

BADGE OF HONOR

Eagle Scout becomes most decorated Scout in organization's history

By JOHN KLINE

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NEW PARIS

While he may have just become the most decorated Scout in the 107-year history of the Boy Scouts of America, Elkhart's Nathan Hite is about as humble as they come.

Hite, a member of the New Paris Boy Scouts Troop 12 for the past eight years, recently completed his 143rd merit badge, officially making him the most decorated Boy Scout in scouting history.

"It has definitely been a little bit stressful, because my 18th birthday was approaching fast," Hite said of his recent achievement, noting that 18 is the age when Scouts officially age out of the program. "But overall it was a great experience. I got to learn a little bit of everything, and so now I feel confident that I can start a family and know the things I need to know for life."

From hiking and swimming to carpentry and pathfinding, if you name a badge, Hite has earned it. His most recent badge, this time for exploration, was actually earned just



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EAGLE SCOUT NATHAN HITE of Elkhart just completed his 143rd merit badge with the Boy Scouts. Hite, who is a member of New Paris Boy Scouts Troop 12, now has more merit badges than any other Scout in the country.

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days before his 18th birthday on May 4.

"It came right down to the wire," Hite said with a laugh.

According to Meredith Isenberg, senior district executive with the South Bend-based Boy Scouts of America LaSalle Council, which oversees the New Paris troop, the Boy Scouts of America currently offers 138 merit badges, though the number of total badges actually fluctuates over time, allowing Scouts to achieve more than the official total as past badges are phased out and new ones are added. It's a process Hite knows all too well.

"Back in 2010, they released four merit badges that had previously been retired. I think they brought them back for just that year, for an anniversary or something like that, and I got all four of those: carpentry, pathfinding, signaling and tracking," Hite said of some of his now-retired badges. "So that's how I got more badges than are actually available."

With his recent achievement, Hite has joined a very select group within the Boy

Scouts — those who have completed all merit badges available to them at the time of their service. According to the organization, of the more than 100 million boys who have been Scouts since the organization's founding in 1910, only about 250 have ever accomplished this feat — and none to the extent of Hite's 143 badges.

"There was a kid in a troop out of Elkhart who completed all the merit badges several years ago, and when I saw him get all of them, that really motivated me to earn them all too," Hite said. "But at that point, Scouts weren't able to earn 143 merit badges, so I believe that I'm the only scout to have completed all 143 merit badges that were available to me, which is pretty crazy."

Hite attributes much of his success to being home-schooled, which he said provided him with more time and opportunity to pursue merit badges than perhaps some other Scouts. He also gave much praise to his scoutmaster and current Elkhart County Sheriff Brad Rogers, as well as his father, Steve Hite, who serves as assistant scoutmaster for his troop.

"Brad Rogers, our scoutmaster, and my dad, they've

both been super supportive and encouraging throughout my time as a Scout, and throughout my entire life, really," Hite said. "They're both a big inspiration. And then, of course my mom, Cara, she's super proud of me. She tries to brag about me all the time."

Hite also attributes a portion of his success to the fact that he was able to achieve the rank of Eagle Scout by the time he was 13, whereas many Boy Scouts tend to make the Eagle designation just before they turn 18. The way the Boy Scouts ranking system is currently set up, new entrants must first work toward the rank of Scout, then move on to Tenderfoot, Second Class, First Class, Life, and finally Eagle — the most difficult and prestigious of all the ranks.

"I had earned 53 merit badges by the time I was an Eagle. So at that point, I was like, 'Now what am I going to do?'" Hite said, noting that many Scouts who reach that rank either age out of the program or decide to move on to other things. "For me, it was a good accomplishment, but I wasn't quite ready to stop. So I decided to make a goal and keep going."

Over the course of his eight years with the New Paris troop, Hite said he has probably spent an average of about 10 hours a week working toward his various merit badges and other troop duties, though that time can fluctuate depending on the specific task or challenge at hand.

Asked about the badges he is most proud of, Hite said aviation was definitely at the top of his list.

"I'd probably have to say aviation, because not many kids get to fly an airplane for a half an hour," Hite said. "That was just awesome. And then the robotics badge, that's probably what really got me into computers, because to get to see the programming that goes into the robot and makes it move, that's just cool."

As for the badges that gave him the most trouble, Hite didn't have to think

long before coming up with that answer.

"It was probably personal fitness and cycling, because you had to do like three full months of personal fitness, and with cycling you had to go like 150 or 175 miles," Hite said. "So those were tough."

Even today, after all the time and hard work he has dedicated to the Scouts, Hite said he can hardly believe all he has achieved.

"It's definitely not something I ever really thought of when I was just getting started," Hite said. "Really I just wanted to go for Eagle and then I'd be good. But I just kept going, and here we are. I still can't really believe it."

Asked what it was about the Scouts that kept him coming back day after day, year after year, Hite pointed to the many friendships he has gained, as well as the many experiences and opportunities membership in the Scouts has provided to him that otherwise may never have come his way.

"For me, it's the friends you make, and getting to meet new people, and all the trips you get to take," Hite said. "Scouting has really showed me how to get out into the world and prepared me for just about anything that may come my way. So it has just prepared me for life. So I'd definitely recommend it to other youth who are thinking about joining. It's basically a pathway for boys to become men. So it's important for sure."

Set to graduate from high school this spring, Hite said his current plans are to take a gap year to raise some money and get some things off his bucket list, after which his hope is to attend Purdue University where he will major in computer science.

Hite currently lives in Elkhart with his parents and his 13-year-old brother, Levi, who Hite is proud to say is well on his way to achieving his own Eagle Scout status within the New Paris troop.

"We'll see how it goes," he said with a grin.

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