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ASTRONAUT in training

Years before John Glenn became the first American to orbit Earth, he was a marine pilot wrangling for more combat action against the Japanese.

by Susan Zimmerman

NAPALM WAS A GRUESOME WEAPON, a sticky gasoline-based gel that caught fire and stuck to whatever it touched as it continued to burn. One of the things it touched was human flesh.

US Marine Corps planes were dropping napalm on the Japanese by mid-summer 1944. The gel was loaded into half-ton bombs, and it ignited on explosion. Lieutenant John Glenn and his fellow Marine Corps pilots were forced to come to terms with the reality of what they were doing.

Glenn accepted napalm as one of many inescapable horrors of war. “Using napalm didn’t fit with peacetime sensitivities,” Glenn later wrote, “but peace and a return to the sensitivities that it permitted were what we were fighting to achieve.”

As a youngster, John Glenn surely never imagined he would do many of the things he would later do,

such as setting an air speed record as a test pilot, orbiting the Earth as an astronaut, and getting elected to the US Senate. What he did know early on was that he belonged in the sky. Glenn caught the flying bug at age eight when a local pilot took him and his father up above their hometown of New Concord, Ohio, in a biplane. As a 19-year-old sophomore at Ohio’s Muskingum College in early 1941, Glenn stumbled across an advertisement for the Civilian Pilot Training Program, a federal initiative that had been established two years earlier to create a national pool of capable young pilots in case of war. It offered the cash-strapped youngster with a lifelong itch to fly free flight lessons in exchange for a little hard work. The program would also school Glenn in physics and other technical subjects, giving him knowledge that would open doors for him down the road. Glenn

OPPOSITE: JOHN GLENN ARCHIVES, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Opposite: Future pioneering astronaut John Glenn is the picture of fresh-faced enthusiasm in this portrait taken while he was a naval aviation cadet, probably in 1943. He was no neophyte behind the controls of a plane, though. He had been through the Civilian Pilot Training Program and had already logged substantial time in the air.

ASTRONAUT in training by Susan Zimmerman

jumped at the chance. By July, he had earned his pilot's license, the first step toward becoming a commercial pilot.

Like millions of other young American men, Glenn saw his career plans take a sharp turn on December 7, 1941. He was driving to future wife Anna Margaret Castor's organ recital in New Concord that day when news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor broke over the radio. Armed with flying skills and an eagerness to join the nation's new fight, he dropped out of college and enlisted in the US Army Air Corps. Like America's other future first-generation astronauts, Glenn would begin his career in the skies much closer to Earth, beneath the canopy of a prop-driven WWII plane.

FOR MORE THAN A YEAR, Glenn awaited orders that never came. Finally, he had enough, and in March 1942 he enlisted in the US Naval

Reserve for training as a naval aviation cadet. Two months later he was assigned to active duty and reported to the Naval Aviation Pre-Flight School in Iowa City, Iowa. But getting the necessary training and placement in a combat unit would be a long haul and would keep him bouncing from one stateside base to another for the next two years. From Iowa City he headed off for primary flight training at the US Naval Reserve Aviation Base in Olathe, Kansas, and then moved on to the Naval Air Training Center in Corpus Christi, Texas, for advanced training. There, between mundane practice flights in Vought OS2U Kingfisher observation planes and Vultee Valiant trainers, Glenn took in the spirited address of a Marine Corps officer trumpeting the exploits of marine airmen in the touch-and-go 1942–1943 campaign for Guadalcanal. The moment helped convince him to apply for a commission in the corps, and after completing flight school, that's what he did.

For the eager-for-action, freshly minted second lieutenant, the move appeared to promise a shorter path to flying something with muscle, perhaps Lockheed's one-of-a-kind P-38 Lightning, which was rumored to be bound for the South Pacific. Designated a naval aviator, Glenn reported to the Marine Corps Air Station at Cherry Point, North Carolina, where, to his disappointment, he was assigned to duty on a slow-moving North American PBJ, the

marines version of the B-25 Mitchell medium bomber. He spent little time in North Carolina's skies before being hustled off once more, this time to California. Assigned to the utility squadron VMJ-353, Glenn now found himself flying lumbering Douglas R4D transport planes.

Glenn was what marine airmen referred to admiringly as a "sniveler," a flier constantly angling for a more interesting assignment, more exciting duty, and a faster plane. He hustled and wrangled and finally caught a break in the form of a reassignment to VMO-155 (redesignated VMF-155 in January 1945), an observation squadron temporarily staked out near his own unit at the marines air depot at Camp Kearny in San Diego. This outfit was equipped with planes more to Glenn's liking: tough, heavy-punching Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters. In July 1943 he joined the unit at its new home, the expanding Marine Corps Air Station at El Centro, California. There, he quickly, and happily, adjusted to life as a fighter pilot.

