Life Stories
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JEFF SHESOL INTERVIEW
MERCURY RISING: *A LIFE STORIES SPECIAL*

Jeff Shesol, Historian and Author
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Interviewed by George Kunhardt
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JEFF SHESOL:

Mercury Rising is the story of John Glenn's orbital flight around the Earth. He was the first American to orbit the Earth, in doing that he really propelled the space race forward in a really significant way. It happened not in a vacuum, it happened in the heat really, if I can mix a metaphor here, the heat of the Cold War, in an incredibly dangerous moment for America and the world. And I think that the story that I try to tell is why Glenn's achievement was significant for both the United States, our national security, and for our allies around the world.

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Jeff Shesol

Author

Mercury Rising:

John Glenn, John Kennedy, and the New Battleground of the Cold War

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JEFF SHESOL:
John Glenn was another of these figures who seemed to loom very large in our national life. When I was growing up, he was in the United States Senate, but of course we all knew that he was more than a senator, that he a national hero, that he had been really not just an astronaut, but one of the great astronauts who was responsible for one of the great achievements of the space race, which was America's first orbital flight around the Earth. But I didn't know that much about that history. And that, too, was something that I really wanted to understand. You don't spend a lot of time in most history courses, whether in high school or in college, learning about the space race. That was something, again, that I was drawn to on my own. I would pick up books and try to absorb what I could along the way. But it became, for me, a lifelong fascination.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Tell me about what interests you most about John Glenn.

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JEFF SHESOL:
Glenn, as a politician, four terms in the United States Senate, representing Ohio, was not incredibly compelling. He was honorable, he was respectable and highly respected, but he wasn't exciting. He wasn't an exciting politician.

He was a pretty mild man, frankly. And it was hard for me, as I learned more about the space race and I learned more about what Glenn had done in space, it was harder for me to reconcile that John plan. the astronaut and the incredible danger that he was willing to face in moving the space program forward with the politician that I knew. And I wanted to understand that and how, in fact, this was the same person and whether they could be reconciled. And the more that I explored the life of John Glenn, the clearer it became to me – and this is before I decided to write the book, this is in many ways why I decided to write this book – that I felt there was a John Glenn that most Americans didn't know. The John Glenn who was a highly decorated combat pilot.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And it's not simply that he was a combat pilot, it's that he an incredibly daring pilot who was even more willing than most of the other pilots around him in his squadron to face danger, to take huge risks, and somehow to survive even when the enemy had blown a hole, literally, in the tail of his plane. He was incredibly daring, even kind of reckless. And it was, again, not the Glenn that we were. used to much later as a politician, but this is the Glenn who became an astronaut. This is the Glen who was willing to really put his life on the line when it was unclear whether he was going to come back safely from his orbital flight.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Walk me through a little bit about his childhood, where he was from, a little bit about parents and if you can paint that picture for me that would be very helpful.

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JEFF SHESOL:
John Glenn was the quintessential small town boy, and I mean small town. He was from New Concord, Ohio, the eastern part of the state. It was a town that is a mile across. And at the time when Glenn was born, 1921, the population was barely a thousand people. So this is as small as it gets. And as a child, he could easily just walk back and forth across town, cover the whole landscape, knew everybody. It was an America that, in many ways, is lost to us today, and he really imbibed those small town values of community, of church, the Presbyterian church in the town, there were actually two in that little town. And this was really fundamental to who John Glenn was. All of these, what we regard to be kind of American cliches, he lived them, he imbribed them, he believed them, and embodied them. Glenn talked a lot about his religion over the course of his career. As an astronaut, he talked about it very comfortably in his later years as a politician.

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JEFF SHESOL:
He wanted to make clear that he didn't believe that everything was sort of preordained in that the success of his mission was a given, for example. That,

to him, created a kind of fatalism, a sense that there really wasn't much you could do to affect your fate one way or another. A lot of pilots, he said, combat pilots seemed to feel that way. Well, you know, it's not up to me. He did actually feel, as he put it, that he was living with his God in a kind of 50-50 proposition. And certainly, God shaped events, as he understood it, but that he had some say in the outcome as well, and that He was given the opportunity to use his abilities, his God-given abilities, the best he could to the best ends that he could. And so it wasn't a passive sort of faith in Glenn.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
John wrote about that his father was his hero. Can you talk a little bit about his father and a little about what being a hero, both his father was, but also how John was a hero to the country?

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JEFF SHESOL:
John Glenn Sr. had actually fought in World War I, not in the trenches in the sort of classic combat role, but he was a war veteran, and this was something that really filled young John Glenn, Budd, as he was known, to his family and friends at that time with enormous pride. It was a classic case where the father didn't actually talk that much about his war experience, but he would on every decoration day put on his uniform and... and take out his bugle, and it was the sort of ritual that Glenn grew up with. But he didn't just admire his father as a former soldier, he admired his father as a citizen of New Concord.

He was a member of the community. He was plumber, later he ran a small auto dealership, and he was the the sort-of person, both of Glenn's parents were the sort of people who just had an open door and friendly to one and all and had a very active group of friends.

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JEFF SHESOL:
They might do something really exciting on the weekends and get in the cars and drive to Cambridge, Ohio, the next town over is Zanesville. Again, is really what seems to us to be a cliche of small town life in the early part of the century, but that was very much where John Glenn came from and he never lost sight of it no matter what he did.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
So his father was in the military and then later, John was. How did his parents take it when he enlisted and talk about what his role was in the military?

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JEFF SHESOL:
Even before John Glenn joined the military, he made his parents very uncomfortable by expressing his determination to fly. His mother's response was, well, they might as well just sort of take you out and bury you right now. They thought it was crazy. They thought that it was dangerous. He had gotten the flying bug when he was only about eight years old, and he was

accompanying his father, the plumber, to the next town on a job, and they drove by a little airstrip, and this is in the very late 1920s, and there was a pilot there with a little two-seater that became a three-seater, because for a buck or 50 cents or whatever it was that they had to pay, he took them up for flight, and they circled around the town, John Glenn and his father. He never forgot the experience. And even though it was a number of years before Glenn himself actually got in another plane, he was obsessed with the idea. And when he expressed to his parents, in his teenage years that he was determined to learn to fly properly, they were really not in favor of it at all, but he managed to persuade them.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And so that process began before the World War began. And when Pearl Harbor happened, like a lot of Americans, John Glenn just went right out and enlisted. And then he waited, and he didn't get his orders. And he was frustrated because he wanted to fly, he wanted to fight, he wanted to be in this defining conflict. So having enlisted in the Army Air Force and having not heard from them, he decided with a buddy of his that he would go re-enlist, this time for the Marines. And this time it took and he did get his orders and ultimately wound up in combat, but not until 1944. Glenn was a master of what was known in the military as sniveling, which doesn't sound like a particularly flattering term and probably wasn't. But it was consistent with Glenn's view that you shouldn't be kind of a passive observer of your own

fate. That if you wanted something, you should lean forward, you should go out and get it.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And what he really wanted to do was fly a combat plane. He wanted to be in the thick of the fight. And so during his training, he was assigned to one of those big cargo planes, which are important to the war effort, but you know, nobody. Nobody makes a motion picture about those guys, right? I mean, this is not exciting stuff, as important as it is. And so he worked, he campaigned, he drove his superiors crazy until he managed to get reassigned to learn how to actually fly a fighter plane.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Can you talk to me about his wingman in the Korean War and kind of who he befriended and who fought alongside him?

