The John H. Glenn, Jr.

Oral History Project

Oral History Interview 7

with
Senator John H. Glenn, Jr.

in the Hart Office Building
in Washington, D.C.

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Interviewer

[Begin Interview 7, Tape1, Side A]

WILLIAMS: This is the seventh interview with Senator John Glenn, on February 10, 1997, in the Hart Office Building. I'm Brien Williams.

Let me ask, since we've reviewed now in pretty good detail your activity in World War II, some summary thoughts about your experiences during the war.

SEN. GLENN: World War II was really the last war where we were a united country, completely clear with what we were trying to do. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the forces we were up against in World War II, whether in Europe or in the Far East, wanted to take over the world. They had territorial ambitions and made no bones about it and were trying to take as a big a slice of the world's property, including our own, as they could. So almost all Americans were unanimous in their support for the war. It was an all-out mobilization effort, which we have

never had since that time. Everybody was involved, from Rosie the Riveter, trying to fill in for the men that were called off to war, to people volunteering, to Defense Production Boards and the government leadership in mobilizing this whole effort and coordinating with other nations' activities so we could win this.

The outcome of that war was not guaranteed until we really got into it on a big scale. The war in Europe, of course, had been going on for some time before we got into it. I guess historians will probably say that it was almost inevitable that we would be involved. But at the time we got involved, we did not have a full defense production going. We were not the bomber and fighter aircraft-maker for the world, basically. We were not the tank-maker for combat for everybody. We became literally almost overnight an arsenal of democracy. And that's the way it should be.

I think we will continually have arguments about the Korean War and whether [Harry S.] Truman was right to, in effect, let the message go out that we might not care, really, that much if North Korea invaded the South or tried to take over the whole peninsula. Certainly, Vietnam, the next war after that, was one that was fraught with all sorts of almost frightening disagreements among our own people. Then, of course, there are always those who detract from any commitment we have made since that time in places like the Persian Gulf or Bosnia or whatever.

But World War II, I think, remains as a war in which all America was absolutely united, from those who were going to go out and do the fighting, to those who were back home producing the equipment that the war was going to be

fought with. So I look back on it as—I won't say it's righteous war. I'm not sure any war is a righteous war. But if there ever was a war when we were in the right in what we were doing and showed we were willing to go to whatever ends were necessary to win, that was it.

WILLIAMS: What about the war's effect on your own philosophy of life?

SEN. GLENN: I don't think it changed that much in my own philosophy of life. I'd grown up in New Concord believing that anyone who was not a patriot to this country, there was something wrong with them. It was just that kind of community and that kind of family that I grew up in. And I believed that very firmly. I guess when you're going off and you know people are going to be killed, because it is a war, you can't help but think about that some, but that didn't give me any second thoughts at all about what I was doing and whether it was right or not. I was out to do everything I could possibly do to win that war in my own personal way for this country, as millions of Americans were all over this world. Don't mean to think that I was unique in that regard. But I went at it with a desire to do absolutely the best job I could possibly do.

I think every mission I flew—I never flew a mission in World War II or in Korea where I flew the mission mainly second-guessing the decision to send me out on a mission. My concern was that I be worthy of the trust being placed in me. I never flew a flight in combat that I didn't try to do absolutely the best job I could possibly do, oftentimes without regard to—maybe too much disregard for my own safety. But I was lucky, fortunate, or whatever. Never got a Purple Heart out of all of that. Never wanted a Purple Heart.

So I never had any second-guessing about whether World War II was correct, and it did not change my own personal view of what I was doing. I'd grown up thinking that service to country and responsibility to your country was something that just wasn't questioned. That was there and that came before anything else, and that's the way I felt going into World War II. That's one of the reasons I stayed in the Marine Corps and was in the Korean War and did testing later on, and in the space program, too.

WILLIAMS: A moment ago, the way you expressed yourself, are you saying that you never felt a mission was ill-advised, that everything that you were told to do was correct in light of the circumstances, or not?