On January 6, 1944, Glenn finally received orders to ship out. After two years of flying seemingly every slow and ungainly plane in the Marine Corps air arsenal, Glenn was bound for action in what some later called the best fighter in the Pacific, the Vought F4U Corsair. On February 6, he jokingly told Annie (now his wife)—in what would become a pre-departure tradition—"I'm just going down to the corner store to get a pack of gum." Then he and the rest of VMO-155 departed San Diego for the Marine Corps Air Station at Ewa, Hawaii. On February 23, the squadron was directed to proceed by air to the Midway Islands, some 1,200 miles northwest of Hawaii and 2,000 miles

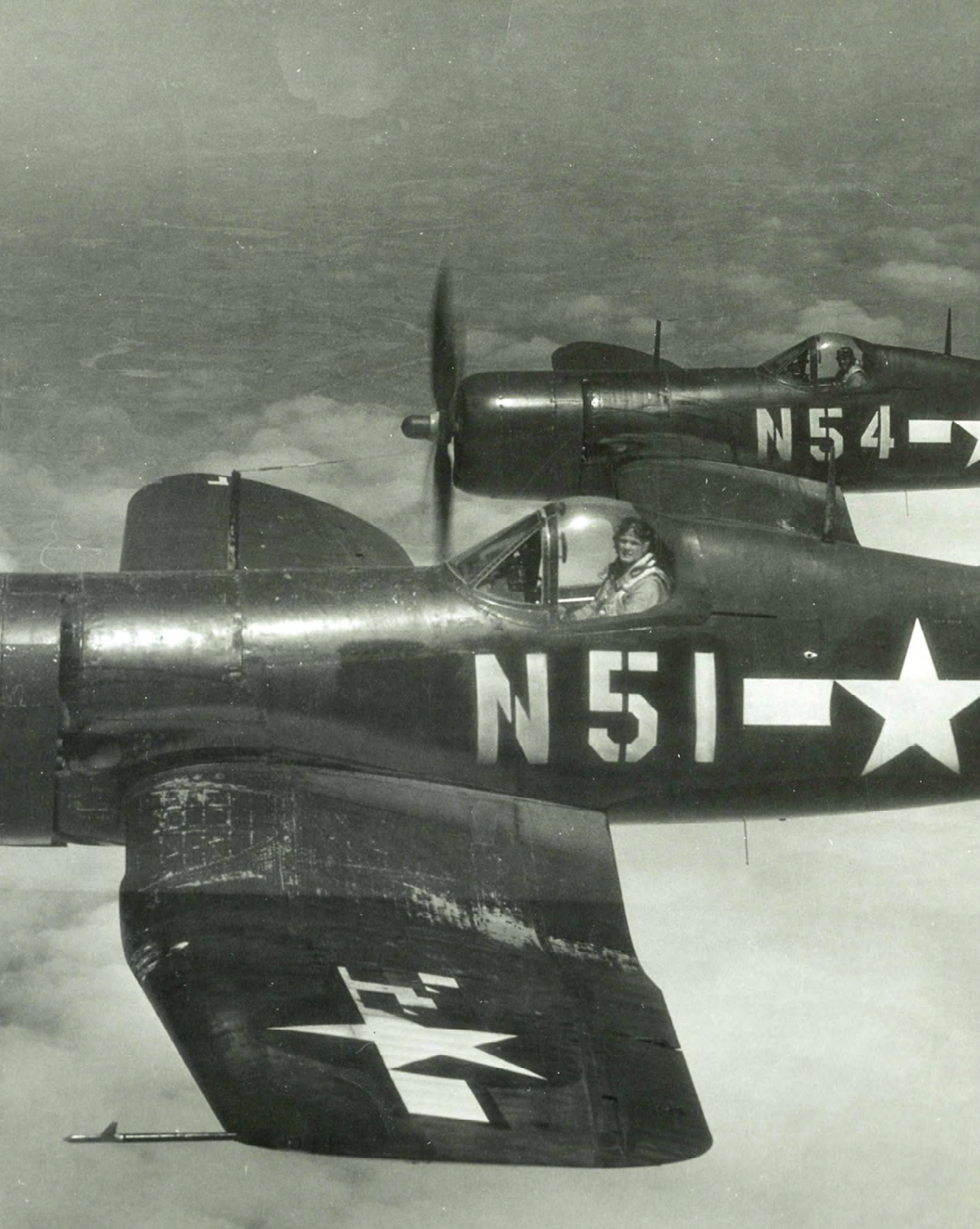
from Japan. As part of Marine Aircraft Group 31, 4th Marine Aircraft Wing, the outfit's job was simple: protect the US Navy's submarine base at Midway.

