

Growing Wings: John Glenn Always a Standout

By **PATTY REINERT**
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NEW CONCORD, Ohio - Forget that Boy Scout image you read about.

OK, it may actually be true that the legendary John Glenn -- first American to orbit the Earth, decorated veteran of two wars, millionaire businessman and four-term U.S. senator -- doesn't drink, smoke, fight or cuss.

But the Boy Scouts weren't good enough for Glenn.

"They were kinda rowdy," remembers Lloyd White, Glenn's lifelong friend. "So Johnny and I started our own club when we were 11 or 12. About every kid in town was in it. We got together and had a big time."

In Glenn's strict, Presbyterian, dry (then and now) hometown -- population 2,000 -- a big time for the Ohio Rangers consisted of swimming in the Muskingum River, sleeping out in tents and making model airplanes every chance they got. To earn merit badges, they waded through knee-deep snow and climbed 80-foot trees.

Today, at 77, with about half of his high school classmates and nearly half of his Mercury astronaut buddies gone, Glenn is still climbing. On Thursday, he is scheduled to take his second ride into the great unknown, becoming the oldest human in space and, NASA hopes, igniting memories of his glory days as the first American to orbit the earth.

"I always wanted to go back up again," Glenn says, "but as the years went by, I thought those hopes had gone glimmering a long time ago."

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The section of Interstate 40 that connects Cambridge, Ohio, where Glenn was born on July 18, 1921, and New Concord, where he moved with his parents a couple of years later, is known as the John H. Glenn Highway. The street by Glenn's boyhood home is named Friendship Drive after his space capsule; the local high school and the gym at the college are named for him.

New Concord is an idyllic rural village about 75 miles east of Columbus. It's a place where, White says, "everybody in town is your mother."

"No smoking, no drinking, no dancing, no cards," White remembers. "It was a great place for kids to be raised."

"It was a nice little town, but it wasn't the sticks," says Lorie Porter, a local historian at Muskingum College, Glenn's Presbyterian alma mater. "There were lots of missionaries who had been all over the world, coming home. There was more of a cosmopolitan atmosphere than you might expect."

During the Depression, Glenn, whom everyone called "Bud" or "Johnny" to separate him from his dad, the local plumber and car dealer, earned extra money on a paper route and raised rhubarb to sell from a wagon.

In high school, Glenn's grades were good, but not outstanding. His mother, a former teacher, thought he could do better if he devoted a little less time to socializing and sports. A star center on the football team, Glenn was the only athlete in his high school to letter in three sports - football, basketball and tennis.

He was president of his junior class, had the lead in the senior play, and sang tenor in the glee club. Every Memorial Day, Glenn's father, a World War I bugler, performed "Taps" at the local cemetery. John stood on the bridge near his home and played the echo on his trumpet.

In their 1939 yearbook, Glenn was dubbed "busiest" and "all-around popular boy."

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As a child, Glenn begged his parents to stop at the airport to watch takeoffs and landings. He took his first airplane ride when he was 8 or 9, sitting next to his dad in the back of a small plane.

"We went up and circled around Cambridge, Ohio," he remembers. "I was fascinated with flying from then on and I built model airplanes as a kid."

But when Glenn's hobby threatened to lead him into a dangerous profession, his parents balked.

"We were sick when he took up aviation," Glenn's father would later tell the *Columbus Dispatch*. "It was just like taking him out and burying him, we thought."

In later years, when Glenn became a test pilot, he would fly his jet home. John and Clara Glenn would hear him buzz New Concord, signaling them to pick him up at the airport in nearby Zanesville.

Today, visitors to the town often stop the police, whose uniforms include a Friendship 7 patch on the shoulder, to ask directions to the John Glenn museum, Porter says. There isn't one.

"You don't call attention to yourself here," she says. "That's bragging. It's not done." Glenn is the same. "It's still hard to get it in his head that we want to do a John Glenn museum," she says. "That shocks him."