SEN. GLENN: I think in the position I was in as a fighter pilot in a squadron, the decisions about what was important in the overall strategy of the war wasn't something we got involved with. We generally were at the end of that line. We were the ones being given the orders to go out and shoot, and you didn't question why or go up and ask a general to explain himself as to what he had in mind in the mission we'd been assigned to. You just flew your mission and that was it, and that's the military way of doing things. You don't debate things. The military is not a debating society. It's there to invoke sufficient destruction and terror on the enemy, that we prevail and they lose. That was my motive on every flight I flew, was to do the utmost to bring whatever destruction I was assigned to carry out, to do that to the best of my ability.

WILLIAMS: But you weren't being sent out on unnecessary missions or bombing something that already had been…

SEN. GLENN: No, I never had the feeling that we were sent out on unnecessary missions. Now, in World War II and Korea, we had missions that were on targets that had already been hit rather severely, but there was always the chance that the enemy could come out and use those positions again, so you kept them knocked down. That was particularly true in the Marshall Islands, where there was some major concern that the Japanese might try to come back in and reoccupy those islands. If they did, they would, in effect, be almost behind our lines. If they could take those islands again, it would be a real problem for us as we island-hopped toward Japan.

Once again, in Korea, when I was in Korea, the lines were rather static along the 38th Parallel, a rough line paralleling about the 38th Parallel. But I never questioned whether I would have any doubt about going on a mission or not. If you're in that situation, you've trained for it, you look forward to missions and to flying them and doing the best job you can. If the war's over, okay, that's the time you can look back and think how awful it is that people were killed. But when you're out there in the middle of it, you do the best job you can, and that means somebody on the other side is going to get hurt.

WILLIAMS: Your basic Presbyterian beliefs weren't challenged by the war experience; in fact, they helped you?

SEN. GLENN: No, if anything, I guess they helped somewhat. That's a dichotomy you have to face. We don't like to see any human being given unnecessary suffering, and yet war is of a nature that you're doing the utmost to create suffering that you and your equipment know how to do. But did I ever think that it was so much against my Presbyterian beliefs or training that I could not fly a mission? That never even

entered my mind.

WILLIAMS: Do you subscribe to the expression, "God is my co-pilot"?

SEN. GLENN: No, you know, you find a lot of fighter pilots, you'll find a lot of combat pilots who buy the fatalist idea that they can do almost anything they want to do. They can fly almost any way they want to fly, because they're not going to get killed unless, "My number's up," which is a fatalist view that I never subscribed to. You do find an awful lot of pilots, though, look at things that way.

Go back to my training. The old, in real old fundamentalist Presbyterian teaching there was a theory, at least, of predestination. That's what it was called. The church I grew up in, in New Concord, I remember the preacher preaching some sermons on predestination. I always had trouble with that. I never liked the idea that somehow I was just placed here on Earth and everything I was going to do was all programmed out, no matter what I thought about it.

I remember asking my mother, who was a real Bible scholar, I remember one time asking her about it. I told her that that bothered me, that I had trouble with that. I think, I don't know, maybe into my early high school days, about then, when I was thinking about such things. She said that, well, it bothered her, too, but the way she looked at it, it was a partnership with God. The partnership was that you're born with certain talents and capabilities, and that's God's half of this partnership. How you use those talents and capabilities is your own free will here on Earth, and that's your end of the partnership. Now, you can misuse them. You can do stupid things with the talents and capabilities in the situation you find yourself in, or you can do what you think is right at the time, and that's your

judgment. But I always thought that was a pretty good way to explain it.

I never was as fatalist as many of the pilots that we had in the squadron. I did not believe that no matter what happened, that I could not die until my number was up, as it goes, on some great calendar that God had with my name in there at a certain hour, minute, and second of some year.

