

A dream takes flight at the University of Iowa

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Astronaut John H. Glenn Jr. poses for a photo with the Mercury 'Friendship 7' spacecraft during preflight activities at the Kennedy Space Center Canaveral, Florida in 1962. (Courtesy NASA/Handout via REUTERS)

Feb. 20 marked the 60th anniversary of the flight of John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth, a flight of 81,000 miles around the planet at 160 miles above terra firma ... and it all began in Iowa.

Glenn was born July 18, 1921, in Cambridge, Ohio. His father was a part-time plumber and car dealer and Glenn learned from him an appreciation of things mechanical and speed. He enlisted with the Army in 1942, but quickly switched to the Marine Corps, intending to become a fighter pilot.

With the influx of recruits after Pearl Harbor, the armed forces of the United States desperately needed locations that could adequately house and provide training facilities for future military aviators.

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Virgil Hancher, a distinguished corporate lawyer in Chicago who had graduated from the University of Iowa in 1918, had recently been named president of the university, and remembered the mobilization and sacrifices he had seen on campus 25 years before.

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Hancher immediately answered the military's call and announced the campus would become "an arsenal of education." To fulfill his goals, he invited the Navy to establish a preflight school on the west side of the river, creating what was known as "The Annapolis of the Midwest."

The Hillcrest dormitory, armory, and field house were rented to the Navy and Marine Corps for initially \$1.20 per student cadet per day. It was here, in April 1942, that a 21-year-old recruit who had just given an engagement ring to his lifelong neighbor and friend, Annie Castor back in Ohio, reported for duty as one of 2,000 arriving that semester for the United States Navy preflight school.

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The program was established mostly to prepare the young men for the physiological demands of a soldier or sailor (or airman) in time of war. Organized into platoons (Glenn's was First Battalion Company A Platoon 1), they would rise at 6 a.m. every morning to begin a full day of marching, learning the fundamentals of aerodynamics and basic survival skills. A football team had even been formed by the recruits (Glenn played as guard) and was known as the Seahawks. Directed by Bernard Bierman, the former head coach of the Minnesota Golden Gophers, the team of Navy and Marine Corps recruits would ultimately win the championship in its league.

Upon the completion of his preflight training, Glenn was transferred to Corpus Christi, Texas, where he was certified as a Marine Corps aviator and assigned to fly the F-4U Corsair fighter plane for the legendary VMO-155 Squadron, which came to be known by the enemy as "Whistling Death."

Glenn flew 59 missions over enemy-occupied islands in the South Pacific and earned two Distinguished Flying Crosses and 10 Air Medals. He then returned to the U.S. to be reunited with Annie (whom he had married while on leave in 1943) and was called again for service in 1952 during the Korean War.

In that conflict, Glenn, already promoted to captain, completed 63 combat missions in F-9F fighter jets with VMF-311 flying alongside his wingman, the Boston Red Sox World Series hitter Ted Williams. A new, more powerful aircraft, the F-86, had, at the time, however, been introduced into service by the Air Force and Glenn applied for the U. S. Air Force Exchange Program and was awarded a seat in the 650 mph Sabre jet, with which he shot down three enemy planes.

When the war ended in late 1953, Glenn was named as an experimental test pilot (for the Navy and Marine Corps) and in July 1957, set a world speed record, crossing the North American continent with an F-8 Crusader attack jet in three hours and 23 minutes. Three months later, Russia's space program launched the Soviet Union's sputnik satellite, the first human-made object to circle the Earth in space.

Fearing the Russians were ahead in technology, NASA was incorporated in 1958, and in 1959, announced the first Americans to be selected as astronauts. Known as the Mercury 7 (named after the series of capsules that would be built to bring them to space), Glenn was the only Marine of them and was chosen to pilot the third flight of the program, the first to orbit around the planet. This was famously portrayed in the movie "The Right Stuff" and, more recently, in "Hidden Figures" when Glenn refuses to allow his rocket to be launched until the trajectory figures were confirmed by Katherine Johnson, a brilliant Black mathematician who NASA had hired as a human computer.

The mission launched flawlessly at 9:47 a.m. on Feb. 20, 1962. But after one orbit, Glenn reported seeing what he described as fireflies dancing around the capsule. He soon learned that it was a possibility parts of his heat shield had broken off in flight. Without it, the 3,000-degree temperatures caused by the friction as his capsule plummeted into the atmosphere at 17,000 mph would melt the metal of the vehicle and everything in it. Following two more orbits, he took partial manual control and initiated a re-entry back to Earth.

No communication was heard from him for the next several minutes and cameras were unable from the ground to identify if the capsule had burned or not. Finally, he was heard to say, "That was a real fireball."

Four hours, 55 minutes, into the flight, he and his Mercury capsule splashed down in the Atlantic Ocean. America had its first man to orbit the planet ... and the path to first achieving that dream had begun at the University of Iowa.

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John died on Dec. 8, 2016, at the age of 95. Annie, his wife, survived him by four years, and passed away from complications of COVID-19 in 2020.

David V. Wendell is a Marion historian, author and special events coordinator specializing in American history.

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