John H. Glenn Jr. — The Quintessential American Hero

John H. Glenn Jr. was the quintessential American hero. He died Dec. 8 at the age of 95.

As a member of the Original Seven Mercury astronauts, he was a frequent visitor to Florida’s Space Coast becoming the first American to orbit the Earth. After serving more than 24 years in the U.S. Senate, Glenn returned to space as a member of the crew of the space shuttle Discovery.

Born in Cambridge, Ohio, Glenn served in the U.S. Marine Corps Flying 59 combat missions in World War II. During the Korean conflict, he flew another 90. In the last nine days of fighting in Korea, Glenn downed three MIG’s fighters in combat along the Yalu River.

When NASA was formed in 1958, one of its first tasks was to select pilots to serve as the nation’s first astronauts. During the April 9, 1959 news conference that introduced the Mercury astronauts, the seven military pilots discussed their views on the fledgling space program.

Responding to a reporter’s question, Glenn compared Project Mercury to the Wright Brothers’ first powered aircraft flight in North Carolina in 1903.

“My feelings are that this whole project with regard to space is like the Wright Brothers standing at Kitty Hawk about fifty years ago, with Orville and Wilbur pitching a coin to see who was going to shove the other one off the hill,” he said.

“I think we stand on the verge of something as big and as expansive as that.”