Is this the same guy who shot up both hands when reporters asked which of the original seven astronauts would be first in space? And sent his physical exams to NASA. Every year since retirement? And lobbied relentlessly for a second ride?"

"You don't go from selling rhubarb to where he is unless you're ambitious," Porter says. "With the outside world, pressing himself forward is OK, but this is

his home."

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It has been said that Johnny Glenn and Anna Margaret Castor, the daughter of the town dentist, were engaged in the crib.

"There's never been a time in our lives when we didn't know each other," Glenn told *Columbus Monthly* magazine this summer. "Everything we've been through, we've been through together."

They were actually engaged while attending Muskingum. It looked like John might graduate from college and settle down with Annie, maybe eventually take over his dad's plumbing business.

But on Dec. 7, 1941, John was on his way to Annie's senior recital when he heard on the radio that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. After she played "Be Still My Soul" on the organ, he told her he was joining up.

A few days later, Glenn, who already had his private pilot's license, enlisted in military flight training and was sent to Corpus Christi, Texas. As soon as he earned his wings and was commissioned into the Marines, he took a train home and married Annie.

"He was all dressed up in his Marine uniform," recalls White, who served as Glenn's best man in 1943. "He looked at me and said, 'What do you think of this ol' clown suit?' I can still see him standing there with a great big grin on his face."

He flew 59 missions in the South Pacific during World War II and requested combat duty again during the Korean conflict. By then, the Glenns had two children, Dave and Lyn, whose names were painted on his F-86 Sabrejet along with Annie's. He flew 63 missions with the Marines and another 27 as an exchange pilot with the Air Force. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross six times and was awarded the Air Medal with 18 clusters.

After combat duty, he moved his family to the Washington, D.C., area so he could become a test pilot. In July 1957, he flew from Los Angeles to New York in three hours, 23 minutes -- the first transcontinental flight to average supersonic speed. During the flight, he laid a supersonic boom over his hometown, prompting phone calls to his parents' home.

"Johnny must have dropped a bomb," a neighbor lady told his mother.

A couple of months later, Glenn was picked off a New York street by a TV recruiter to appear on CBS-TV's *Name That Tune*, paired with a 10-year-old fellow redhead, Eddie Hodges. They shared a \$26,000 jackpot.

"Yeah, I guess looking back, he stood out," White says of Glenn's early career. "But we never thought he'd do *that*."

That, of course, was becoming an astronaut. Glenn was the oldest of the Mercury team,

and he was considered the front-runner in a friendly competition among the seven astronauts to be first in space.

"He was really disappointed that he didn't get chosen," White says.

But while Alan Shepard and Gus Grissom blasted off ahead of him, Glenn drew the mission that would make him the first American to circle the globe. The orbital flight, Feb. 20, 1962, was the day Americans became convinced they could catch the Russians in the great space race.

By the time the 40-year-old Glenn was finally launched, there had been 11 delays; he had suited up four times, spending several hours waiting in his tiny capsule before the mission was postponed.

"We just wanted to get the thing going," Glenn recalls. "People think somehow that you're under such great tension, that you're suffering some way, or that you're almost looking at this as a suicide mission or something, and it wasn't that way at all."

One such delay, on Jan. 27, 1962, has become as much a part of NASA lore as Shepard's hitting a golf ball on the surface of the moon.

The story, made famous by Tom Wolfe's book *The Right Stuff* and the movie by the same name, begins as Glenn waits in his capsule at Cape Canaveral and quickly flashes to the front lawn of the Glenn home in Arlington, Va., where the media has descended, hoping for a word from the worried wife.

Annie Glenn, who has struggled with a severe stutter since childhood, is terrified at the thought of stammering on national TV.

After the launch is canceled, the vice president of the United States demands to come inside the house, cameras in tow, to comfort Annie.

She refuses to open the door.

As Lyndon Johnson curses, word goes back to Florida: Get John Glenn on the line to order his wife to play ball.

Instead, Glenn picks up the phone and tells Annie she doesn't have to open the door to anybody. "And I will back you up all the way, 100 percent," he says.

