly to 26 year veteran assistant Scoutmaster Rick Eppley] you probably remember the beginning of those programs. We were making and throwing boomerangs, had an awesome firemanship program, did rock climbing and rappelling and had a fabulous snake study program. We had snakes at every troop meeting. We had little snakes, big snakes, poisonous snakes and even a twelve-foot python for guys to put on their shoulders and get their pictures taken with. It was awesome. And those quality programs are still here today.

2. I wanted to take big high adventure trips. I never got to do them with my Scout troop. We left the state one time and it was a big disaster. However, now I could make it happen for the guys in this troop. In 1983 we started our high adventure program. It started fairly modestly with a backpacking trip on Appalachian Trail in the Smoky Mountains and a whitewater-rafting trip. Over the years, it has mushroomed. We've backpacked across the Grand Canyon and back, we did a 500 mile tri-state cycling trek, we did 50 miles of canoeing in Boundary Waters and Canada, we've been coral reef sailing and scuba diving in the Florida Keys, we did eleven days of backpacking at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico and the highlight was our two weeks in Alaska.

3. The third and final part, which I felt was most important, was the older Scout program. This seems to be where Scouting has the toughest time in retention. When I was an older Scout, they had what was called, [speaking like Darth Vader] "The Leadership Corps." This was nothing more than a fancy term for the older Scouts providing the younger ones with leadership and skill instruction. Now this was okay.....for the first six months. Then the older Scouts got bored with it and quit one by one. So you had to have something there to challenge them, to push them to their limits. We started this program by having a meeting with the older Scouts and their parents. We let the Scouts pick and vote on the programs and then had the parents make them happen. We were very successful at that. Over the years, this program snowballed and you will find today that we have an awesome year round program. Take this year for example. We've done downhill skiing, mountain man program, cycling,

backpacking, scuba diving, rock climbing/rappelling and caving. These are not easy programs. The Scouts will tell you they have rappelled 217 feet. They have descended 85 feet down a rope into a cave, explored all the passages and then used mechanical ascenders to climb 85 feet back up the rope. Etc., etc., etc.

Now I was sharing this information with a co-worker just a couple of days ago. He said to me, "John, I gotta tell you. You've gone on some great vacations with those kids and have done some great creative babysitting." Unfortunately, I think he missed the point. However, I can explain this point to you very simply.... [gets out a box of Life cereal and places it on the podium] Life cereal. This is Scouting right here. If you are as old as I am, you remember that commercial on TV. Two boys are standing there in the kitchen. The first one says, "I'm not eating it." The second one replies, "Well, I'm not eating it." So the first boy says, "Let's give it to Mikey. He eats anything." So they walk over to the kitchen table where their younger brother is sitting and they pour the Life cereal into his bowl. Now Mikey sits there munching this cereal complacently in his jaws with a big smile on his face. The one boy yells, "Hey Mikey! He likes it!" Then the announcer comes on to tell you that not only does Life cereal taste good, but it is also good for you.

And that is what Boy Scouting is all about. That's the secret we never tell these Scouts. They're off doing all these great activities, having the time of their lives while being challenged, but they never realize all the goods things that come from all this. The benefits from a great Scouting program are:

Physical fitness - You can't do these things really fun things unless you are working out, getting in shape, getting physically ready for the challenge.

Character development - A successful activity breeds confidence, self-reliance and leadership skills (that's a big one).

Good citizenship – Scouts learn to work as a team, respect the rights of others and learn to care for the world and all its resources.

When these Scouts go through the program, whether they earn the Eagle rank or not, somewhere along the line, all this sinks in and great things will happen for them later on in life. I can guarantee you that when they go out into the world that they will be great in whatever they do. They

don't have to be President of the United States to be great. They can be a great coworker. They can be a great neighbor. They can be great in their church. They can be a great husband. They can be a great father. In whatever they choose to do, they will be great.

Now I know you are out there somewhere [Finger pointing and scanning through the audience]. I can't see your face, but I can hear your voice. You are saying, "John, I hear those great words, but that's a lot of crap. Where is your proof?" So I brought some proof with me today. [Pulls out a stack of papers; Audience laughter] I am a very lucky guy. Over the years, I have received dozens of letters, cards and emails from our alumni. I would like to share a few of them with you today as proof.

This one is from a local Eagle Scout. He says, "Without the troop, I know I wouldn't be anything close to the person I am today."

