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John Glenn was the first American to orbit the Earth in space. Here we see him climbing into his *Friendship 7* space capsule. Image online, courtesy NASA.

Nine months later, school children and their teachers once again watched another American first: [John Glenn's launch](#) to orbit the earth.

It was February 20, 1962. His flight lasted just under 5 hours (4 hours, 55 minutes, 23 seconds) as he and his space capsule, *Friendship 7*, (hurled [into space](#) by the more powerful [Mercury-Atlas rocket](#)) made three orbits around the earth.

It wasn't as perfect as Alan Shepard's flight had been, however. At the time, [Glenn](#) (and the watching public) did not know how close he came to being lost in space.

Mercury Control Center was picking up a strange reading from [the spacecraft](#). It appeared the heat shield was loose. In order for Glenn to safely reenter earth's atmosphere, he needed *Friendship 7's* heat shield to work. If it didn't, both Glenn and his space capsule would be destroyed during reentry.

As Glenn began his descent, everyone watching the telemetry and monitoring the tracking stations nervously watched their screens. Would the loose heat shield be able to withstand the [tremendous forces](#) as it returned to earth's atmosphere?

As he began reentry, [Glenn](#) reported sounds like "small things brushing against the capsule." Then he told mission control, "That's a real fireball outside." Later Glenn said he thought the heat shield might be disintegrating. It was the most stressful part of the flight for Glenn and one of the most critical moments in Project Mercury.

The heat shield held. At 17,000 feet above the ocean, Glenn's parachute was fully activated. When he landed in the Atlantic, he was only 40 miles short of the planned [pickup site](#). He had traveled 75,679 statute miles in just under 5 hours, hurtling through space at a speed of 17,544 miles per hour.

Alan Shepard and [John Glenn](#) became American heroes. Project Mercury was a complete success, and President Kennedy's dream of a manned moon mission before the end of the decade seemed a little closer to reality.

But more triumphs, and tragedies, lay ahead. Ed White was about to experience both.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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Media Stream



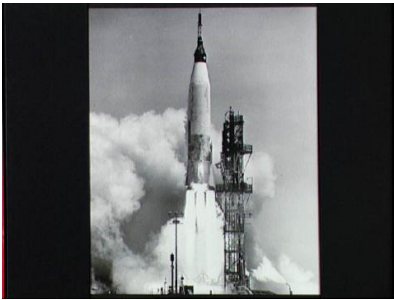
John Glenn - Entering the Space Module

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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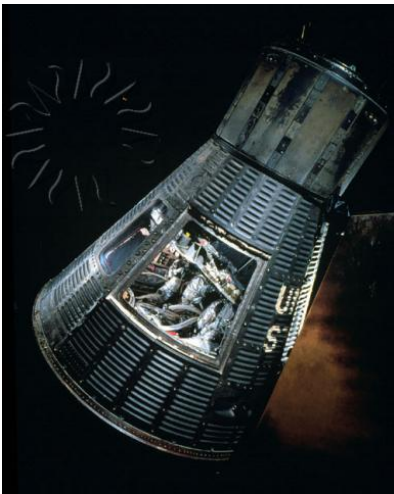
Launch Atop the Mercury-Atlas Rocket

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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Friendship 7 Spacecraft

Image online, courtesy the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

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John Glenn - Space Suit Photo

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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JOHN GLENN'S ORBIT

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John Glenn - First American to Orbit Earth

The John Glenn Story, from the U.S. National Archives.

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