

Mourners remember life, career of US astronaut John Glenn

17 December 2016

Mourners gathered at a memorial service for groundbreaking astronaut John Glenn on Saturday in his home state of Ohio, capping two days of remembrances for the first American to orbit the Earth.

Glenn, who later in life also became the first senior citizen in space, was remembered as a national hero who believed in selfless service to his country.

He died last week at the age of 95, after a lifetime spent in the US Marines, the American space program, the Senate, and as a university professor.

At the public memorial service in the state capital Columbus, Vice President Joe Biden said Glenn exemplified America's view of itself as a "country of promise, opportunity, always a belief for tomorrow."

"He knew from his upbringing that ordinary Americans can do extraordinary things," said Biden, who served in the US Senate with Glenn.

"If you're looking for a message to send for our time here on Earth, and what it means to be an American, it's the life of John Glenn."

The former astronaut, who was born in a small town in Ohio, enlisted in the Marines following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

He served in World War II and the Korean War as a pilot, and later became a military test pilot.

Glenn was one of the "Original Seven" pilots recruited into America's nascent space program in 1959. The pilots' saga was recounted in the classic movie "The Right Stuff."

Two days of mourning

The state of Ohio held ceremonies over two days, complete with full military honors, ending with the memorial service held at a 2,500-seat auditorium on the Ohio State University campus home to the Glenn College of Public Affairs.

The memorial service was attended by dignitaries, high-ranking government officials and members of the public who got tickets.

The service included a platoon of 40 Marines who marched three miles (4.8 kilometers) to accompany the hearse carrying Glenn's body from the Ohio Statehouse to the auditorium.

Glenn's flag-draped coffin lay in state at the Statehouse rotunda Friday, allowing thousands of visitors to pay their final respects in an honor granted to only eight other people in Ohio's history.

At the memorial, speakers—including his adult children Lyn and David—remembered Glenn's long career in public service.

"The potential for government to do good was something he never forgot. This was not an abstract concept to him. This was real life," Lyn Glenn said, recounting that her father was a child of the Great Depression and remembered the positive effects of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs.

She also pointedly referred to recent conversations she had had with her father over the current state of US politics.

"You never allowed your name or picture to be used to make money," Lyn Glenn said in addressing her father, "because you said you were a government employee and it wouldn't be right to make money from government service.

"In today's world, your words almost seem quaint, but they should be standard," she added.

'Standing on John Glenn's shoulders'

In 1962, Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth, one year after Russia's Yuri Gagarin became the first person ever do so.

After his 23-year career in the US military and space program, Glenn entered the US Senate as a Democrat, and made two unsuccessful tries for the party's presidential nomination.

In 1998, Glenn made history again when he returned to space at the age of 77, becoming the oldest astronaut ever.

"We are standing on John Glenn's shoulders as we pursue a human journey to Mars," said NASA Administrator Charles Bolden, who recounted a warm relationship with the former astronaut and Annie, Glenn's wife of more than 70 years.

A frail Annie Glenn was in attendance at the memorial service, sitting in the front row of the auditorium next to Biden.

"John made us look up, not only to the sky... but toward a higher purpose that we as a country are always striving to achieve," Bolden said.

Glenn died surrounded by family at a Columbus hospital on December 8. He had been in declining health and had spent more than a week in hospital.

Connie Schultz, a family friend and a journalist, said Glenn had been aware that he was nearing the end of his life, recounting a recent visit in which the late astronaut used a car metaphor.

Glenn said: "You can only replace the parts so long... eventually you need a new chassis," Schultz recounted.

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