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JEFF SHESOL:
It is an incredible coincidence and stroke of fate that the wingman, John Glenn, in Korea was even more famous, at least at the time, than John Glenn himself, and that was Ted Williams, the great hitter for the Boston Red Sox. And they became fast friends, and there was something that Ted Williams said years later looking back on his time with Glenn in Korea. Again, drew me

into the story and helped me to understand that there was more to John Glenn than I saw in the United States Senate. He said, that man is crazy. That man is Crazy. Now, if you go back on C-SPAN and you watch Glenn giving a speech or talking at a congressional hearing, where's the crazy? You don't see any of the crazy, but the crazy was there. It was there in Korea. And as I said before, he was not only daring in himself, but he inspired the others around him to be more daring and to take greater risks, and it was very clear that he was always willing to put his life on the line, sometimes to a fault, sometimes he got himself into greater danger than he probably should have, flying back to make a second attack on an enemy position when that was really against protocol, taking a bunch of hits in the plane, coming back again with the plane full of holes, sometimes a hole in one case as big as his flight helmet.

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JEFF SHESOL:
There's a photograph of Glenn after one of these missions. He somehow got this plane back to base with a huge hole in its tail. And he's standing next to it proudly in his flight jacket holding up his helmet so you can see just how big this hole is. And that's a photograph that apparently lived forever on the desk of Senator Glenn. This was a very proud moment for him.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
A few years later in 57, Project Bullet happened. Can you set up Project Bullet and tell me what it was and why it's so significant?

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JEFF SHESOL:
When Glenn finished his service in Korea, he really wanted to keep flying. There were some around him who saw his leadership qualities and said that he should kind of do everything he could to move up the hierarchy in the Marines. Maybe someday he could become commandant of the Marines, and that appealed to him on a certain level. But really what he wanted to do more than anything was get back up there and face danger again, during time when there wasn't a hot war. There was Cold War, but there wasn't the kind of combat that Glenn had experienced World War II or in Korea. So he became a test pilot. He became a military test pilot, and having done that for a while, he was then promoted, as they saw it, to a desk job In Washington, the Bureau of Aeronautics, which he found just absolutely stultifying, miserable. He would get in his car, he had to commute just like everybody else. He would go sit and he would push paper and he couldn't stand it.

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JEFF SHESOL:
So he contrived for himself a mission. He called it Project Bullet and the idea was that he was going to test this new Navy plane called the Crusader. It was a new Navy jet and the Navy was preparing to buy a whole bunch of them and that he would test its capabilities by trying to break the speed record, flying from one end of the United States to the other. And so he managed to sell his superiors on this idea. They liked the idea of beating the Air Force, which

held the record. And so Glenn got in this plane in California, and he managed fly all the way to Brooklyn in three hours and 23 minutes. He set the record, and as he hopped off this plane onto the tarmac, the press was waiting, snapping pictures of Glenn and his family and he instantly became a celebrity. Nobody had known who John Glenn was prior to that. Suddenly he was on the front page of every newspaper in the United States. Suddenly he being invited onto a television game show, named that tune, which made him even more famous. And Glenn in 1957, before there was even a NASA, was a national figure.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Can you set up what the Cold War was, what was going on in the country, in the U.S. and around the world.

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JEFF SHESOL:
Well, it took a little while post-World War II for the reality to set in, but it was very clear, I think, to everyone by 1947 that we were engaged, the United States was engaged in a Cold War with the Soviet Union. The Iron Curtain, as it was called, had come down around Eastern Europe. Freedom was extinguished there, and it was quite clear that America was in a... Not just a new conflict, but a new kind of conflict, in which both sides, in fairly short order, were armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons. So it was an era of great danger. We think of the 1950s in particular as a time of great kind of

consumer culture and beautiful cars and movie stars, and all of that was certainly true, but it was also a time of existential peril, not just in the United States, but really around the world because of this Cold War conflict. Both the United States and the Soviet Union, and this was all very public at the time, were working very busily to try to get satellite of some kind up into space.

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JEFF SHESOL:
Nobody had done that yet, and there was a realistic hope in the United States that we might go first, even though the effort seemed to be fraught by all kinds of trouble, not just technological trouble, not just the fact of rockets exploding on launch pads, which seemed to happen all the time with alarming frequency, but also a bureaucratic battle among the different branches of the armed forces, all of which wanted to own the space program. In effect, we had multiple space programs in the United States before NASA. The Navy had its own space program, the Air Force had its, even the Army, it's a little bit hard to imagine. the Army in space, but the Army had a space program as well. And so it was kind of a mess, frankly, the United States effort. And in October 1957, the Soviet Union did it. They managed to get a satellite in space before the US, before anybody else did, this little orb called Sputnik. And it was a sensation in a terrifying way, really.

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JEFF SHESOL:

Americans told stories. Some of them to this day still tell stories about seeing. Sputnik orbiting around the Earth. Now, it was so tiny they weren't actually seeing Sputnik. They were seeing the booster rocket, which was much larger, reflecting light. But nonetheless, this was a terrifying fact. The idea of a Soviet satellite passing over the United States again and again, repeatedly, and the United State not having been able to do this itself yet at that point. That was the beginning of the space race, and it accelerated pretty quickly.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
How did the Americans respond?

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JEFF SHESOL:
The Americans responded by continuing to try to get their own satellite up in space. But when they did manage to do it later that year, it was not so sensational. They were playing catch-up from the very beginning of the space race. And the other thing, Sputnik wasn't the only spectacular achievement by the Soviet Union in space, it followed almost immediately by a sequel, Sputnik 2, which was even more impressive because it was a heavier piece of equipment and the heavier it is, the harder it is to get something like that into orbit. They sent a dog into orbit, the poor ill-fated dog Leica, but the fact that they got it up there was the achievement. They also managed to crash land a spacecraft onto the Moon. It was not yet possible to soft land something on the Moon, but they fact that could aim at the Moon and hit the moon and

make the target was both, again, hugely impressive and terrifying. They also sent a spacecraft around the far side of the moon, which no one had ever seen.

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JEFF SHESOL:
It is the farside of the Moon. It's in darkness. And they managed to take pictures of it being back to the United States. They were being referred to always in the press as space spectaculars. It was one after the other, while the American program continued to seem trapped in, again, bureaucratic trouble, these intramural arguments among the armed forces and failing technology.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Can you set up the Mercury 7 program?