This one is from one of our Eagle Scouts in the Army. He just left Kosovo and returned to a base in Germany. In this email, he is congratulating several of our Scouts who just obtained the rank of Eagle. "Good job fellows and welcome. You will never regret any of the hard work or long hours. I consider the day I got my Eagle to be one of the single greatest and proudest moments of my life. " And that is true for me too.

This one is from an Eagle Scout in Idaho. "I'd just like to say thanks again for everything. I don't think I could have done half of what I have without your guidance and support. You have been more than just a leadership figure to me. You've been a true friend and you have my deepest gratitude."

Here's one from another Eagle Scout in the Army. He returned to the United States from Afghanistan not long ago. "I can still remember you telling me almost without fail, 'Go do great things!' And John I try to do great things. Along with following the Scout Law and the seven Army values which are a lot alike."

This one from one of our alumni in Colorado. "I want to thank you for giving me the experience that you did. The Boy Scouts opened my eyes to so much and made me realize there is more to this world than just past the city limits. I would definitely not be able to experience what I have today, without the troop."

This one is from a local Scout that I just bumped into a few weeks ago. "Hey, I was really excited to see you guys tonight. If I have had any success in my life, you had a part in it."

Here's a classic. This is from one of our alumni who's in California. "I never picked up Scouting again after I moved. But many of the trips into the wild are still refresh in my memory and I remember them as some of the most important learning days of my childhood." Reading that one gives me chills!

This one is from our first Eagle Scout. As a matter of fact, our first Eagle Scout got his Eagle badge here at Miami Valley Country Club. I hope the meal today is as good as the one we had back then. It was a seven-course meal. [Audience laughter] Our first Eagle Scout who is a surgeon in Chicago writes, "Those really were the best days of my childhood and I want to thank you for being such a great leader and role model. There isn't a day that goes by that the basic principals of scouting are not used. For example, when in the operating room and asked to finish off my suture with a square knot on my first day, you laugh to yourself and think piece of cake." Let me tell you, one thing, he's not operating on me! [Audience laughter] I remember that boy all too well! [Audience laughter]

This is perhaps my favorite of all the letters. "You were the person in my life who was always telling me to take one step, to push myself just a little harder. You were always the voice in the back of my head saying get tough or die. So mostly you taught me how to live, like the rules of life. You showed me the way and I feel after earning my Eagle that I acknowledge how much I have learned from you and how much I can now go off into the world more prepared than others. You may not have taught me everything, but you got me on the trail, gave me the skills to learn, the skills to lead. I thank you for showing me how to be my full potential and strive for the best and do my best in whatever I do. "

As I said, I am one of the lucky ones because I get this kind of feedback. As it turns out, every adult leader who comes through Troop 325 gets to see miracles happen before their eyes. I'll give you a good example of one that is taking place right now. We have a patrol of eight called the Anacondas. They started around the same time and have spent the last

six years in Scouting together. They have all worked hard, earned the rank of Eagle and Mike McFall is the closing chapter to this story. It is an awesome statement of what is good and right about our youth today; about positive peer pressure, about hard work, about setting goals and achieving them.

I missed a most important point of adult leadership until about ten years ago. I was watching TV and I heard this pastor saying that whenever you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior, unto you is given spiritual gifts. Now I am one who has to put everything past the litmus test. So I thought about what he said and realized he was right. Indeed, it was about that time in my life when I accepted Jesus that all these skills started coming to me. I was easily able to administer a Scout troop, work successfully with young men, and do great things for Scouting. It then dawned on me, as it must have for hundreds of Scoutmasters over the past ninety or so years, that we are given a piece of clay for a short amount of time and we have an important job of leaving quality impressions on it, because we aren't going to get a second chance.

In closing, I would like to share with you a framed poem that was given to me by one of my Eagle Scouts at his Eagle Court of Honor. It is called "Within My Power" and the author is Forest Witcraft.

"I am not a very important man as importance is commonly rated. I do not have great wealth, control a big business or occupy a position of great honor or authority. Yet I may someday mold destiny. For it is within my power to become the most important man in the world in the life of a boy....All about me are boys. They are the makers of history, the builders of tomorrow. If I could have some part in guiding them up the trail of Scouting, on to the high road of noble character and constructive citizenship, I may prove to be the most important man in their lives, the most important man in my community. One hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in or the kind of car that I drove, but the world may differ because I was important in the life of a boy."

And that Mike McFall is why I have been doing this for the past 25 years. Thank you.

[Applause]