I still look at it that way today. I look at it as though I'm here with certain talents and capabilities, whatever they may or may not be, and my job is to use the situation I'm in and my talents for whatever good I can do. That's one of the reasons I'm here in the United States Senate, I guess, right now.

WILLIAMS: Continuing along that line of that thought, which talents were you utilizing in such a fashion during World War II?

SEN. GLENN: In World War II, I came along at the right time, or wrong time, when a major war was just starting and when I was of the age that they were looking for in people. But certainly the education I had at that time. The patriotic fervor that I shared with many other people, of course, but I don't think it burned any brighter in many other people than it did in me at that time, and it still does, as far as that goes.

I forget my train of thought there.

WILLIAMS: I was asking which God-given talents were…

SEN. GLENN: Oh, yes. Okay. Certainly, physical talents. Those are probably as much or more important than anything else, because you couldn't be a combat pilot unless you had the physical characteristics to do it, the strength to fly the airplane, and the vision, the eyesight, the hearing. All your senses had to be absolutely normal or

better than normal. So those were all things that went into it. Plus, I think, just growing up in New Concord, you had the drive to go out and be there, no matter what, for your country.

WILLIAMS: What about the lessons that the war taught about mortality at a premature age? How did you deal with that, seeing good friends die in the course of the line of action?

SEN. GLENN: Well, that was one of the prices. That's what war's all about. Of course, you hate it when someone died. Monty Goodman died on the very first combat mission that we ever flew. That was a horrible blow. Joe Johnson was killed in an accident on Midway and we buried him at sea. I still remember that vividly to this day. Took him out on a small boat and he was buried at sea. Other people were killed also.

Mortality is something that if you're a combat pilot and you start dwelling too much on mortality and all that in war, you probably wouldn't fly the way you have to do to help win the war. So that wasn't something that I mooned over or thought about excessively.

WILLIAMS: Let's talk now about what happened as the war ran down, the closing days of the war. Describe that.

SEN. GLENN: I came back at the end of my year's tour out in the Marshalls. When I came back, I was sent to Patuxent River, Maryland, and the purpose of that was not at that time to go through test pilot training. What they were doing was bringing people back and assigning them to the Patuxent for a three-month tour of duty to put a service life on new aircraft, newly designed aircraft, to put a service life on

those aircraft as fast as they possibly could.

When I came back, the war was not over yet, and we had a whole stable of new, mainly prop aircraft, at Patuxent. They flew those airplanes around the clock on a twenty-four-hour basis on what was a preconceived idea of what the normal combat life of that airplane would be once you sent it out to combat. In other words, we put so much high-power time on the airplane, where you ran the engines wide open. We had so many landings that we made, landings and takeoffs. We dropped so many bombs. We shot so many thousand rounds of ammunition out through those gun barrels. We did so many flights where you went up to a certain G-level to put the strain on the aircraft that it would be in combat.

What we did was they had flights scheduled around the clock on a twenty-four-hour basis where pilots came on for their eight-hour shift, and you flew the kinds of flights on the aircraft you were assigned to. They wanted people who had recently returned from combat to do that. So after I came back from the war and went to Cherry Point, I was assigned then to come up to Patuxent River, Maryland, for three months. I think it turned into about three and a half months. I was doing that kind of flying at Patuxent River.

It was an interesting time because the airplanes that were flying there, most of them had superior flight characteristics to them than anything we'd been flying, the Corsairs that I'd been flying. So we were as interested in flying and putting on this service time just as rapidly as you possibly could.

On that tour at Patuxent, one of the incidents there, talking about mortality

again, was we had a fellow in the same squadron who had been overseas—we'd been together overseas for a year, Fred Ochoa. He was assigned to Patuxent the same time I was for this. They were flying around the clock there. He was flying an F-7F Tiger Cat one night, and I was on the same shift that he was on. I think this was on the four in the afternoon to midnight shift or something. I think that's what it was.