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JEFF SHESOL:
I've described the mess of it in the late 1950s. And there was a huge congressional investigation, by the way, after Sputnik that was led by Senator Lyndon Johnson. Ultimately, Johnson, more than anybody, is responsible for the creation of NASA. Eisenhower, president at the time, was not particularly excited about creating, as he put it mockingly, a great department of space. He was a conservative, he was a small government Republican, and he didn't like the idea of creating some big new agency. But he recognized that it was

important, particularly if the United States was ever going to catch up to the Soviet Union. So he created NASA. He signed the Space Act in 1958. And Project Mercury was only part of NASA, but it was the manned space mission, as it was referred to at the time. There was an idea that... the United States had to come up with some way to get human beings into space. Now, what was lacking at the time, and Eisenhower certainly felt this, was a rationale.

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JEFF SHESOL:
Why send human beings into space? What was it we actually wanted them to do up there? We just want them to go and look around and tell us what it was like. We could do that with cameras. We could measure things in space with machinery, with magnetometers. Did we actually need to put people at risk? Did we need to spend all that money? to send people to space or even, as some people were starting to suggest, send people to the moon. It wasn't just Eisenhower who was wary of this. The scientific community thought it was kind of a waste of money. If it was going to be spent on space, they thought it could be spent more fruitfully on certain kinds of research. Or maybe it actually ought to be spend on research into medicine, problems here on Earth. So there was a fair bit of argument as to whether a manned space mission was important at all, and the Eisenhower administration was pretty ambivalent about it.

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JEFF SHESOL:

They created it and then they occasionally kind of disowned it a little bit, they didn't like to talk about it, and there was a sense of, again, unease, hesitation, and I think on Eisenhower's part even some regret that he agreed to it. When the Mercury program was created, it was an idea more than anything. They had to build an organization, and they had to pick some astronauts. In fact, they had first decide what they were even going to be called. There was some discussion of different names for these guys who were going to go to space, and ultimately someone suggested astronaut, which sounded pretty good. And then they had go and find some. Eisenhower ultimately made the call that the pool should consist only of military test pilots. You didn't have to have been a combat pilot, although that was pretty nice if that came along with the package, but that they needed to be military test pilots, not only because they were familiar with high-altitude, high-speed aircraft, but also because they lived under the umbrella of secrecy of the military, which was going to be pretty important to the space program going forward.

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JEFF SHESOL:
So a big effort was undertaken to find a number of astronauts. They settled on seven, and three of them were Air Force. veterans and three of them were from the Navy and John Glenn was, as he put it, the lonesome marine in this outfit.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:

Can you talk a little bit about how the press and NASA focused on the astronauts more than the program and the machines?

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JEFF SHESOL:
So the astronauts were introduced with some fanfare to the country at a press conference at NASA in April of 1959. And I said with some fanfare, but I don't think NASA had any idea what was about to follow the incredible public fascination with these seven guys, their families, their backstories, and ultimately their fate as astronauts. So they walked them into a conference room at NASA and they sat them along the long table with a big blue tablecloth draped over it, each one of them got a microphone, some of them had ashtrays as they smoked through the press conference, and they leaned forward and did the best they could to answer the questions, but what was clear immediately was that six of them were pretty uncomfortable in front of a microphone. These were incredibly accomplished pilots, but none of them were public figures, except for John Glenn. And Glenn, it was immediately obvious, was incredibly comfortable in front of the cameras.

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JOHN GLENN:
I look at it, if I use the talents and capabilities I happen to have been given to the best of my ability, I think there is a power greater than I am that will certainly see that I am taken care of if I do my part of the bargain.

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JEFF SHESOL:
He had had that experience of Project Bullet when he became a celebrity. He was a natural on that game show Name that Tune. And he had exactly the kind of warm personality, the humility, the humor, the earnestness that played incredibly well on television. And he was essentially the master of ceremonies at that press conference. And you can see him leaning over, he's gesturing, he's expansive, he's funny, he is sentimental, he's hitting every note on the register at that first press conference. And you can see, you watch the body language of the other astronauts leaning back kind of shooting looks at one another. They don't like this at all. First of all, they're not sure they like this guy who's outperforming them. But second of all they don't the idea that maybe they're supposed to do this too. Because I think they know, it becomes very clear, that they're capable of that kind of performance, they are capable of incredible things, but not that.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Can you just briefly introduce the other six astronauts?

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JEFF SHESOL:
Starting with the three from the Navy. Alan Shepard, whose name I think may still be familiar because he became the first American in space. Alan Shepherd had gone to the Naval Academy. He had never fought in combat,

which was kind of a sore point for him, but he was an incredibly daring test pilot and also someone who lived a little loosely in his private life, which became kind of an issue between himself and John Glenn and really a public relations risk to the program. There was also Wally Schirra, another Navy pilot who had flown in combat pretty considerably. A practical joker with kind of an edge. And there was Scott Carpenter, who was a thoughtful guy, a lovely guy, really became a close friend of John Glenn's, and also in many ways the most impressive physical specimen of the seven astronauts and outperformed many of them in many of the tests that they had to take to become astronauts. Looking then at the three who come from the Air Force, you had Deke Slayton, who was a sort of a gruff and chain-smoking veteran. You had Gordon Cooper, who is young and a little bit awkward, but a very good speaker. And Gus Grissom, who had a degree in engineering and was shy to the point almost of diffidence. And then you had John Glenn, the seventh, and the only one who was already famous when he became an astronaut.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Can you talk a little bit about both their friendship and rivalry?

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JEFF SHESOL:
The seven had won this incredible competition over literally hundreds of other qualified pilots to become the seven astronauts. And then the real

competition began because it was clear that none of them was going to be satisfied with simply being one of the astronauts. They all wanted to be first. And the press became obsessed in the United States and around the world with this question of who was going to be the first man in space. It seemed just as likely that it would be the United States at that point. We didn't know who the Russians were or the Soviets were because that program was just shrouded in secrecy, but here were the seven astronauts and Life magazine and the news reels and so the public got very caught up in the contest, and it was difficult for them. It was often tense for them because on the one hand, they were training together, they needed to support one another. On the other hand, each one of them wanted to outshine the others.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And it seemed pretty clear to the other astronauts, to the leadership of NASA, and really to the public that the two likeliest candidates for first in space were going to be John Glenn and Alan Shepard, and so a lot of the competition really revolved around them with two camps developing among the astronauts. Again, it was every man for himself, but they did kind of congregate, and it was five against two, because... The only ally, really, of John Glenn's in that group was Scott Carpenter. The NASA leadership had already made up its mind that Alan Shepard would go first and Glenn would be his backup in case Shephard got injured or got a cold, and that Gus Grissom would go second and Glenn again would be the backup in that case. And so Glenn was not even assigned the third in the series. He was simply the

backup to the other two. But NASA... again, in the interest of secrecy to a degree, but also because they were uncomfortable with the idea of offending John Glenn's many fans in the country, and just about everybody was a John Glenn fan at that point.