Annie Glenn has since overcome her disability. Earlier this year, as John and Annie celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary, Glenn told reporters the secret to their happy marriage was learning to stand by each other in hard times.

"That's what partnership is all about," he said. "It can't all be ticker-tape parades."

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The goal of Glenn's first mission was to put a man into orbit and see if the human body could endure weightlessness for a few hours. The science was basic: Glenn read an eye chart periodically to make sure the shape of his eyeballs wasn't changing, affecting his

vision. He ate a squeeze tube of applesauce and kept it down.

After one of seven planned revolutions, the capsule began to drift. He took over manual control from the autopilot and was actually flying the spacecraft. The test was cut off after three orbits by ground controllers worried that an inflatable cushioning device between the capsule's aft bulkhead and its heat shield had deployed prematurely. The world held its breath, hoping the heat shield had remained in place, as Glenn made a fiery descent back to Earth.

After splashing down in the Atlantic near Grand Turk Island, a NASA psychiatrist asked Glenn to fill out a form that ended with the question: "Was there any unusual activity during this period?"

"I couldn't resist it," Glenn said. "No, I wrote, just a normal day in space."

Even after meeting the Kennedys, riding in victory parades and delivering a speech before a joint session of Congress, Glenn seemed relatively unaffected.

The Glens returned to New Concord for a parade that drew about 75,000 revelers. As the high school band played "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," John and Annie rode through town in a convertible, waving and calling out to all their old friends.

"One of my kids said, 'He called you by your nickname!' and I said, 'Of course. He knows me,'" says Harold Kaser, who went to Glenn's church and played football with him at Muskingum. "They were very impressed."

Afterward, there was a private -- town only -- reception at Muskingum's new gymnasium that would be named for the astronaut. Each family on the local gas meter list got two tickets. A speaker introduced John Glenn as "the embodiment of America."

Through it all, his friends insist, John Glenn didn't change a bit.

"But we changed," says White. "When he was an astronaut, I didn't really know how to handle it. I felt like he was untouchable almost. But that was a sensation in me. He was the same.

"When he became a senator," White adds, "then I felt more comfortable -- like he was a human being now, not a God."

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Glenn's political career brought early disappointments. Before his first run for the U.S. Senate got off the ground in 1964, Glenn slipped and fell, hitting his head and causing dizziness that put him in the hospital for nine months.

He eventually retired from the Marines and settled in Houston, where he worked as a NASA consultant and as an executive with Royal Crown Cola, a job that made him a millionaire.

In 1970, he ran for the Senate again and was defeated in the primary. On his third attempt four years later, however, he carried all 88 counties in Ohio, and in 1980, was

re-elected with the largest margin in state history.

In 1984, Glenn made a run for the presidency that many describe as disastrous. The candidate summed it up this way: "I humiliated my family, gained 16 pounds and went millions of dollars into debt.

"Otherwise," he said, "it was an exhilarating experience."

Concerned about the campaign debt and the fallout from a scandal in which Glenn was investigated but never charged over questionable campaign contributions from convicted savings and loan magnate Charles Keating, Glenn's friends have urged him to retire and come home.

But when Glenn does retire from politics in January, he will have served 24 years and will leave a nearly spotless record of leading the Senate in technical and scientific matters, of helping prevent the spread of nuclear arms and of demanding the cleanup of contamination at nuclear production plants.

And he's been a dutiful ex-astronaut, says George Diller, spokesman for Kennedy Space Center, recalling Glenn's actions after the Challenger explosion in 1986.

"When Glenn got word of it, he could not get here fast enough," Diller says. "The fact that he showed up so fast showed how much he still cared about this place. It was not lost on anyone."

And while some have derided the upcoming flight as a political payoff or a publicity stunt, many credit John Glenn for inspiring their own careers and for his undying quest to push himself further and farther.

When Glenn was coming up in little New Concord, Ohio, "he believed in a cause," says his friend Kaser. "He wasn't aimless or wandering around. He was always forward thinking.

"And he's like that now," he says.

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