

SLIPPING THE SURLY BONDS:**Sun Country Pilot Recalls Space Shuttle Days**

By John Perkinson, Staff Writer

ALPA members fly to the far reaches, but few have traveled to where F/O Curt Brown (Sun Country) has gone. From 1992 to 1999, the retired Air Force colonel manned six space shuttle missions, flying as either pilot or spacecraft commander and logging more than 1,300 hours in space.

Growing up in Elizabethtown, N.C., Brown dreamed of flying and began taking lessons by the time he was 16 at nearby Fisher Field, a facility that would later bear his name. "I'm not dead yet, but I have an airport named after me," he joked.

Brown attended the U.S. Air Force Academy and completed undergraduate pilot training at Laughlin Air Force Base in Del Rio, Tex., in 1979. He served as an A-10 instructor at Davis-Monthan AFB near Tucson, Ariz. He attended both the Fighter Weapons School at Nellis AFB in Nevada as well as the prestigious Test Pilot School at Edwards AFB in California before serving as a test pilot for A-10 and F-16 aircraft at Eglin AFB in Florida.

Career takes off

Never one to be satisfied with his accomplishments, Brown decided to apply to become an astronaut in 1987. "NASA invited about 130 of us to the Johnson Space Center in Houston for a week-long interview," said Brown, adding that he was offered the job after his first attempt.

Brown completed a year-long training and evaluation program and then participated in a variety of technical assignments, including the upgrade of the shuttle mission simulator. But his real claim to fame would be his space shuttle missions. Brown flew in the right seat of the space shuttle *Atlantis* once and the *Endeavor* twice, and commanded the *Discovery* a remarkable three times. Missions included rendezvous sequences with satellites, atmospheric studies,



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Curt Brown, left, mission commander of space shuttle Flight STS-95, with childhood idol John H. Glenn, Jr.

technological tests for the then-future International Space Station, and upgrading the Hubble telescope.

Asked about his most memorable experience, Brown commented, "On my fifth mission, I took [former Ohio] Sen. John Glenn back up in space after his 36-year hiatus. He flew in '62 and was the first American to orbit Earth, and in the fall of 1998, we took him up for his second mission in space." Brown acknowledged the gratification and honor of being able to work with his childhood hero, who in May was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. "If it wasn't for John, I wouldn't have been doing what I was doing," he said.

In April of this year, both Brown and Glenn were on hand at the ceremony to induct the shuttle *Discovery* into the Smithsonian's Udvar-Hazy Center at Washington Dulles International Airport. For Brown, it was a bittersweet moment, given that the spacecraft was being retired from service. Commenting on the shuttle operation's termination last summer, Brown noted, "Unfortunately, our space program is looking backward instead of forward these days."

A new beginning

In his early 40s, with his space shuttle years clearly behind him, Brown wanted

to continue flying, so he left NASA and went to work as a pilot for American Airlines, where he flew for nearly six years. Commuting to stand reserve in New York and watching the furlough list continue to grow, he talked to his wife, Mary, and decided to call it quits. But after several years, Brown missed being in the cockpit. Living near the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, he decided to submit an application with Sun Country Airlines and has been flying for the airline for nearly two years.

When off duty, Brown speaks at public engagements and supports a college scholarship he created at his high school in North Carolina. He also has been a regular at the Reno Air Races since the 1990s, teaching classes on how to race and setting a record in 2009 for the fastest-ever qualifying time at 543.5 mph. (And keep in mind that at the time Brown's black-and-gold L-29 Viper was flying around those pylons a mere 50 feet off the ground.)

"When you're flying—whether it's a Cub, the space shuttle, or a 737—there are certain skills that are required to operate that machine precisely," said Brown. He admits that accomplishing perfection may be an impossibility, but he continues to strive for it every day, doing what he loves most. 