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JEFF SHESOL:
Beatles fans might have argued at one point whether they loved Ringo the most, or Paul, or John, or George, but it was pretty clear that the public was all for John Glenn, and NASA was really wary of losing support in the program. Not so worried that they would have picked John Glenn first but worried about announcing it. So they came out with a big grand announcement that there were three finalists and it was these three. It was Shepherd Grissom and Glenn and the three wound up together on the cover of Life magazine and Glenn had to go forward with what he knew to be a charade and it was a deeply embittering experience for him.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Will you talk about John Glenn and his relationship with Life magazine, their coverage of the space race, especially the Mercury program in general?

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JEFF SHESOL:

So the astronauts were very much a life magazine phenomenon. There are still a lot of Americans who have in the closet, in the attic, somewhere a stack of Life magazines from the 1960s with Glenn's picture on the cover, with all the astronauts, with their wives on the covers. You know, week after week, life brought the story of the astronauts to the American public more than any other publication. Why was that? Well, it wasn't just that life was the leading periodical in the country. It was that life had a special deal with the astronauts. NASA had been really concerned about the feeding frenzy around the astronauts from the first moment. I described that first press conference when they were introduced to the world. And while the cameras were focused on the astronauts, naturally enough, what was happening off camera was that reporters were elbowing each other, literally climbing over each other. Pushing each other out of the way. to get closer to the astronauts. It was what, you know, beetle mania would be several years later. It was, it was pandemonium.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And NASA was concerned that this was gonna be a huge distraction to the astronaut. The astronauts were concerned. They minded, didn't mind to varying degrees being in front of the camera, but they also had a lot of work to do. They had a lot things to learn, they had a lot of training to do, and they didn't love these constant press junkets of having to be giving interviews and all the rest of it. And so with NASA's blessing, the astronauts signed a special deal with Life magazine that they would have exclusive rights to interview

the astronauts and cover the astronauts. It's not that other magazines couldn't write stories about them or newspapers, of course they could. But you wanted to get near the astronauts, unless you were a Life magazine reporter, you weren't getting near the astronauts. And there was a little sweetener in there, which was the astronauts got a financial benefit from that. Life magazine paid them and their families for this special right to their stories. This was a huge grievance among journalists more broadly. There was great frustration, as anyone can imagine. that life got this special deal. But it not only worked well for life, it tended to work pretty well for the astronauts as well.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Tell me about Vostok 1 and what happened with the Gagarin mission, please.

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JEFF SHESOL:
Well NASA during this period, 60, 61, continued to be plagued by all sorts of technological problems and delays. And it was clear that Project Mercury was falling farther and farther behind. In fact, when John Kennedy was elected president in the fall of 1960, his incoming science advisor suggested to him that he should probably distance himself from Project Mercury and leave open the possibility of killing the program altogether because it looked like it was destined to fail. So there was certainly a sense of foreboding within NASA, within the government broadly and even just across the country that a

Soviet astronaut, a cosmonaut, was going to get there before any one of the Mercury 7 and in fact that's exactly what happened. While NASA was busy planning the Shepard launch, the Soviets managed to send Yuri Gagarin, the cosmonaut, into space. He was not only the first man in space, but he orbited the Earth. United States was not even prepared to orbit anybody around the Earth at that point.

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JEFF SHESOL:
Shepard's flight, when it actually happened, which was a couple of weeks after Gagarin's flight was what they called a sub-orbital flight. We didn't have a rocket at that point that was powerful enough and safe enough to send a man into orbit. All they could do was just get him barely into space and then gravity would pull him back down. So he went up 15 minutes, start to finish, and splash down in the water. While Yuri Gagarin, in April of 61, had managed to orbit the Earth because Soviet rockets were more powerful. So the United States, again, continued to find itself playing catch up in a very dramatic way.

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JOHN F KENNEDY:
I do not regard the first man in space as a sign of the weakening of the free world, but I do regard the total mobilization of men and things for the service of the communist bloc over the last years as a source of great danger to us.

And I would say we're going to have to live with that danger and hazard through much of the rest of this century.

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JEFF SHESOL:
I think sometimes when we think about the space race today it's lost its national security implications. It's lost it's sort of Cold War context and it feels like it might have just been a contest for prestige between these two global powers, kind of, you know, an Olympics in space. Who gets there first? Who gets bragging rights for getting there first? But again, the sense was that this had huge national security implications, even if people didn't necessarily understand what they were at that time. There was the feeling that if the Soviets could do anything they pleased in space, which is the way it seems from 1957 on through this period, that what they are going to do in space was not going to be to our liking, and it was not gonna be in the line of NASA's for all mankind. that it was going to be very threatening, and very threatening to the United States and its allies. And so there was a lot of discussion about these doomsday scenarios that sound kind of fantastical and dystopian to us today, but struck people as perfectly realistic at the time.

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JEFF SHESOL:
For example, that the Soviets would build a nuclear base on the moon that would be outside the range of U.S. defenses. And so you could take out all the nuclear weapons somehow in the Soviet Union, but they would still have

those nukes on the moon, or that they would build a space station that would simply sit above the United States in orbit, locked above the U.S., armed with nuclear weapons, ready to rain those down on the United States at the slightest provocation or without a provocation. That they would be capable of a surprise attack from space. These all seemed achievable, frankly, and the more the Soviets were able to do in space, the more it seemed achievable. And I want to be clear. This was terrifying not only in the United States, but really to our allies around the world. There was a poll taken of our allies in 1960. I mean specifically Britain, France, and West Germany. And people there were asked in 1960, which of the two superpowers, the US or the Soviet Union, was going to be ahead militarily in 10 years?

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JEFF SHESOL:
And by a two-to-one margin, our own allies said the Russians would be ahead. Why did they believe that? because of what the Russians had been able to do in space. And the conflation of space and military power was just obvious to everybody. Again, we call these rockets. They are, in fact, rockets, but what are they? They're intercontinental ballistic missiles. Instead of a nuclear payload, you're putting a capsule on top of it and sending it into space. But in many ways, it's the same technology. And so when Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier, said that We in the Soviet Union are producing ICBMs like sausages. We're just cranking them out. It wasn't true, but it seemed very credible and terrifying.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
I wanna talk about John being the third American selected to go into space. If you can kind of just set up where he is and what his mission was.

