John Glenn Becomes an American Hero

On the 20th of February, 1962—about eight months before the Beatles released their first single, "Love Me Do"—John Glenn was about to fly an extraordinary mission. Strapped into a tiny spacecraft, he would be launched into space by means of a Mercury-Atlas (MA-6) rocket.

In order to be selected for this mission, Glenn—like all the other "Mercury" astronauts—had to meet seven basic requirements. Each one had to be:

- A test-pilot school graduate
- In excellent physical condition
- Under 40 years old
- Shorter than 5 feet 11 inches
- A qualified jet pilot with at least 1,500 hours of flying time
- A college graduate with a bachelor's degree in engineering.

Of the 508 astronaut-candidates, only seven were chosen to be in the first group. They were the "Mercury Seven." In addition to Glenn, they were:

- Scott Carpenter
- Gordon Cooper
- Gus Grissom
- Wally Schirra
- Alan Shepard
- Deke Slayton

John Glenn had some qualifications that his fellow seven mission-candidates did not. NASA tells us about those special achievements:

> *He also had a reputation as one of the best test pilots in the country. In July 1957, he had set a transcontinental speed record by flying from Los Angeles to New York in 3 hours and 23 minutes. It was the first transcontinental flight to average supersonic speed.*

Before Glenn could board his spacecraft, which he named "Friendship 7," John had to complete three years of intense training. Although he would not be the first American in space, he would be the first to orbit Earth. The success of his mission was not assured.

Facing what no other American had ever faced, John Glenn could anticipate problems but neither he, nor anyone involved with the mission, could anticipate that he would have to manually control the space capsule at a critical time. NASA tells us what happened:

> *The historical flight was no easy feat. At the end of his first orbit, a yaw attitude jet clogged, forcing Glenn to abandon the automatic control system and use the manual electrical fly-by-wire system.*

Glenn made three orbits around the Earth before he began his re-entry procedures. Because he was traveling so fast—attaining speeds of more than 17,000 miles an hour—he could complete his globe-circling mission in 4 hours, 55 minutes and 23 seconds!

In less time than it takes students to finish a school day, Glenn launched into space, circled the Earth three times, splashed-down into the Atlantic (about 800 miles southeast of Bermuda) and exchanged his space capsule for a place on the USS *Noa* (which recovered him 21 minutes after splashdown.

Amidst this flurry of activity, Glenn came close to losing his life. To safely reenter Earth's atmosphere, he needed Friendship 7's heat shields to work. If the shields failed, Glenn and his spaceship would burn-up.

Glenn's heat shield somehow loosened, causing intensely worrisome moments for him and for mission controllers on the ground. If the loosened shield did not hold, there would be nothing to prevent Glenn from becoming part of the "real fireball outside" his capsule.

Although the pioneering astronaut thought his shield was disintegrating, it held. Glenn returned to Earth, an American hero.

NASA tells us that his hero status was instantaneous:

> *John Glenn instantly became a hero. President John Kennedy awarded him the Space Congressional Medal of Honor. Schools and streets across the country were named after him. And a ticker tape parade in New York City celebrated his mission.*

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