

John Glenn still inspires 55 years after his 1st orbit

February 20 2017, by Julie Carr Smyth



In this Feb. 20, 1962, file photo, U.S. astronaut John Glenn climbs inside the capsule of the Mercury spacecraft Friendship 7 before becoming the first American to orbit the Earth, at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Cape

Canaveral, Fla. John Glenn is continuing to inspire 55 years after becoming the first American to orbit Earth. The anniversary of the flight is Monday, Feb. 20, 2017. (AP Photo/File)

John Glenn is continuing to inspire 55 years after becoming the first American to orbit Earth.

Since Glenn's death on Dec. 8 at the age of 95, untold numbers of devotees have stopped by an exhibit of his artifacts on the campus of Ohio State University, backers have begun fundraising for an observatory and astronomy park in Glenn's name and work has begun on a 7-foot statue in his likeness.

While he also spent time as a military test pilot and U.S. senator, it was the history-making Mercury mission that propelled Glenn and his spacecraft Friendship 7 into the history books. Monday marked the anniversary of the flight.

For 4 hours, 55 minutes and 23 seconds on Feb. 20, 1962, the capsule circled the Earth three times, making Glenn the first American to orbit Earth.

Jeffrey Thomas, an archivist at Ohio State who curated the Glenn display on display until March, said the event was so intensely anticipated and followed by the public that it made Glenn an instant hero.

He said the world knew debris from a burning heat shield was flying by Glenn's window as he entered the atmosphere and into radio silence.

"So, here he goes into the atmosphere and everything's black for 10

minutes," Thomas said. "Did he make it? Did he burn up?"

Glenn was fine, and he went on to a long life remembered in the display. Among items displayed are his baby book, his first pilot's license, flight logs, personal notes, anti-aircraft shell fragments recovered from a jet fighter-bomber he flew during the Korean War, patches, jackets, medals and headgear.

The walls of artist Zenos Frudakis' studio in eastern Pennsylvania are also plastered with photos of Glenn, as the sculptor produces clay models for an eventual full-size sculpture.

Frudakis has connected with Adam Sackowitz, a New York graduate student pursuing a sculpture, portrait and other tangible remembrances of Glenn. An initial application seeking a spot on the Historic Register for Glenn's birthplace was rejected. The National Park Service has indicated Glenn's boyhood home in New Concord is more suitable for the designation.

The Ohio History Connection, the state history office, has not yet received initial paperwork on the boyhood home, said spokeswoman Emmy Beach.

Glenn's legacy is also inspiring members of the nonprofit Friends of Hocking Hills State Park.

The group has secured half of the \$1.6 million budget to build an observatory and astronomy park at the location about 45 miles southeast of Columbus. A lack of light pollution in the area allows clear views of the night sky, the group says.

Frudakis' business partner said fundraising efforts are also underway for the sculpture project, which will exceed six figures.

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