00:35:24:00

JEFF SHESOL:
So as I mentioned, Alan Shepard became the first American in space, that suborbital flight that went up and came right back down beginning of May 1961. And then Gus Grissom, second in space did the same thing that summer. Glenn did actually wind up getting the third slot. And actually it wound up working to his benefit in that this was the moment when the United States was finally ready to send a man into orbit. They were a little bit humiliated frankly by these suborbital flights. Soviets had not only beat them to space but had orbited the earth and here we are doing these these little 15 minute shots. So this was the big one to actually send a man into orbit and there was the sense both within the program and across the country that Glenn had been saved for this big mission that this was finally a space shot as they called them worthy of John Glenn. That wasn't really the case, but it seemed to explain the fact that John Glenn hadn't gone first.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And so he began training for a much more significant and frankly much more dangerous mission. One of the reasons that the United States hadn't been

ready to send a man into orbit is because this different rocket was called the Atlas. It was a much larger rocket that could carry the weight of a heavier capsule with a in and into orbit. There have been all kinds of trouble with the Atlas. These things seem to continually be blowing up. They seem to be going off trajectory. Just getting this thing, as they put it, man-rated, that meant that you could do more than just put a warhead on it. You could actually put a human being on it with some reasonable sense that he might actually survive. I say reasonable sense, but that was also open to question. To this day, there's always a risk. It's not just theoretical that somebody who is launching atop one of these big explosive devices of a rocket is not going to come back alive.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And certainly, we have seen our nation's tragedies over the decades. So there's also that sense of awareness. In a way, this group of astronauts had lived with that kind of mortal danger for years as test pilots or combat pilots. But there was something different, something special and not necessarily in a good way about being strapped in a tiny little tin can to the top of an intercontinental ballistic missile that would then essentially ignite, erupt with a force that you couldn't create in any other way to propel this human object into space and they all understood this was another order of danger. And unlike what they had done either in the war or as test pilots, this was all happening essentially on live television in front of the eyes of the world. The Soviet program was utterly secret, as I said before.

00:38:29:00

JEFF SHESOL:

So the Soviets managed to appear invincible because when they failed, they failed secretly. In fact, there were horrific accidents that plagued the Soviet program and one of their cosmonauts was burned alive in a terrible, terrible failure. But that wasn't known for many, many years because it was unclear even where most of these events were happening in the Soviet Union, even the location. Their version of Cape Canaveral was a state secret. But the United States, being an open society, inviting reporters to the launches, running their cameras and taking notes, all of this happened before the eyes of America and before the eye of the world, and in a way that increased the stakes. And in fact... One reporter around this time, 1960, 1961, said that the astronauts actually should be relieved of duty because they had all become, and this is the quote, too famous to burn in public. That threat was always very present in the minds of the public, in the mind of the astronauts themselves, and their families, certainly.

00:39:34:00

GEORGE KUNHARDT:

Well, that's terrifying. And speaking of families, tell me about Annie. We haven't even touched on her yet, but I'd like a little intro to who she was, how they met, but also she hears on the radio that he's selected to space. Tell me about her reaction, how she's feeling during all this.

00:39:49:00

JEFF SHESOL:

Starting at the beginning and the beginning is really very early because John and Annie Glenn grew up together They were actually put in a playpen together when when they were when they, were little babies and toddlers. and they began to date in high school and and so it was a great many many decades long love story between the two of them and one of the interesting and I think important facts about Annie Glenn was that she had an almost paralyzing stutter. And it was the sort of stutter, particularly in the less aware, less sensitive time of the 1920s, 1930s that caused other people in the community simply to look away or to back away. But John Glenn, really from the beginning, not only fell for her, but also just refused to acknowledge that this was an issue. He helped her to cope in all sorts of ways without making anything of it that would be humiliating to compound the humiliation she was already experiencing, so it was an incredible partnership between the two of them.

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JEFF SHESOL:

By the time of the space program they had two teenage kids, David and Lynn, and she was as aware or more aware during those years of the danger he faced than she had been during wartime when she had be nervous enough anytime he went off to duty or anytime she was aware that his planes were taking flight. So this was terrifying for her. And there was part of her, certainly, that would have rather that he had gone back to that desk job and a safe existence into his 40s and 50s and beyond. But she understood who John

Glenn was. And she understood that this was not just something that is needed, but it was something that he wanted to do for his country and that that was a very deep sense of obligation for him.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
By the time he's selected, years have passed. He's getting old. He's definitely on the older side of the other astronauts as they all are. But talk to me about what age was like as an astronaut and what that does to the body, the mind, the training.

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JEFF SHESOL:
Glenn was the oldest of the astronauts. As I said, he was born in 1921. So 1961, when Yuri Gagarin went up, when Alan Shepard went into space, Glenn was 40 years old. And that had been regarded by NASA as the outer edge of how old an astronaut was supposed to be. Not for any specific reason, other than that it was just assumed that by the age of 40, you're starting to lose your reflexes, you're falling out of shape and so forth. But Glenn had performed so incredibly well during the try-out process, during the testing process in 1957-58 that he had showed his physical prowess and his mental acuity and he had outperformed most of the others, all of the other by some metrics. But he understood that he was someone who was going to have to train harder than anybody else to keep his shape and that if somebody like

Scott Carpenter could do it almost seemingly effortlessly, that Glenn was just going to have to get out there and go running every day.

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JEFF SHESOL:
He was going to work harder. He tended to pick up weight a little bit more quickly than the others, and weight was a big issue because the heavier you were, the harder it was going be to get that capsule into the space, the more thrust it was gonna need. So there were strict parameters in terms of height, weight, all sorts of things. And so this was very much on Glenn's mind too, and I think he was also aware that he might have a sort of shorter time span in the space program than some of the others, all of the other who were younger than he was.

00:43:22:00

GEORGE KUNHARDT:
I love the story of how Friendship 7 was named, can you tell me that story?

00:43:28:00

JEFF SHESOL:
Glenn was given the opportunity to name his own capsule, and he decided to put the question in a very characteristic John Glenn move. He decided to give the question to his kids. And so they took this responsibility that he had given them very seriously, and they wrote up long lists of different kinds of names meaning different things. And some of them actually wound up being used for

future missions, just coincidentally. But they came up with all sorts of ideas. And ultimately, among these ideas, John Glenn picked Friendship as the name for the capsule. It had a technical NASA name, MA-6, Mercury Atlas Number 6, but that wasn't how it was known to the public. To the public, it became known as Friendship 7, the seven representing the seven astronauts. And to Glenn, this was a symbol of what his spaceflight would mean, or at least should mean, to the rest of the world, that the space program was indeed something that was done for the benefit of all mankind and that this was a step forward if he succeeded, not just for the U.S., but again, for the world.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And he believed that very deeply and it was one of his principal motivations as an astronaut. Glenn took center stage as he began to prepare for his flight at what Kennedy called the hour of maximum danger. The Cold War seemed to be heating up considerably. Just consider August 1961 for a second. Beginning of August, August 6th, 7th, the Soviets achieved another incredible feat in space. They sent a second man to orbit the Earth. But while Gagarin had orbited the Earth once in April of 1961, now Titov, the second cosmonaut, orbited Earth 17 and a half times. He was in space for over 24 hours. He slept a little up there, he ate a little bit up there. He made it seem suddenly more possible that you could not only send someone to space and have them come back alive, but that you can get them to the moon, ultimately, to show a kind of endurance in space. So this was a huge feat. And the Soviets played the propaganda for all it was worth.