My plane was down for maintenance, and so I was stretched on a couch asleep over in the ready room. The little bullhorn, the speaker system, came on and woke me up. It said, was Glenn over there. Well, I said, yes, Glenn was here. They said, "Are you sure he's there?" I said, "Yes, I'm sure, I'm me," or something like that.

Well, they wanted me to come over to the operations officer just as fast as I could, so I went over. They had had a call come in that identified a dead pilot as Glenn, in a plane from the Naval Air Test Center. So they were preparing to call Annie [Glenn] and tell her that I had been killed in a flight, because it had been called in from a sheriff or a deputy sheriff over in Virginia someplace that there'd been a crash on a hillside back there on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The sheriff had found the dog tags, and the dog tags were Glenn. So I assured them that it was not me.

What had happened was sometimes when we had parachutes that were out—had to be repacked every sixty days or something like that—sometimes when your parachute was out for repacking, you would borrow another pilot's parachute, who you knew was not going to fly at a particular time. My plane was

down and it turned out that Fred, or Bubba, as he was known in the squadron, Bubba Ochoa, Bubba had borrowed my parachute. We used to have little cardboard tags that were attached on the side of the parachute, just the harness, with a little metal edge around them and it just had your name on it. It was your parachute.

Well, Bubba had let down and hit a ridge back here with the F-7F, and he was killed. When they found his body in the parachute, why, they found this little tag that identified the parachute. It was not a dog tag. But the sheriff called that in as being a dog tag, which in the military is absolute positive identification. So when I could assure them that it was not me, they obviously did not call Annie. But that was one incident I remember very vividly there, because he was a good friend and we had just flown together for the last year before that in the Marshalls. He was a good pilot.

WILLIAMS: When your squadron came back, how many of you came to Cherry Point?

SEN. GLENN: I think there were maybe, oh, about seven or eight of us from the squadron that were sent to Cherry Point. The rest of them were spread out all over the place. When I was doing some of this flying at Patuxent, putting the service life of the airplane on fast as possible, it was during that period of—when did the European war end, in August? I believe it was in August of that year. So there was all of that kind of celebration.

We were living at a place out along the Patuxent River, an old, old inn. It was very old, even at that time, an old ramshackle house called Seven Gables Inn. It sat right beside one of the deepest channels in the Patuxent River. It was just a

few miles from the base. Knowing we were only going to be there three months or so, that's where we lived.

Annie was pregnant at that time then. It wasn't until later that year in December, when we had gone back to Cherry Point, that Dave, our son, was born. But remembering that very hot summer along Chesapeake Bay with no air-conditioning in the Seven Gables Hotel, and Annie going through pregnancy, was not one of the high points, although we look back and laugh about a lot of those things now.

WILLIAMS: That was a happy time for you, because, of course, you hadn't been together as a couple for a long time.

SEN. GLENN: No, that's right. Well, that's the first time that it wasn't—I was back and we thought I was going to be staying back at that time. So that was it. It was a good time and we had a great time. We had decided to start a family and we were doing that. So it was a good period for us.

WILLIAMS: But since the war in the Pacific hadn't ended when you started that tour, was there a possibility that you'd be sent back?

SEN. GLENN: Oh, yes, absolutely there was a chance I'd be sent back. When I went back to Cherry Point, as a matter of fact, after what was temporary duty up there at Patuxent, they were forming squadrons then—which I was going to be a part—that would then go out to Japan probably for the invasion of the Japanese Islands. So that was what we were looking forward to at that particular time. Then, of course, that fall the war ended.

WILLIAMS: When you were flying these planes out of Patuxent River, were you restricted to

flying over the water, or did you go in every direction? What was it like living under all these military jets taking off? Of course, then there weren't jets.

SEN. GLENN: Well, they weren't jets then. We lived out at Seven Gables, which was about three or four miles straight across from the air base. So you heard the planes all the time, but the types of planes we were flying were very high-performance planes. We were trying to put maximum combat time on them or simulate it as much as we possibly could. We all considered that an honor to be asked to participate in putting those planes through their paces, because we had just come back from combat, we wanted to get as good airplanes as we possibly could for what might be the impending invasion of Japan. So that's what we were working toward.

