

GLENN



Although well-known as one of the first astronauts (he made the first American orbital flight in February 1962) and as a senator from Ohio, John H. Glenn's experiences go beyond these two important areas. As a Marine Aviator, then-1stLt. Glenn flew F4U Corsairs in the Pacific during World War II and immediately after the war as part of the small Marine aviation presence in China.

During the Korean War he flew with VMF-311, one of two Marine jet fighter squadrons providing close air support (CAS) to the United Nations forces. He flew 63 CAS missions before making an exchange tour with the USAF's 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing flying F-86 Sabres. In June and July 1953, Maj. Glenn flew bomber escort and air superiority missions, eventually destroying three MiG-15s.

After Korea, Glenn planned a supersonic dash across the U.S. in the new Crusader. In July 1957, he flew an F8U-1P (RF-8A) from California to New York in three hours and 23 minutes at an average speed of 726 mph. Soon after his transcontinental dash, Glenn became part of the new astronaut program. When he retired as a colonel, John Glenn held five DFCs.

Senator Glenn's schedule is hectic, but he saved 15 minutes one busy day to talk with us. As he recalled his experiences in aviation, it was obvious how much he enjoyed talking about his life in the cockpit. The 15 minutes quickly stretched to 45.

Approach: Senator, how soon after you got your wings did you find yourself flying the Corsair in combat?

Sen. Glenn: Well, let me go back a little bit. I first started flying in the old civilian flying program when I was in college — you could get physics credit for it — so, I first soloed in '41 in a 60-horsepower Taylorcraft. When World War II broke

out, I volunteered and went into flight training. I got my wings in March of 1943. After a few shore transfers I wound up in an old F4F squadron at Kearny Mesa, which is now Miramar. It was sort of a tent city back in those days.

We took the squadron (VMF-155) to El Centro, trained there and got Corsairs before we went overseas. We were one of



the first squadrons in the Marshall Islands after the Marines took them. We never had any air opposition, although there were rumors that the Japanese were going to try and move airplanes back in. Our mission was mainly bombing the by-passed islands and keeping them down. We were up against heavy anti-aircraft fire. I was never directly hit by big stuff, but I did get hit five times. None of them were very big, but there were holes. So, basically, it was a year-and-a-half from the time I got my wings until I was in combat. Then I came back to the training command after the war and eventually went to Korea.

Approach: Did you notice any difference between the Marine Corps and Air Force

approach to operations during your exchange tour in Korea?

Sen. Glenn: Not at that time – this was during late '52 until the war ended in July of 1953. They were such different types of operations you really couldn't compare the two. That's one reason they had the slots for the Marines up there so we could get some air-to-air experience. What we were doing with the F9Fs was all deep interdiction or close air support. The Air Force was working strictly air-to-air. So, how you ran a squadron or a group was much different.

There were a couple of times when I was with the Air Force I did get to do some air-to-ground work. Some days the MiGs just

Courtesy of the artist and Aeroprint, Spofford, NH 03462.



First Swept-Wing Encounter by Keith Ferris



Maj. Glenn brought his F9F back after a 1953 mission in Korea.



Maj. John Glenn in the cockpit of his Vought F8U-1P Crusader.

didn't fly. We'd just sit and grind around on our figure-eight screen patterns. If there were no reports of MiGs, we dropped down and strafed targets-of-opportunity rather than waste the gas. That's what I was doing one day on the CO's wing when he got hit by anti-aircraft fire while we were strafing some trucks. To get back to your original question, the F9F was the heavy-duty workhorse, while the F-86 was kind of the glamor, go-get-'em jet of the day. It was completely different flying and it's very difficult to compare the two missions.

Approach: Let's talk about the F-86 versus the MiG-15. The two aircraft were very similar in appearance. Did you ever worry about "blue-on-blue" situations?

Sen. Glenn: Getting an early ID was a problem. In fact – this sounds kind of silly today – we used to carry binoculars. I still have mine at home. If we're going to a ballgame and I ask Annie to bring the "MiG glasses" she knows which ones I'm talking about. Anyway, I carried those. They used to hang around my neck. If I really got into a scrap, I just tucked them into my vest so they didn't bang around and hit me in the face. I used to practice with them between flights, trying to get them in the exact piece of sky I wanted on the first attempt, sort of like shooting from the hip with a gun. It's funny, but I got very proficient at it.

The difference between the two airplanes nose-on was the MiG-15's wing attached to the fuselage about half-way up whereas the F-86's wing was on the bottom of the fuselage. I got real good at spotting the difference at range and never ran on friendlies as a result. There was a lot of that going on, though. You'd hear it on the radio sometimes.

Approach: What kept you alive in those days? This was pre-NATOPS, pre-RAG concept. LtGen. Tom Miller, former DCIS (Air), told us safety was pretty much up to the CO of a squadron.

Sen. Glenn: Safety was left up to individual commands back in those days. Of course, in combat, you're out for a specific purpose and safety sometimes takes second place, but you're still safety conscious. I think Tom's right. It depended much more on the individual CO, what he demanded of his maintenance department, and whether he had an Ops Officer that

really ran a tight ship. I was Ops Officer in several different squadrons. If guys showed up bleary-eyed the next morning or whatever, I'd ground them. Guys would get livid, but eventually they'd understand that kind of behavior was not going to be tolerated. They could either fly or watch the war from the sidelines.