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JEFF SHESOL:

And at press conferences, Titov and Khrushchev both dropped references to how easy it would be to arm a capsule like that with missiles. And so the military aspects of that flight were never far from anybody's mind. A week later is when the Berlin Wall begins to go up and the border is shut down and sealed between East Berlin and West Berlin, again, increasing the sense that we're moving inevitably, inexorably, towards some kind of nuclear conflict between the superpowers. And a week or two after that... The Soviets began, again, atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, which was something that neither side had been doing, had agreed not to be doing. And they began testing these weapons that were many, many times more powerful. 50 megaton, 100 megaton weapons, many time more powerful than anything collectively that had been dropped during World War II. So there was the sense by the end of the summer of 1961 that we were moving very swiftly toward a time of peril.

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JEFF SHESOL:

And Kennedy delivered a speech to Congress in September of 1961 that was focused on national security and he talked about fallout shelters. We tend to think of fallout shelter craze as a 1950s construct. This was really the moment when a lot of federal money went into building fallout shelters and Life magazine published a big how-to guide, how to build your own fallout

shelter in the backyard. There was a sense that things were really heating up and meanwhile John Glenn is training to go into orbit and they can't seem to schedule the flight. It's set back because of technical difficulties. It's sent back because weather. It's send back for reasons that NASA isn't articulating. And so right as the contest with the Soviet Union seems to be building towards something incredibly dangerous, the United States just seems to stuck in neutral when it comes to the space race. And the danger of that is clear to everyone.

00:47:40:00

GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Can you tell me about the conversation that JFK had with John Glenn at the Oval Office?

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JEFF SHESOL:
Kennedy was, as I said, not particularly interested in space in the 1950s, but he felt very differently about it by the time he became president. And he understood that whatever happened in the space program, he was going to own one way or another. He was very invested in its success. He had invested the United States literally in its' success. In May 1961, announced his goal of sending a man to the moon and returning him safely to Earth by the end of the decade. which was not necessarily something that NASA was telling him should be done. There were some at NASA, but there was a lot of doubt and skepticism within NASA itself and within the country. So Kennedy had really

put himself in the country, in a sense, out on the limb. So every one of these space flights along the way, Project Mercury, was important in establishing the credibility of a goal that not that many people believed in. So Kennedy took a very active interest, to put it mildly. And as the delays in Glenn's flight extended month after month after month through the fall of 1961, NASA kept promising, we're going to do this by the end of the year.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And then the end the year came, and the calendar turned to 1962, and they couldn't get it done. We go through January of 1962 and still can't get that rocket into the air, out of the atmosphere. John Glenn is even going through what ultimately became miserable dress rehearsals of this launch, where they expected that he would go up. He suits up gets into the capsule, all signs are go until they aren't, and he has to come down from the capsule and try again another day. It had become, by this point, as it was put in the press, a national ordeal. And with every successive delay, this flight was scrubbed 10 times before John Glenn finally got into space. It seemed less and less likely that he was going to come back alive. It started to seem not that he was going be the first american to orbit the Earth, but that he was going to become the first man to die in space. That was the way it seemed to more and more Americans, and even Glenn himself was starting to get unsettled.

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JEFF SHESOL:

And so Kennedy, understanding this, thought that he could reassure both Glenn and the nation by inviting Glenn to the Oval Office to have a conversation. And so the two of them chatted about it, they chatted about safety, but they also chatted a lot about the technical details of the flight. Kennedy was fascinated by how the controls worked and the degree to which the astronaut himself could control the thrusters and all of it. And Glenn was a wonderful teacher about these things. Kennedy might have been comforted by it, and maybe Glenn was momentarily, but privately Glenn was going to a very dark place, which was not consistent with his personality. He was usually the most confident and the cheeriest about his ultimate fate, as he demonstrated in Korea, especially as well as World War II, but he was starting to grow very nervous that maybe NASA had not buttoned everything down, had not nailed everything down and that he might not come back alive.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Well, let's talk about his launch. While he's in the capsule, he has one phone call. Can you tell me about that phone call to Annie and how that all went?

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JEFF SHESOL:
Well, finally, finally after all these scrubs, after all of these months of delay, February 20th, 1962, it looks like both the rocket and the weather agree and he's going to finally get into space. And so he again suits up, he again straps into this very tiny capsule, so tiny as he put it, you don't get in it, you put it on

like a suit. And he is preparing to take off and he is patched through to have a conversation with Annie who's at home with the kids in Arlington, Virginia where the family was living. And they have a what on Annie's side is a tearful conversation and Glenn asks her one question. He said, did you get the recordings that I sent you? Now I found a reference to this in a Life magazine story without any indication of what the recordings were. And was able to put it together based on really the most incredible thing that I came across in the Glenn archives, which are housed at Ohio State.

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JEFF SHESOL:
I found in a file, a sort of nondescript file that wasn't labeled to indicate really what was in it, a stack of sheets from a yellow legal pad. And there was Glenn's handwriting in pencil. and the first line on the page says If you're hearing this, I've been killed. Which is kind of an eye-opener. I have chills even thinking of it right now. And what follows is a script for a recording that he made for his two kids that would be given to them, that would played for them in the event that he didn't survive the flight. He also made a recording for Annie. The script for that one, as far as I can tell, doesn't survive. I found a few scattered notes to indicate what he wanted to talk about in that script, but... neither that script nor the two recordings themselves have ever surfaced. But he wanted to make sure that Annie had those in her possession as he prepared to take off.

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JEFF SHESOL:
So you can see just how concerned he was with the possibility that he would not come back. And the message that he left his kids was not just about the mission and why he felt that it was important, so important that he risk his life for his country and actually give his life in those circumstances to his country. But also what kind of people he hoped they would become as they grew up without him. It's very, very moving. It's incredibly poignant and you really get a sense of just how fully, viscerally he felt the danger that he was about to undergo.

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GEORGE KUNHARDT:
He had a specific handful of missions and goals while he was in space to do that I found very interesting. Can you paint that picture for me?

00:53:52:00

JEFF SHESOL:
The plan was for Glenn to orbit the Earth three times and then come back safely. He could have probably orbited a couple more times. He would have had enough fuel to orbit a couple more times, but the plan was three. And that, along with every other detail, every minute of this flight was perfectly planned and regimented. He knew exactly when he was supposed to look for a constellation to see if he could orient himself by the stars. He knew what he was supposed to look for on the ground to see how well he could recognize details from his elevation, more than 100 miles above the Earth's surface. He

knew exactly when he was suppose to take this little tube of pureed roast beef and lift his visor and squeeze it into his mouth to see, could he keep food down while he was in space. So everything was pre-planned. This had been a source of tension, actually, between Glenn and the NASA leadership. Glenn felt the whole thing was a little too regimented. He was excited about the little scientific experiments.

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JEFF SHESOL:
He was all in on all of that. And many of these ideas had been his own. But he felt that ultimately he did not have enough control as the pilot. Particularly there was a battle over whether the capsule should operate mostly on autopilot, which is what NASA wanted, or whether he should fly the thing, which was what he wanted as one of the great combat and test pilots of the era. That argument lasted until liftoff. But thankfully liftoff was safe. The immortal words of Scott Carpenter's Godspeed John Glenn. He uttered from the blockhouse at the Cape as Glenn lifts off. And everything went perfectly at first. And Glenn is reporting every detail with incredible enthusiasm. You can hear it in the recordings in his voice. He is just loving every moment.

