NASA marks 45th anniversary of Americans in orbit

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NASA commemorates the 45th anniversary of Americans in orbit with a special multimedia salute to the original Mercury astronauts and new interviews with Sen. John Glenn, Scott Carpenter and Walter Schirra.

On Feb. 20, 1962, an Atlas rocket successfully carried Glenn and the hopes of an entire nation into orbit aboard Friendship 7, a flight that ushered in a new era of space travel that eventually led to Americans walking on the moon by the end of the 1960s. "Glenn's achievement came at a time when there were many unknowns about the ability of humans to survive in space," said NASA Deputy Administrator Shana Dale.

Glenn was soon followed into orbit by colleagues Carpenter, Schirra and Gordon Cooper. Their fellow Mercury astronauts Alan Shepard and Virgil "Gus" Grissom flew earlier suborbital flights, and Donald "Deke" Slayton was grounded by a medical condition until the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project in 1975.

NASA remembers the achievements of its first generation of explorers through special programming and interviews on NASA Television and an extraordinary interactive feature on the agency's Internet site, http://www.nasa.gov/, beginning at noon EST, Friday.

A half-hour program that highlights the achievements of Mercury and the 45th anniversary of Americans in orbit will be broadcast on NASA TV. Extended interviews with surviving Mercury astronauts Glenn, Carpenter and Schirra also will be available on NASA TV's Video File feeds for media organizations, as will a special message from the Expedition 14 crew orbiting Earth on board the International Space Station.

The interactive Internet feature is hosted by NASA astronaut Carl Walz and will offer a rare virtual look inside Glenn's Mercury spacecraft, which is on display at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington.

Images from a rare photo shoot inside the tiny Friendship 7 capsule provides a 360-degree tour of the spacecraft. Plus, users can select the questions answered by veteran space explorers Glenn, Carpenter and Schirra.

To experience the 45th anniversary of Americans in Orbit multimedia feature, visit:

http://www.nasa.gov/mercury