

From Stockholm to the stars

Swedish people are known for doing things differently, but there are some who break physical as well as technical boundaries. Nick Blackmore meets Christer Fuglesang, the man who has boldly gone where no Swede has gone before

“I was very happy. It was something I really wanted to do,” says Christer Fuglesang, Sweden’s first astronaut, smiling broadly as he remembers one of his greatest achievements. The opportunity for success was down to a number of crucial factors: luck, location, tireless practice, and ‘the right window’ being available.

Christer could almost be discussing the challenging but ultimately satisfying journey that has taken him from his birthplace in Stockholm to somewhere 300 kilometres above the Earth. In fact, the locations are reversed: he’s talking about the difficulty of photographing his home country from space. The window he is talking about is a real one, on the space shuttle *Discovery*, and the picture was taken while travelling at more than 27,000 kilometres per hour. “With our orbit it was always night-time in Europe and it’s a pretty shaky picture. I know it’s Sweden, at least,” Christer laughs.

The first photo of Sweden taken by a Swede in space – it’s a distinctive achievement only made possible by more than 14 years of patience and hard work. The former trait Christer recognises as definitely Swedish, even if trailblazing behaviour of this kind has not been seen from a Swede since the intrepid era of the Arctic explorers.

There are many jobs that you can apply for via advertisements, but you wouldn’t imagine that the position of astronaut was one of them. Yet this is more or less true in Christer’s case – a friend mentioned seeing that the European Space Agency (ESA) was advertising for potential spacefarers. As an associate professor in particle physics with a robust physique (he is a marathon runner and former Swedish frisbee champion), Christer seemed to fit the bill. He trained as both an astronaut and a cosmonaut (which necessitated learning Russian) and, after almost a decade and a half in astronautics, found himself waiting on the launchpad at Kennedy Space Centre, Florida on December 9, 2006.

The pioneering aspect of Christer’s presence on the mission did not go unnoticed (ESA named this the Celsius mission, after the Swedish inventor of the eponymous temperature scale) and he ensured that Sweden was represented during the mission, in culinary form. Swedish toffee, moose sausage and knäckebröd (crisp bread) were served on board *Discovery*, though Christer’s original choice of national food was vetoed by NASA: “They thought reindeer meat was a PR

disaster,” Christer explains. “You can’t eat Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, particularly not at Christmas time!”

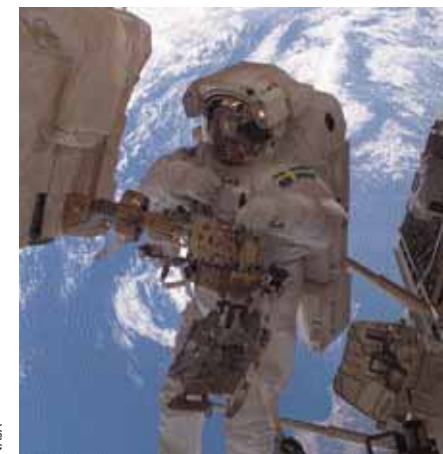
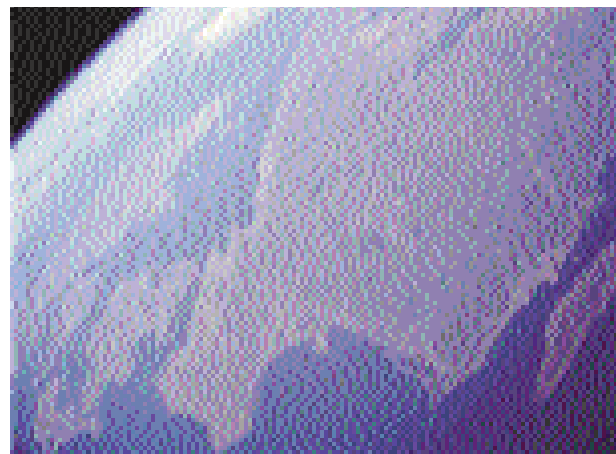
The mission’s purpose was to dock with the International Space Station where, among other operations, the station’s power system would be rewired. As Mission Specialist, Christer took part in several spacewalks totalling 18 hours. These were a success, barring one minor moment of annoyance when Christer was driving a bolt with a pistol grip tool. “There is a principle that everything is always locked somehow,” Christer says; on this occasion, he failed to give the mechanism the age-old ‘pull test’. When he went to the back of the tool to drive the bolt in, he discovered that the extension had vanished. His helmet camera captured how it had “slowly, slowly floated away”.

While the mission represented a career high for Christer, he rejects the idea that going into space changes you as a person. “I think it’s a myth from the days of the Apollo missions,” he says. “When you’re in orbit, the Earth is still not such a small thing! Those who went to the moon knew that they had done something that they will never, in their

lives, come close to matching.” Christer’s attitude is to look for further challenges. There could be at least one more flight for him and he sees a possible future at policy level: “What we really, really need to do in Europe is build our own spaceship,” he enthuses. “In Europe we spend about 20 per cent of the amount of money on space that the US does, but we have a much bigger population.”

Christer is no longer a permanent part of that population – he has lived in Houston for 10 years now – but he visits regularly. When it comes to driving around Houston, his experience in sophisticated flying craft meets with his Swedish roots. A Saab veteran (he bought a Saab 9000 in the late 1980s), he now owns a Saab 9-3 Sport Sedan. As Christer’s three children grow up and leave home, he and his wife have chosen to replace their people carrier with something “smaller and sportier”.

Whatever challenges life and work might pose, this affable Swede has no regrets about his time in space: “I made sure I had time to take in the environment. I never had the feeling of a big void around me,” he muses, “but I did enjoy the scenery.” €



“I made sure I had time to take in the environment. I never had the feeling of a big void around me, but I did enjoy the scenery”