00:55:48:00

JOHN GLENN:
Roger, zero G, and I feel fine. Capsule is turning around. Oh, that view is tremendous.

00:55:55:00

JEFF SHESOL:

This was a team effort in the largest sense. There were thousands, even tens of thousands of people who made this moment possible. Not just at NASA, but all the companies creating the technology that we're relying on and the network around the world that supported it. This was an orbital flight. While Shepard's didn't get much farther than Florida up and down, Glenn's carried him all around the world, and so NASA had to create essentially stations along the way ringing the Earth along the flight path that Glenn would take. And so there were huge teams in every one of these places, some of them on ships in the middle of the ocean and others in locations like the coast of Australia who were there to support Glenn. And he would check in with them, which was part of the design as he flew around the Earth. And he'd pass out of communications contact with one and into the zone of the other and so forth. And so Glenn was very aware, and this is another area where his natural humility really comes into play, that none of this would have been possible without every one of these people.

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JEFF SHESOL:

And so he certainly had a lot of confidence in himself, Glenn did. He knew that he was indispensable to this mission. I don't want to overstate his self-effacement, but he also recognized that you can't do that this doesn't happen unless there's buy-in and involvement and, you know, an incredible effort on the part of tens of thousands and really of the entire country to

support something like this with their tax dollars and their enthusiasm. And everything seems to go well until the end of the first orbit of the three. And then a couple things either go wrong or appear to go wrong. And one is that the capsule starts to essentially feel like it's skidding out of alignment as it goes around the Earth. It's like a car whose back wheels are on ice and he's fighting to kind of control it and get it back into alignment. And when he essentially lets go of the controls, lets it go back on autopilot, it happens again.

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JEFF SHESOL:
And so it takes fuel to correct this every time. So at a certain point, Glenn has to switch from autopilot to manual control, which as I said, is what he wanted all along, to fly that thing. So he's not particularly concerned about this. But there's another problem that he's ... altogether aware of, but they are very focused on down on the ground at Mercury Control Center in Florida. And that is that a warning light on a monitor went down up there that indicated that the heat shield of Glenn's capsule had started to separate from the capsule itself. And if that was true, if it was separated even a little bit, then it was not going to protect him when he came back through the atmosphere, through the 3,000 degree heat of re-entry and he would be incinerated on his way back to Earth. So they were very focused on that problem and just a terrified argument began at the control center whether to believe that signal or not, whether it really was a problem or not.

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JEFF SHESOL:

Chris Craft, who was the flight director who ran the whole operation there on the ground, made the decision that Glenn should not be told that this was a potential problem. He should not be let in on the discussion they were having heatedly in hushed voices in the control center about whether Glenn was doomed because Glenn might panic. Now, of course, Glenn had been chosen for this mission precisely because he was the kind of pilot who didn't panic. He didn't even panic even, as I said, when a huge hole had been blown in the tail of his jet in Korea. But that was the decision that was made. And yet... and yet, at the same time they needed information from Glenn to try to assess whether this was actually happening or whether it was just a faulty switch, a failty light.

00:59:48:00

CONTROLLER

Will you confirm that your landing bag switch is in the off position, over?

00:59:52:00

JOHN GLENN:

Radar's affirmative landing bag switches in the center-off position.

00:59:57:00

CONTROLLER:

Roger, you haven't had any banging noises or anything of this type at higher rates.

01:00:02:00

JOHN GLENN:
Negative.

01:00:03:00

CONTROLLER:
Roger this, they wanted this answered.

01:00:07:00

JEFF SHESOL:
Banging noises, which is not the kind of question you want to get asked when you're up in space, particularly because this was not one of the standard questions. Glenn had been through 150, and I'm making that number up, but it gives you a sense of the scale, different contingency plans, of all the things that could conceivably go wrong with this capsule. But this was never a question that was supposed to be asked. Are you hearing any banging noises? He doesn't ask why they're posing that question. He lets it slide. And so as he goes along, he gets more of these kinds of questions, and then they want him to flip a switch back and forth to see what happens. Why? He's not told. And over time, he starts to put two and two together about what they think is going on here, and he recognizes that this is not just serious, this is existential. And so they feel like they've come up with a fix, if he needs a fix.

There's a package of thrusters, it's called a retro pack, that's strapped to the heat shield.

01:01:10:00

JEFF SHESOL:
And what Glenn was supposed to do before re-entry was to jettison that, to let it go, so that the heat shield could do what it's supposed to, which is to take the heat as it's going back through. And so he's about to come back through the atmosphere, and they say, John, you should just leave the retro pack on, if you would. Don't jettison it. Again, nobody has ever discussed. the possibility of leaving.

01:01:40:00

CONTROLLER:
We are recommending that you leave the retro package on through the entire reentry, this means that you will have to override the 05G switch, which is expected to occur at 0443. This also means that you will have to manually retract the scope. Do you read?

01:02:00:00

JOHN GLENN:
This is Friendship 7. What is the reason for this? Do you have any reason? Over.

01:02:05:00

CONTROLLER:
Not at this time.

01:02:07:00

JEFF SHESOL:
So even in this hour, this moment of maximum danger to Glenn's life, he is not being told what's going on. But again, he has pretty well put this together, that there's a problem with the heat shield. And so as the capsule is reoriented and plunges now through the atmosphere, Glenn said later that he was bracing himself to burn. He knew that because of the way he was facing back first going into the atmosphere that if the capsule was going to melt, that he was going to feel it first on his back. And he said that the nerve endings in his back started to twitch as he was anticipating the heat that thankfully he never did feel. Because in fact, the heat shield wasn't separated from the capsule. It was a faulty switch. But again, no one knew this at the time. So until Glenn actually got back through the atmosphere, no one new whether he was gonna make it.

01:03:04:00

GEORGE KUNHARDT:
So he's successful, he lands. Tell me about the next day, two days. Paint a little bit of a picture of what that momentous moment was like and what was going on in America.

01:03:14:00

JEFF SHESOL:

It's hard to describe how big this moment was, how big the launch was. Glenn's safe return is really the emotional high point of the Kennedy presidency. And in part, that's because of this incredible buildup that I was describing before, this incredible fear on the part of the nation. They had seen Shepard go up and come back, they had seen Grissom go up and come but this was different. This was the big one, as I said before. This was more dangerous. And this was John Glenn, a beloved figure in the country. And so the nation, and I mean the nation just stopped, hit pause for five hours while Glenn had been up there in space. And people crowded around television sets wherever they could find them. If they weren't in their homes, they would stand outside a department store window and they would watch the coverage being played. School was canceled or some schools let the kids sit and simply listen to radio reports over the PA system. Trials were put on pause.