Defending the base proved mostly routine. During the previous 18 months, while Glenn had been shuttling from one stateside base to another in pursuit of a spot at the front, the US Pacific Fleet had won a string of decisive victories over the Imperial Japanese Navy and driven its thinning flotillas west. By then, the island was hardly under threat, and the Midway posting did provide the squadron's men with some comic relief in the klutzy antics and crash landings of the thousands of native black-footed albatrosses.



Above: Glenn and Annie Castor were playmates as children. By high school, they were sweethearts. They married on April 6, 1943, just after Glenn received his US Marine Corps commission. Here, they relax on the lawn of the Castor home in New Concord, Ohio, in 1938.

Opposite: Glenn looks out from the cockpit of an airborne Corsair fighter during training with his marine fighter squadron, VMO-155, in California in 1943. Soon he would be far from Annie, flying combat missions against Japanese installations on islands in the Central Pacific.





By June, though, the men were clamoring for more meaningful duty, and they got it—though not without some regret. “We had nursed the baby gooney birds through their early stages of development and now had them walking with a fair amount of steadiness,” Glenn later wrote. But due to reassignment to the Marshall Islands, “we were to be cheated of the opportunity of helping them through their first flights.”



IN EARLY JULY, navy escort carriers delivered the men and aircraft of VMO-155 to the Marshalls’ Majuro Atoll, a widely dispersed group of Central Pacific islets some 1,900 miles southwest of Hawaii. Since invading the Marshalls in February, American forces had driven the Japanese from strongholds on Roi-Namur, Kwajalein Atoll, and Eniwetok and were now busily consolidating their control of the vast Central Pacific. The Japanese still maintained token bases in the area—on Maloelap, Mili, Jaluit, and Wotje—which more or less encircled Majuro, and from their new, lushly landscaped home, Glenn and his fellow aviators would fly dive-bombing and anti-aircraft missions in their trim Corsairs, helping to pound the besieged enemy into dust. It wouldn’t take much. The lightly occupied Japanese outposts were already disintegrating beneath a ceaseless rain of steel and explosives.

Wotje, one marine officer said, was “a mummified corpse of an island, torn by shells and scorched by fire.”

For sharply trained pilots eager to go head-to-head with the Japanese in their near-mythical Zero fighters, the Central Pacific theater was something of a combat wasteland. Stretching nearly 5,000 miles from the Samoan Islands in the

south to Okinawa in the north, it was a swath of water far too large for Marine Corps air groups to cover without carrier planes or long-range bombers. Former *Time* and *Life* war correspondent Robert Sherrod later wrote, “Until 1945, the Marine flyers’ job in the Central Pacific could never, with minor exceptions, have been called front-line offensive in the same sense that the Marine divisions operated offensively.” That meant a dearth of both cockpit seats and combat opportunities for Glenn and his squadron mates.

Despite the lack of adventure, VMO-155 duty was not without danger. On July 9, 1944, the squadron buzzed over Taroa Island, Maloelap Atoll, targeting enemy anti-aircraft batteries. Amid the squadron’s runs, a burst of flak from one of the Japanese guns knocked out the Corsair of Glenn’s friend First Lieutenant Miles F. Goodman, Jr. “He never came out of his dive and his plane burst into flame just as it plunged into the water about three miles west of the island,” Glenn recalled. “Although a search maintained over the area for the next five hours, the body did not come

JOHN GLENN ARCHIVES, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY; INSET: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

ASTRONAUT in training by Susan Zimmerman



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

to the surface.” Like most fighting men, Glenn quickly realized the simple truth of his predicament. “You inhabit a small universe of you, your unit, and the enemy, and you’re fighting for your own survival and that of the men you’re with. It is destroy or be destroyed.”

A steady schedule of close-in air strikes and a daily eight-plane combat air patrol kept Glenn and his fellow fliers busy for the balance of the summer. “The danger of combat flying did nothing to diminish my love of flying in general,” Glenn wrote. “If anything, it enhanced it. This was flying with a purpose. We had been in no air-to-air combat, which is what every fighter pilot wants to do. But bombing runs into anti-aircraft fire were a test of skill, nerve, preparation and focus that I relished.”