Approach: *Did you have any habit patterns that worked for you, that perhaps other guys might not have used?*

Sen. Glenn: I think I just had a professional attitude toward the whole thing. I was very serious about flying. I was staying in, making a career out of it. I wanted to be the best there was, and that meant I needed to take a very professional attitude toward it. I didn't take anything for granted about knowing how an engine works or the altitudes on fuel curves. I could see those things in my sleep. I think everybody who cared about what they were doing did the same thing. We didn't take chances on safety things. That's true of all good pilots, I think. Of the "Smilin' Jack" pilots, I'd say at least three-quarters of them are dead. That's not to say we were so super-safe we didn't do anything – quite the opposite. But, the guys who had a very flippant attitude toward flying aren't with us anymore. I don't think it's a coincidence it happened that way. I think it's cause and effect.

Professionals, whether they're doctors or dentists, try to know everything possible about their profession. Being a pilot not only demands a lot of you to accomplish the job, it demands you to stay alive! That's true in peace or combat. As hokey as the movie "Top Gun" was – I loved it, saw it several times – it did bring out one important point: If you don't feel you're the best in the business, you'd better go drive something else. Part of feeling that way is knowing everything there is to know about the airplane and the threat. That's even tougher today. What I had to know about the F-86s or F9Fs, for instance, is pretty elementary stuff compared to what you guys have to know now.

Approach: *Let's talk about the F-8, specifically "Project Bullet."*

Sen. Glenn: I could fill this whole interview with stories about the Crusader. I

came back from Korea and went to Test Pilot Training, TPT in those days, not TPS. I was there for about four years. I came out of there and was assigned to BUAIR as the Class Desk Officer for the F-8. That's how I got temporary duty to do the cross-country speed run, which was a little fancy maneuvering in itself.

We lost an airplane practicing for Project Bullet. We couldn't get the Air Force to launch any tankers so we had to use an AJ Savage. The AJ had two big prop engines on the wings and a jet engine in the fuselage. It took jet fuel in the belly and AVGAS in the wings. We were practicing just north of Dallas. The AJ could fly at about 29,000 feet max with a load of fuel. I'd come screaming in with the F-8 and slow down as quickly as possible so I didn't lose any time. I'd just plugged and was taking on a little fuel when the AJ's right engine started spitting black smoke. I knew something was wrong so I backed out of the drogue and went off to one side. The left engine started doing the same thing. Both prop engines were putting out black smoke. The jet engine was going full blast, but that wasn't enough to keep the thing airborne. I followed them down to 3,000 feet and they transmitted they were going to have to bail out! They couldn't keep the thing up. Here I was off to the side, watching these three guys come piling out of the AJ. The airplane had a full load of fuel when it hit so it looked like an atom bomb on impact. I called Grand Prairie to get the choppers to pick them up. Fortunately, nobody got hurt. The accident investigation revealed the line guys had put jet fuel in the AVGAS tank.

Approach: *Let's shift gears to the NASA years. What appealed to you about the space program at first?*

Sen. Glenn: There were rumors about manned space flight while I was at BUAIR. I was interested in seeing whether or not I could get into it. We had a couple of projects that came through on orbital mechanics and re-entry. The simulators were being run down at Langley. They wanted somebody who had had high-speed test-flight experience to come down and be a guinea pig every two or three weeks for a day or so and try running some of these things on a little simulator they had hooked into an analog computer, which was brand-new at the

time. I talked to the captain and managed to get assigned to some of that stuff.

When they set the criteria for the space program, I fit the profile and my card dropped out with 130 other guys. They narrowed that field down to 32 and put us through all the different physical and psychological tests.

Approach: *Speaking of hokey movies, how about "The Right Stuff?"*

Sen. Glenn: That wasn't my favorite, although the general theme of the book – the idea of test pilots and early astronauts as a breed of people out against the elements – had some validity. We had an awful lot of people killed at Pax when we were doing work on the early jets. We had a lot of weird things happen. We lost 13 guys out of about 70 pilots doing the test work during my time there.

Approach: *What about the relationship between the astronauts and engineers during the early days? Was it as adversarial as the film portrayed?*

Sen. Glenn: Bob Gilreuth ran the Space Task Group, STG, as it was known. At the first meeting we had with him he told us we were all experienced test pilots with more practical experience than the engineers. Anytime we saw anything that looked unsafe or if we wanted more tests run, he wanted us to let him know. And we did. He always backed us. It wasn't something we abused – we didn't ask for new tests on everything under the sun, but it goes back to what I was saying about professionalism. It was part of making sure that you had thought of everything that might happen and what you were going to do if it did happen. That's just part of taking a professional attitude toward flying in space or anyplace else.

You know, people always tell me that they've just started flying or they've just soloed. I tell them to either get out of it or make up their minds to keep going until they get their instrument ratings. So many people in private flying get bagged because of weather and a lack of instrument knowledge. Usually the equipment doesn't quit; it's pilot error. The same thing all too often is true in the military, although you guys have got unbelievably low mishap rates today. The lifetime rate on the Crusader was 46.6. What you're doing now, 2.5 or so, that's unbelievable.

– Lt. Ward Carroll

¹"Smilin' Jack" was a U.S. aviation-adventure comic strip drawn by Zack Mosley from 1933-1973. Its hero, "Smilin' Jack" Martin, was always involved in daredevil, crime-fighting aerial exploits. – Ed.