I remember very well I was assigned, most of the time I was there, to a plane called the F-8F. It was a Grumman plane. It was a carrier plane. It was called the Bearcat. It was an even smaller plane than the Corsair, but it had the same 2,000-horsepower engine on it. Very high-performance airplane, the only prop airplane I ever flew where if you wanted to, you could take off, pull the wheels up, go to the far end of the runway and do an Immelman, which is when you just pull straight up like half a loop and come back heading the other direction. It was a little bit unusual to have an aircraft with that kind of power, power-to-weight ratio. That was not a usual way of taking off, needless to say. In fact, it was prohibited.

But one day one of my friends there took off and did exactly that, and it turned out the base operations officer just happened to be out watching when he

did that. He spent some time under unofficial arrest in the barracks as a result of that. So there were lots of things that happened back in that time.

We had different kinds of aircraft we would check out in, which was a lot of fun, flying different kinds of aircraft. It was there that I checked out in the F-7F, which was a twin-engine airplane being designed as a night fighter. It had two 2,000-horsepower engines on it, on a fighter airplane. So it was a very high-performance airplane and was the first time I had really flown anything of that kind of power with twin engines.

Just a couple of things about flying and our flight patterns and flying around Patuxent—back in those days, the main airplane I was flying or I was responsible for the testing of was the F-8F, the Bearcat. It was an extremely maneuverable airplane. At that time you thought nothing at all if you were out on a training mission and happened to run into an Air Force, or at that time the Army Air Corps, airplane that was flying. They would join up on us, or we'd join up on them. You'd wiggle your wings at them, and if they had fuel and were inclined, why, you'd practice dog-fighting with them and just do it unscheduled out in the middle of nowhere. That was good training, but now it would be unheard of to do something like that now. It was considered almost routine back in those days, although I think there may have been an order out against doing things like that, but it wasn't anything that anybody really paid much attention to.

I flew some on an airplane that was rather a peculiar airplane, also—it was called the Ryan Fireball—while I was at Patuxent. It was one that had been designed as a fighter carrier aircraft. It was a prop airplane, single-engine. But it

had one addition to it. Jet engines had just been coming into play at that time, and a jet engine then was looked at as something that could give boost to that airplane just for combat purposes. So they had a jet engine in the fuselage with the exhaust coming out the back. But if you're looking at the airplane from the side, you could not tell that this airplane even had a jet engine in it, because it was hidden in the fuselage.

We used to fly the Fireball up to Dover, Delaware, which was a P-47 base. We'd see some of their pilots up, and you'd fly over maybe and get in their vicinity and join up with them. I remember it was considered to be great sport that you then would fire up your little jet engine, which had about twenty minutes of fuel with it, supposedly just for combat purposes. You'd fly wing on the P-47, or he'd be flying wing on you. As you went along then flying on your jet engine, you'd cut the front engine, you'd cut it back and feather the prop so it's standing straight up in the air, and it looks as though the airplane is flying on with no visible propulsion at all. The first couple of times you do that, the other pilot would about spin in, looking at you to see how you were flying that thing. So there were some little funny incidents that happened like that also.

The Bearcat being the maneuverable plane it was, occasionally people would take license in spite of regulations back in those days and fly under bridges or one thing and another, even though that wasn't very bright even back in those days. But flying there and putting combat time on those airplanes was something that we really relished, because you were really simulating the combat life of an airplane in as short a period as you possibly could.

WILLIAMS: One question left over from the war that I had, and that was about radio communication. When you were in the South Pacific, was it common to have a lot of chatter amongst you while you were in the air, or was it mainly visual signals you gave one another, or how did that work?

SEN. GLENN: You worked as much as possible off visual signals. You kept radio transmissions to a minimum.

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[End of interview]