The unit’s missions included an attack on Nauru, a lonely island 600 miles to the south. There, the raw-materials-starved Japanese had set up operations processing the island’s rich phosphate deposits. To get at the far-off target, VMO-155 shifted south to Tarawa Atoll,



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

in reasonable range of Nauru. Limited to a single attack route to the plant, the Corsairs “came down in a line into the heaviest anti-aircraft barrage I had seen thus far, all concentrating on our approach route,” Glenn remembered. “Black bursts of it dotted the sky from ten thousand feet down to two thousand. We flew into it because we didn’t have a choice, each dropped our two-thousand pounders, and jinked out of there. It was a miracle that nobody went down.”

In early November, the squadron shifted its base of operations to Kwajalein Atoll and launched a handful of strikes from Roi-Namur. Among these was a memorable run over Jaluit. “I was climbing from my run when the plane shook as if somebody had hit it with a brick,” Glenn later wrote. “I looked for the damage, and saw the plane had taken a hit on the left wing. A 20-millimeter explosive shell or its equivalent had taken a chunk the size of a man’s head out of the wing’s leading edge. I tried the controls and found out that the cable leading to the aileron trim tab on the

Opposite, top: Glenn (front, third from left) and his fellow VMO-155 flyers, in the Marshall Islands in 1944, were eager for action. Opposite, center: Their first assignment, Midway, offered very little. So the pilots made friends with the island’s goony birds, like this one “broadcasting” on Midway’s navy radio station KMTB near the war’s end. Top: A Corsair prepares for takeoff on Majuro in the Marshalls in August 1944.

VMO-155 was stationed there, flying bomb missions against Japanese bases on surrounding islands. Above: In November 1944, Glenn’s squadron moved to Kwajalein, formerly one of its targets. Here, 500-pound bombs stand ready to be loaded onto dive-bombers on the island.

ASTRONAUT in training by Susan Zimmerman



JOHN GLENN ARCHIVES, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY; OPPOSITE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Above: A snapshot, probably from 1944, shows Glenn in the Marshalls, re-creating air maneuvers with models. He had loved aviation since a childhood ride in a biplane. Opposite: Glenn's career reached its zenith on February 20, 1962, when he became the first American to orbit Earth, in the *Friendship 7* space capsule.

back edge of the wing had been cut. That made it hard, but not impossible, to fly." Praying all the while that he would not have to ditch his plane in the shark-infested waters below, Glenn made it back to Roi-Namur safely.

Shifting 50 miles south to Kwajalein Island, the squadron increased the intensity of its raids with the fateful addition of napalm bombs to its arsenal. On November 12, VMO-155 participated in a blitz of Jabor Town, on Jaluit Atoll, that unleashed fiery hell. The squadron historian later offered a subtly horrific description of both the weapon and its awful effect. "Each Napalm bomb weighs approximately eleven hundred (1100) pounds and consists of an external gas tank filled with a combustible fluid," he wrote. "Our planes [carrying three bombs each] dropped this bulky thirty-four hundred (3400) pound bomb load from 700 feet at a speed of around one hundred and seventy knots with a result that all bombs hit in the target area. It can be added that Jabor Town was burning briskly."

GLENN'S COMBAT TOUR ENDED in February 1945. "I had flown fifty-nine missions, been hit by antiaircraft fire five times, fired thousands of rounds of .50s [.50-caliber guns], and dropped countless general-purpose, incendiary, and napalm bombs," he recorded. He had also earned two Distinguished Flying Crosses for "extraordinary achievement while participating

in aerial flight in the Marshall Islands Area." He returned state-side to the 9th Marine Aircraft Wing at Cherry Point and then finished out the war as a captain at the Naval Air Test Center at Patuxent River, Maryland. "As I headed back across the country in my winter greens, by air this time, I was moved by the looks and words of gratitude the uniform attracted," he reminisced. "I felt all over again the patriotic pride that I had felt as a boy playing echo taps with Dad at the cemetery in New Concord on Decoration Day. And there was the added sense that I was paying my dues, as so many others had done ahead of me."

Glenn would continue paying his dues. Remaining in the Marine Corps, he would see considerably hotter action during the Korean War of 1950–1953, flying another 63 combat missions in Grumman F9F Panther and North American F-86 Sabre jets. Then he attended test pilot school and joined the staff of the Naval Air Test Center. In 1959 his resume earned him a spot in America's first class of astronauts, with whom he would soar to fantastic new heights. In 1962 he became the first American to orbit Earth, in *Friendship 7*, on a trip strangely reminiscent of his first flight above Ohio in a craft that was also state-of-the-art for its time. ★

SUSAN ZIMMERMAN *boasts a writing resume with a few dozen magazine titles highlighted by National Geographic Traveler and Current World Archaeology.*

UNITED STATES



7
Friendship

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