

A Hero Returns to Space

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NEW CONCORD, Ohio – Grand Central Station stopped.

Young and old, in living rooms around the globe, were glued to radio and TV.

And outside John Glenn's childhood home in New Concord, Ohio, concerned friends and neighbors and hundreds of anxious reporters waited on shifting feet, ruining Clara Glenn's lawn.

"There were several minutes of nothing," remembers Lloyd White, Glenn's best buddy since third grade and best man at his wedding. "The whole town was out there and we didn't know if he was burning up or what."

At Cape Canaveral, Alan Shepard forced a calm tone, repeatedly calling his fellow astronaut: "Friendship 7, this is Mercury Control. How do you read? Over."

Finally, after a communications blackout of four minutes, 20 seconds, during which the world prayed that the capsule's heat shield had held, a familiar, enthusiastic voice pierced the static: "Loud and clear. How me?"

The control center sighed in relief; the crowd in Ohio erupted in cheers. The first American in space asked the first American to orbit the Earth: "How are you doing?"

"Oh, pretty good," replied the grand master of understatement.

Since that day – Feb. 20, 1962 – America has never been the same. And John Glenn, the first of us to snap a picture of the Earth from space, the first to witness four sunsets in one day, and the last, some have said, of the great American heroes, has barely changed.

"I don't think it showed on him at all," says Rex Hoon, who has known Glenn since he was making model airplanes in grade school.

"He's never been one to overestimate his importance," agrees Harold Kaser, who went to church with Glenn as a boy and played football with him in college. "He's just a good, ordinary person."

Spoken like the people who know John Glenn, the fighter pilot, the astronaut, the millionaire, the politician and now, the astronaut again, as a nice, smart kid from a sensible Presbyterian family whom everyone in town called "Bud."

To the rest of America, John Herschel Glenn Jr. is anything but ordinary. And as the 77-year-old retiring senator prepares for his long-awaited second space voyage this week, his hero status appears as solid as it was four decades ago.

Even at a time when NASA launches the space shuttle six or seven times a year, when construction is about to begin on an international space station, and when millions have seen images of the Martian surface beamed home by the robot Sojourner, the average person on the street would be hard-pressed to name a single current astronaut or more than a couple of the 12 men who have walked on the moon.

Yet they continue to embrace Glenn, who spent only five years with NASA and logged less than five hours in space. His ticker-tape parade down Wall Street still holds the record for the most paper flung from New York City skyscrapers. His space capsule sits in the Smithsonian beside the Wright Brothers' plane and Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis. His fan mail has barely let up, and he can't walk from point A to point B without someone requesting an autograph.

As Glenn's launch approaches, authorities in Florida are bracing for an onslaught of beach campers around Cape Canaveral. Motels and trailer parks near Kennedy Space Center have been booked since last spring, and Mattel is introducing John Glenn action figures (one dressed as a senator, one as an astronaut) and a toy Friendship 7 capsule.

And while Glenn implores his fellow crew members to call him "just John" and insists his only mission aboard Discovery will be scientific research on aging, NASA Administrator Dan Goldin has declared Glenn his personal hero. He concedes he's counting on the aging senator to remind Americans "that this is a nation where we take on bold tasks and are not afraid of risk, that this is a place where dreams come true."

Even before Glenn took his position atop the Atlas rocket in his tiny spacecraft 36 years ago, he was considered a hero by many who saw him as the ideal American: a polite, straight-laced kid from rural Ohio who honored his schoolteacher mother and his plumber father.

The Marine Corps veteran of World War II and Korea had flown 149 combat missions and, in the last nine days of fighting, shot down three Russian MiGs along the Yalu River, earning numerous medals.

After the war, he continued to risk his life as a test pilot and in July 1957, he made the first transcontinental flight to average supersonic speed, flying from Los Angeles to New York in three hours, 23 minutes.

His selection in 1959 as one of the seven Mercury astronauts itself would have secured him a healthy reference in American history books.

But no one could have predicted what Goldin now calls one of America's "defining moments."

