



Scott Carpenter

From Outer Space to Palm Beach Gardens

by Glenn R. Swift
Photography by Jason Collins

“There is no adventure without fear,” said Scott Carpenter, one of NASA’s original seven Mercury astronauts and the second American to orbit the earth. “But fear makes us do a better job.”

He should know.

A dynamic pioneer of modern exploration, Carpenter, 83, has the unique distinction of being the first human to penetrate both inner and outer space, thereby acquiring the dual title – Astronaut Aquanaut. These days, Carpenter isn’t climbing Mt. Everest or jet-skiing down the Nile. In fact, he’s content to keep his feet securely on *terre firma*, splitting his time between Vail, Colorado and Palm Beach Gardens. But he retains the youthful enthusiasm that propelled him to the highest levels of scientific achievement.

The son of a renowned research chemist, Carpenter was born in Boulder, Colorado, where he was raised primarily by his maternal grandparents due to his mother being stricken with tuberculosis and his father’s frequent absences while on the college lecture tour. A popular student, Carpenter excelled in athletics at Boulder High School, where he also fostered an intense interest in a budding new field – aviation.

“I was 16 years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked.... That Christmas I listened on the radio to the grim news that my heroes – U.S. Navy and Marine aviators holding Wake Island – had fallen to a ferocious Japanese onslaught. I wanted to fly and fight... but by the time I got to Primary Flight training in the summer of 1945 the Bomb had been dropped.... As an American I was glad the war was over. As a fledgling naval aviator; however, I was deeply dejected that I had not taken part in what I assumed was the greatest aeronautical contest of the century. “

Destiny had other plans.

Following Japan’s surrender, Carpenter returned home to Boulder and entered the University of Colorado on the G.I. Bill. Because the University did not offer a degree in aeronautical engineering, Carpenter’s degree program was in mechanical engineering with an aeronautical option. But in the spring semester of his senior year in 1947, the Cold War was heating up and Carpenter was recruited by the Navy’s Direct Procurement Program (DPP). Despite being just one class short of his degree (he missed his final exam in heat transfer), the astronaut-to-be answered the call of duty.

Carpenter reported to the Pensacola Naval Air Station for pre-flight and primary flight training. After earning his wings, he was immediately sent to the Pacific Theatre. “The Korean War had broken out, and for my first deploy-

ment I was stationed at Atsugi Naval Air Station with Patrol Squadron Six. We carried out reconnaissance and anti-submarine patrols. World War II hero Captain Guy Howard was my Commanding Officer. We flew P2Vs, which were dubbed the ‘Blue Sharks’ in a wartime *Collier’s* story.”

During his second deployment, Carpenter pushed the envelope still further by flying surveillance missions along the Soviet and Chinese coasts. “But I never did any dog-fighting,” laughed Carpenter, who after the Korean conflict ended in 1953 was promoted to Patrol Plane Commander (PPC).

The already accomplished aviator soon found himself selected for the Navy’s prestigious Test Pilot School in Patuxent River, Maryland, after having been nominated by Captain Howard. In that assignment, Carpenter flew every type of naval aircraft, including multi- and single-engine jet and propeller-driven fighters, attack planes, patrol bombers, transports, and seaplanes.

“I was one of the youngest aviators in the group and one of only two multi-engine pilots.”

In 1957, Carpenter attended the Navy General Line School and the Navy Air Intelligence School before being assigned as Air Intelligence Officer to the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Hornet. But a funny little thing happened in that year that is often associated with one of Chevrolet’s most popular models.

“The Soviets launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite, in October, and that was a wake-up call. We really didn’t know what the Russians were capable of. Eisenhower saw the future and knew that we needed a jump start. He responded immediately.”

Part of that jump start was the creation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). And before the ink was dry on the legislation creating the new agency, the search began for the “right men” to send into orbit.

The Space Race was on.

“The military wanted certified test pilots with degrees in engineering who were less than 5’11” tall. In the beginning, there were 550 of us who met those criteria. Of course, when I first got the call I didn’t know what it was for. You often don’t in the military, but my orders came from the Chief of Naval Operations – and the CNO is three steps above God,” cracked Carpenter.

Within six months of and rigorous training and repeated

screenings, the long list was finally narrowed down, and on April 9, 1959 Carpenter was selected as one of Project Mercury's original seven astronauts. He then underwent still more intensive training in communication and navigation. Three years later, on May, 24, 1962, Carpenter became the fourth American to be blasted into space (following Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, and John Glenn) and the second to orbit the earth. His three-orbit mission lasted nearly five hours, with his Aurora 7 spacecraft attaining an altitude of 164 miles and an orbital velocity of 17,532 miles per hour. During his space flight, Carpenter became the first astronaut to conduct experiments and eat solid food in space.

When asked what he and his fellow Mercury astronauts thought about the decision regarding the man chosen to be the first in space, Carpenter in his usual wit replied: "All of us except Alan Shepard disagreed with the decision."

On a more serious note, Carpenter suffered a motorbike accident not long after the historic mission that resulted in a shoulder injury. The mishap knocked him out of the loop with regard to space travel, but by that time Carpenter had his sights set on other frontiers.

"I met Jacques Cousteau who helped to instill in me a sense of wonder with regard to the ocean. After working with Cousteau and his Calypso team, I participated in the Navy's Man-in-the-Sea Project in the summer of 1965 as an aquanaut in the SEALAB II program off the coast of La Jolla, California." During the 45-day experi-

ment, Carpenter spent 30 days living and working on the ocean floor. He was team leader for two of the three ten-man teams of Navy and civilian divers who conducted deep-sea diving activities in a seafloor habitat at a depth of 205 feet.

Carpenter later returned to NASA as Executive Assistant to the Director of the Manned Spaceflight Center and as Director of Aquanaut Operations for SEALAB III. After retiring from the Navy in 1969, he founded Sea Sciences, Inc., a corporation dedicated to developing programs for utilizing ocean resources and improving environmental health.

"Everything I've ever accomplished I owe to the United States Navy," Carpenter said proudly.

Oh yeah, about that college degree. Following the successful completion of his Mercury space flight, the University of Colorado (in what had to be one of the great

understatements of all time) granted Carpenter his diploma on the grounds that "his subsequent training as an astronaut has more than made up for the deficiency in the subject of heat transfer."

You see, sometimes being in the hot seat has its advantages. **PBG**

*To read more about the amazing life of Scott Carpenter, check out his autobiography *For Spacious Skies: The Uncommon Journey of a Mercury Astronaut*, available through Amazon.com.*

