



# City of light marks historic space flight

By Stuart Gary for Science Online

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**Perth has celebrated the 50th anniversary of the historic first US orbital flight by John Glenn aboard Friendship-7.**

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**MAP:** [Perth 6000](#)

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On 20 February 1962, as his Mercury capsule flew 170 kilometres over Perth, the people of the Western Australian capital and nearby Rockingham greeted the space traveller by switching their lights on.

With the vast darkness of the Indian Ocean below and the equally dark Australian outback ahead of him, Glenn saw the lights of Perth shining like a beacon and remarked, "The lights show up very well, thank everybody for turning them on."

The occasion resulted in Perth becoming known worldwide as the city of light.

"It was a significant moment for Perth because we're the most isolated capital city in the world and understood the isolation Glenn was experiencing in his capsule," said Meg Travers, digital archives support manager at the Western Australia State Records Office.

"It was about one city full of people reaching out to one man all alone in space."

Perth's Northbridge Piazza is hosting the [City of Light: 50 years in space](#) celebrations to mark the historic event, which includes a display of operational radio and optical telescopes, including the Square Kilometre Array project, as well as historical records and artefacts from Glenn's flight.

Films and documentaries played on the big screen, before a special hook-up between local school children and Captain Dan Burbank, commander of the International Space Station, scheduled to take place during the orbiting outposts nine and a half minute pass over Perth.

## 'It was a great view'

In a special message, Glenn says he still remembers the flight over Perth vividly.

"It was only about 45 minutes from the Cape until we flew over Perth," he said.

"To look down and be able to see the lights that the people from Perth had turned on, all the porch lights and the refinery, and I could see not only Perth but Rockingham next door very clearly.

"36 years later I was on shuttle flight STS-95 over Perth and was going to see how Perth had changed.

"As we came across the Indian Ocean there was an undercast - no light.

"It opened up just before we came over Perth and it looked as if the lights of Perth and Rockingham were even more vivid than they had been 36 years before. It was a great view."

## Big event

Jack Duperouzel, who was part of the acquisition team at the Muchea tracking station north of Perth for Glenn's flight, says it was a big event for the city.

"We were all looking forward to this," says Duperouzel.

"The excitement had built up, we had trained with two unmanned Mercury orbital flights and a DC-3 aircraft the RAAF were using for simulation training.

"Astronaut Gordon Cooper who was capcom (capsule communications) for Glenn's flight was there. After the flight we had a big party and Cooper was taken down to the Swan River and taught to water-ski."

Upon his return to Earth, Glenn was given a New York ticker tape parade, which also included Perth's Lord Mayor Harry Howard dressed in full mayoral regalia.

Mr Duperouzel says Mr Howard was criticised for attending the parade as he had been opposed to Perth's lights being turned on for the flight, describing it as a waste of public money.

**Topics:** [history](#), [science-and-technology](#), [space-exploration](#), [spacecraft](#), [perth-6000](#), [wa](#), [australia](#)

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