Preflight Interview - John Glenn

The STS-95 Crew interview with John Glenn, payload specialist

Senator, thanks for being with us.

Glad to be here, thank you; very glad to be here.

Before we look ahead to the mission itself, let's look back for a minute, 1959, when you and your colleagues, the Mercury 7, were selected, how did you feel? Was it an honor, were you nervous, or overwhelmed by it all?

Well, not nervous, but I was glad to be selected, it was a very competitive selection process. NASA had set the selection criteria for the Mercury program and they had made it very difficult, because they wanted people who had done as much high-speed flying as possible, uh, supersonic speed if possible, combat time, all of these things. In other words, they wanted people who had worked through emergencies and had come through OK. And they started out with, I think, a list of about 110 people, I believe it was, and they sent communications out of all the test pilot schools in the country. Then out of that group selected down through a number of qualifications, you had to have a college degree, you had to be under 5'11" or you wouldn't fit in the capsule — I mean it's about that much on the 5'11". And so they had all their criteria, worked it down to where the seven of us were selected. And I was elated at the time because I thought it was a continuation of the type of test pilot work that I had done for a short time before that, and it was brand new project, and we didn't know that much about it; we were all just sort of feeling our way along, but it was challenging and it was exciting and it was fun. It was, I'd say, a — it was a continuation on but, uh, it was a time when we were just starting out with the building blocks that have gone on through the years, flight by flight, to the tremendous capability we have right now.

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Sputnik had been launched; we already were behind the Soviet Union, at that time, in space, and there was some pressure on the astronauts, the Mercury 7, did you feel a sense of urgency to get up into space, to prove something?

Yes we did, and you know, people today tend to forget what it was like back in those days; they don't remember the national psyche back then. It was communism versus our form of government, and the Soviet, at that time were saying that they were now superior to us in technology and research; and they were using that to attract a lot of students to Moscow. Some countries who were undecided, we felt were being impressed by what they were saying, and we felt that, uh, we were becoming more communically-oriented, so it was a time of a lot of pressure, and we felt that we had just assumed that we were tops in research and technology and then all at once, what happens? Well, we were trying to put up a satellite, and we failed, and they tried, and they got one up. And there was Sputnik going around and they were crowing internationally about the fact that America was going to be second and we were behind and we felt that, uh, we felt that, uh, we felt that we had to catch up. So we were just trying to catch up. So we didn't even put anything up there in orbit until after the fall of and then we were trying to get a manned space program going. And there was Al Shepard waiting to go up on the first Mercury flight, name the Redstone flight, a suborbital flight, up and down, and to show behold a few weeks before Al was to go, they orbited. Yuri Gagarin orbited the Earth, and this was a real blow. And so it took on the context of not just a space race, just for the new space age, but they were using what they claimed as their superiority to sell their brand of government, sell communism, and we felt that, uh, we felt that, uh, we felt that we had to, uh, we felt that, uh, we came in, that was the basis at the time, and so did we feel a lot of pressure? Yes, but we didn't want to cut any corners, we wanted to be safe and all the engineers did too, but NASA starting out back then in the manned program was a tiny little group, I think we had, I don't, I don't, I don't