As soon as Glenn climbed out of his capsule that day and watched a crewman paint the outline of his space boots on the deck of the rescue ship Noa, it was clear he was stepping in a new world.

On its face, the enormity of what Glenn had accomplished was incomprehensible to those still in awe of Lucky Lindy's 1927 solo nonstop flight across the Atlantic.

Glenn's friend Kaser remembers that in the days following the orbital flight he couldn't stop thinking about his parents' horse and buggy.

"It took me longer to go to town and back as a kid than it took John to circle the Earth three times," he says. "That's how far we had come in such a short time."

Never mind that the Russians had beaten Glenn into orbit. To Americans, that could not have been more beside the point.

All of a sudden, the United States had a fighting chance of catching up in the Space Race and fulfilling President Kennedy's pledge of being first to walk on the moon.

And Glenn, that smiling, redheaded, freckle-faced, all-American boy next door, became the ultimate symbol of what a free country could do if it tried hard enough. The dream doors were flung wide open as

Glenn encouraged children to do their homework and inspired future space voyagers and scientists to explore the great unknown, seek out beings from other worlds, colonize Mars.

“To be a hero, you have to have a cause and stand up for it,” says Kaser. “You have to have certain principles to defend and promote. You have to have an interest in what’s good, not just for yourself, but for other people. You give of yourself relentlessly and wholeheartedly. You know yourself and you know what you stand for

“John is all of those things and more,” he says. “Some people have even said John is the last true American hero. I do not agree. I think there will be others – I hope there will be.”

Maybe that hope, in an age when countless sports figures, movie stars and rock singers soar to hero status one minute only to be toppled the next, is what prompts Americans to cling to Glenn.

Fellow Mercury astronaut Wally Schirra says heroes may have been easier to create in the early days of the space program, when American society was more forgiving.

“We did dumb things, like getting traffic tickets, or racing down the Gulf Freeway in Corvettes,” Schirra recalls of his days in Houston. “But I think the public was more understanding than they are today. I mean they tear people apart so fast (now) it’s unreal.

“It’s kind of hard for a kid to pick up a hero because I’m not sure what generates a hero these days,” he says. “There are heroic things done by firemen, policemen, lifesavers – all kinds of events like that. But they’re dropped within hours.”

Part of the reason John Glenn the hero has survived so long – weathering the relatively minor storms of the Keating Five scandal and a disastrous run for the presidency that left him holding a multimillion-dollar campaign debt – is that Americans continue to view him as an ordinary guy who did his best and accomplished extraordinary things.

History books cite his achievements in space and in politics, but his friends point to his devotion to his wife and children, and to the fact that he’s never forgotten where he came from. Glenn says he keeps his dad’s plumbing wrench on his Senate office desk to remind him of his roots.

He and Annie frequently fly home to New Concord to see how the high school football team is doing, to shake hands with fourth-graders promoted to middle school and to join friends for hot fudge sundaes at their favorite ice cream parlor.

Clearly, he has contributed an enormous amount to his country, and that will be the thing that stands out,” says Sam Speck, president of Muskingum College, the Glenns’ alma mater in New Concord where they now serve on the board of trustees.

“But more than that, he took the best values from a rural community, the idea of telling it like it is, of treating people decently no matter who they are, of working hard, of loving your fellow man and loving your country, of helping those less fortunate,” he says. “He’ll be remembered for living a life of simple virtue in a time when simple virtue is often hard to come by.”

When Glenn himself is posed the hero question, he laughs.

“I figure I’m the same person who grew up in New Concord,” he says. “I don’t wake up every morning thinking, ‘I gotta be a hero today.’

“It wasn’t me,” he adds. “It would have been the same if it had been ... anyone on that particular flight.”

But perhaps he explained the John Glenn phenomenon years ago. In “My Own Story of the Orbit,” published by *Life* magazine in the spring of 1962, the 40-year-old astronaut reflected on the overwhelming throngs greeting him upon his return to Earth.

“I have looked at all those faces and waved and smiled, when I really felt much more,” he wrote. “Here they were, identifying with me, and I was identifying with them – right back.”

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