01:04:13:00

JEFF SHESOL:

John Kennedy couldn't keep away from the television, even though he had a busy day of meetings and so forth. Everything froze as the nation held its breath. And then he was back. He splashed down safely. And the sense of relief and release was incredibly profound, and the sense of accomplishment that the United States was finally really in the space race. And what became clear over the days that followed was that this flight of John Glenn's had given

a credibility to the space program that it never really had up to that point. And suddenly this idea of John Kennedy's, that we should go to the moon, suddenly that seemed possible. And that's what Glenn's flight had done. It had restored a sense of confidence to the country, not just to the Space Program, but really more broadly to the Country, that we could compete. And again, I should stress this, this is not just about two space programs. It's not even just about national security or missile defense.

01:05:13:00

JEFF SHESOL:
It's even more fundamental than that. Because what Glenn understood, what Kennedy understood, and really what everybody understood, was that this was a contest between two systems, two systems of government. One free and one not in any way free. And there was a real question through the 1950s and into the beginning of the 1960s, whether democracy was actually well suited to a nuclear age or whether our system was was too fragmented, whether there were too many hurdles to power being executed and decisions being made and bold steps being taken, or whether actually totalitarianism, with its ability to sort of control everything, seemingly, might actually be better suited to this kind of new, terrifying, dangerous era in which technological mastery mattered more than anything else. Those were the stakes as people understood them. And so this was not just about Glenn or NASA proving itself. This was about the nation proving itself and proving the viability of democracy in this dangerous moment.

01:06:26:00

JOHN F KENNEDY:
Oh, listen, Colonel, we're really proud of you, and I must say you did a wonderful job.

01:06:33:00

JOHN GLENN:
Thank you very much, Mr. President.

01:06:35:00

JEFF SHESOL:
A few days after the flight, Kennedy came to the Cape, which would later be named after him after his assassination, Cape Kennedy, to do essentially a victory lap with John Glenn. And they had a big celebration and a big ceremony. Glenn got to show Kennedy the capsule, show him the burn marks on the heat shield. And it was a big moment. And there were a series of parades. The nation seemed to want to prolong this moment. This was a huge deal. There was one in Florida, as he made his way back to the Cape with the President, there was one in Washington, D.C., and there was on in New York, four million people in the streets of New York. It was the biggest public demonstration since the end of World War II. And people stood out in the freezing cold at the beginning of March 1962, just absolutely bitter cold, just to try to catch some sight of Glenn and his family in the motorcade passing through.

01:07:33:00

JEFF SHESOL:
People climbed out onto building ledges, people climbed up bridges to get a better view. Policemen stood and wept as Glenn passed by. This was the level of emotion that people were feeling. But really for Glenn, the most meaningful of all of these celebrations was the one that happened back home in New Concord and ended up in the gym at Muskingum College, which was the little college in New Concord that he attended, and they had renamed the gym after him. All these accolades that were given to John Glenn, the one that seemed to mean the most to him was naming that college gym after him and he stood there with tears in his eyes on the stage in front of his parents and all of his friends that he had grown up with and after he finished this sort of emotional speech he said, you all clean up my gym.

01:08:22:00

GEORGE KUNHARDT:
Years later, he goes back for one last time. Can you tell me about his last mission and someone who came out of retirement to announce publicly on broadcast?

01:08:32:00

JEFF SHESOL:
So the flight of Friendship 7 was the end of Glenn's time in the Mercury program. The others stayed on. Some of them flew Gemini missions. Some of the flew Apollo missions. Some flew both. Alan Shepard wound up walking on

the moon, hitting a golf ball on the Moon. That was sort of his most memorable moment, I think, during that flight. Glenn didn't. He missed all of that. He wanted all of it, but he didn't get it. And the reasons why are... shrouded a little bit in mystery, but I think it comes down to the resentment that the other astronauts and a lot of NASA officials felt about John Glenn, that his success, his incredible fame and the love the public had for Glenn was actually an irritant to a lot those who worked both with him and those he reported to at NASA. And so he spent an anguished period of time in 1962, 63, asking again and again when he was going back to space.

01:09:38:00

JEFF SHESOL:
There was never an expectation that it was one and done for these guys. The training that they had undertaken was incredible and years long and presumably NASA wanted to get as much use out of these astronauts as they possibly could and their expertise. If you learned a lot going to space once, well what would you be able to apply the second time around? That was Glenn's understanding, and it was his fervent hope. And yet he kept getting the runaround from NASA officials. It became very clear that he was not going back up into space and that he had been put in the back of the line and that was going to stay there. And after a certain point in time, he really had to face that this was his reality and that it was time to leave the program, which he did in 1964, and decided to pursue a career in politics. It would be another 10 years before he wound up in the United States Senate.

01:10:27:00

JEFF SHESOL:

But he never lost his love for space, his interest in space, or really his kind of very quiet passion to get back into space someday, somehow. And so in the 1990s, he came up with a justification, really. And that was that he had been involved in a study about the effects of space on the human body. And he began to feel that, as now an older American in his 70s, they had all the data that you could possibly imagine about the effect that space had on his body back when he was 40 years old. Well, what if he went back now? What could we learn from comparing the two? If he, say, took a trip up on the space shuttle. Took him some time, but he managed to convince the administrator of NASA, Dan Golden, and they convinced President Clinton that it would make sense for Glenn to go back in space. And so he did. He went up on a shuttle in 1998, and he spent a lot more time up there on that trip than he got to in Friendship 7, and loved every minute of it.

01:11:31:00

JEFF SHESOL:

And it is really quite incredible to see Glenn going through the training in his 70s at this point. 77, when he went into space that he had back when he was a young man.

01:11:43:00

GEORGE KUNHARDT:

Is there anything else you want to leave our audience with?

01:11:46:00

JEFF SHESOL:

I think that the experience of writing the book for me and immersing myself in that moment really brought home the danger, the precarity of space flight. That's still true. We have started to take it for granted that astronauts have been coming and going back and forth. Now we're sending private astronauts, we're setting people out on space walks who have had no training and so forth. This is still... incredibly dangerous because space inherently is dangerous. It is a vacuum and we can't survive there. But we've gotten pretty agile up there, pretty adept up there. And we have more and more that we are trying to accomplish up there and whether by we, we're talking about the nation, the federal government, NASA, or we're taking about private companies who are very busily commercializing space. But I think it's always important to keep this in mind and it's also really important that we always feel that we have a good answer to the question of why.

01:12:51:00

JEFF SHESOL:

That this was a question, as I said, that NASA really struggled to answer in its early years. Why send these guys into space? And at the time, it was sufficient enough for some to simply say, well, to see if we can, and then we'll figure out a real reason later. Let's just see if they can survive now, and then, we'll sort it all out later. Well, we're well past that point, but I think that we should always be mindful of what our rationale is for human spaceflight, because it's

expensive and it's dangerous. And I know it is starting to appear as just something that really rich people do for fun, but I think that there are sort of larger opportunities in space. We need to be very clear on our minds what those are.

END TC: 01:13:38:00