

50 YEARS AGO

Colonel John H. Glenn Jr.

Combat-Tested Pilot and First American to Orbit the Earth

By Mike Hoeflerlin

Fifty years ago this month, on the morning of 20 Feb. 1962, millions of people throughout the world were riveted by the televised images and radio accounts of a soon-to-be launched Mercury space capsule from Launch Complex 14 at Cape Canaveral, Fla. The small one-man capsule, *Friendship 7*, was connected to an Atlas 6 rocket. That rocket and that capsule were poised to put, for the first time, an American astronaut into orbit around the Earth. Not surprisingly, inside the capsule was Lieutenant Colonel John H. Glenn Jr., a decorated Marine fighter pilot and test pilot who was again risking his life in service to his country.

“As I look back on that day some 50 years ago—it seems like only yesterday—I distinctly remember every aspect of the launch, the orbits and the splashdown,” Glenn said recently. Before, during and after the successful mission, John Glenn never forgot that he was representing the Marine Corps. He knew that his Marine Corps training would serve him well as the first American in orbit.

Images of a confident and smiling Marine being strapped into the Mercury



Astronaut John Glenn, shown dressed in his Project Mercury space suit and helmet for his formal NASA portrait in January 1962.

capsule were replaced by the sights and sounds of the powerful Atlas rocket blasting off at 9:47 a.m. EST. America’s hearts, thoughts and prayers were with Glenn as he rocketed into space and his rendezvous with destiny. For the next 4 hours, 55 minutes and 23 seconds, America and the world were captivated by the

progress of that Marine and that mission, during which the spacecraft reached speeds of up to 17,544 miles per hour.

Glenn was not merely a passenger in a small capsule hurtling through space. He actually piloted the spacecraft for most of the harrowing flight, during which huge, blazing chunks of the heat shield were disintegrating and passing by his window. According to the National Archives, “With great skill, courage, and grace, Glenn piloted the spacecraft manually as the autopilot function failed, and Mission Control wondered whether the capsule’s [loose] life-saving heat shield would hold while re-entering the atmosphere.” Without Glenn’s precision piloting, the capsule and astronaut surely would have been incinerated.

After three history-making orbits, *Friendship 7* re-entered the Earth’s atmosphere and parachuted into the Atlantic Ocean near Grand Turk Island. The capsule and the astronaut were promptly recovered by the destroyer USS *Noa* (DD-841), which was on station only three miles from the splashdown site.

After the mission, John Glenn became one of the most recognizable and revered men in the country; an American hero. Seemingly overnight, he became part of the fabric of American folklore.

John Glenn the man and John Glenn the Marine are inextricably intertwined by the training and esprit de corps that are common to all Marines. In reflecting on his military experiences, Glenn said, “Let’s just say that my Marine background and training ... gave me a dedication ... [that] is just expected in the Marine Corps.”

The legend of Col John Glenn, USMC (Ret), patriot, decorated fighter pilot, test pilot, astronaut, U.S. Senator, statesman and educator, began years prior to his Mercury mission. In 1943, he was commissioned a Marine officer and earned his wings of gold and designation as a naval aviator. Not long thereafter, he flew 59 combat missions in the F4U Corsair against the Japanese in the skies over the Pacific Ocean.

In Korea, he flew 63 combat missions in the Grumman F9F Panther jet, mostly in ground support roles, often returning



Marine aviator John Glenn pilots an F4U Corsair (N-51) in Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 155 during WW II, around 1944. VMO-155 was redesignated Marine Fighting Squadron (VMF) 155 on 31 Jan. 1945.



John Glenn points to a bullet hole in the canopy of his VMF-311 F9F Panther jet during the Korean War, 1953. (USN photo)



"MiG Mad Marine" Maj John Glenn sits on the wing of his F-86 Sabre while assigned to the U.S. Air Force's 25th Interceptor Squadron in 1953.



Candidate John Glenn's official portrait used during his U.S. Senate race in 1964. (John Glenn Archives, Ohio State University)

to base with numerous large holes in his aircraft from enemy anti-aircraft fire. Near the end of the Korean War, he finally got his chance at air-to-air combat as an exchange pilot with the U.S. Air Force, flying 27 missions in the F-86 Sabre jet. "Before the war ended in July 1953," Glenn recalled, "I had three MiG kills to my credit." His Air Force jet was aptly named "MiG Mad Marine."

Leading up to his work as an astronaut, Glenn completed Navy Test Pilot School and worked on various projects, including the F-8 Crusader program, during which he set a transcontinental speed record while flying from Los Angeles to New York in 3 hours and 23 minutes at an average speed of greater than Mach 1, the speed of sound. "We termed the mission 'Operation Bullet' because the aircraft average cross-country speed was faster than the muzzle velocity of a round fired from a service .45-caliber automatic," he said.

"In early 1959," Glenn said, "I, along with three Navy pilots and three Air Force pilots, were selected as one of our nation's

first group of astronauts. Our assignment was Project Mercury, a mission to prove that the United States could put a man into space and that he could function productively there. For me the culmination of Project Mercury came on February 20, 1962, in my spacecraft *Friendship 7*, when I became the first American to orbit the Earth."

During his Marine Corps career, Glenn was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross six times, and the Air Medal with 15 gold stars and two oak leaf clusters, indicative of 18 awards. He also has numerous other military and civilian awards, citations, decorations and medals, including the Congressional Gold Medal, one of the nation's highest civilian awards.

Glenn retired from the Marine Corps in 1965 and became a business executive until he again heeded the call of his country. In 1974, he was elected to the United States Senate, and served for 24 years, representing his home state of Ohio. In 1998 Glenn, at age 77, became the oldest person to go into space—this time as a

crew member on the space shuttle *Discovery*.

He has logged almost 219 hours in space while making 137 Earth orbits. Today, he is on the faculty of the John Glenn School of Public Affairs at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Although the world has changed drastically during the 50 years since John Glenn first blasted off into space, one constant remains: John H. Glenn Jr. is the epitome of a Marine. His remarkable achievements and service to his country will never be forgotten.

Editor's note: Mike Hoeflerlin commanded at the platoon and company levels in the 1stMarDiv in Vietnam and later was a helicopter pilot in 3d MAW. He is a former military editor of McGraw-Hill's Aviation Week & Space Technology magazine. He earned his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in journalism from the University of Missouri.



Astronaut John Glenn (inset) sits beside the *Friendship 7* spacecraft during training for his Project Mercury MA-6 mission, circa 1961. The image above was drawn by Marine veteran Dave Rydberg. As an active-duty Marine illustrator, he created the artwork for an article about John Glenn's orbit in 1962 for the MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C., newspaper, *The Globe*.