

SPACE DISCOVERY

THE MERCURY PROJECT

ALAN SHEPARD'S MISSION

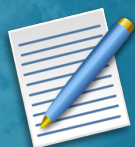
In 1959, 110 test pilots were invited to volunteer for the space flight program headed by the new National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Although Shepard was on the list, a snafu kept him from receiving his invitation. Regardless, he was selected as one of the first seven astronauts for the organization. Known as the Mercury 7, the group included John Glenn, Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Donald "Deke" Slayton, Malcolm "Scott" Carpenter, Walter "Wally" Schirra, and Gordon Cooper. From this prestigious group of highly trained fliers, Shepard was selected to man the first space flight, with Glenn acting as his backup.

The stakes were raised in the space race on April 15, 1961, when the Soviet Union launched cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into space and he became the first person to orbit the Earth. Gagarin beat the Americans by less than a month. Shepard's launch was initially scheduled for May 2, but was rescheduled twice because of weather conditions. On May 5, Freedom 7 lifted off, carrying Shepard to an altitude of 116 miles for a 15-minute flight. Because of the placement of the porthole windows, the first American in space was unable to catch a glimpse of the stars, and he was strapped in too tight to experience weightlessness. Also, a filter left on the periscope window rendered the Earth below in black and white.

Although the Soviets had reached the historic milestone first, Shepard's suborbital flight made a significant worldwide impact because its launch, travel and splashdown were watched on live television by millions of people. By contrast, the details of Gagarin's landing were kept confidential for more than a decade. For his daring achievement, President John F. Kennedy awarded Shepard the NASA Distinguished Service Medal.

Nola Taylor Redd, SPACE.com

1. Introduce the document.
2. Who is Alan Shepard?
3. What was his role?
4. Did he succeed? Explain what happened.
5. Explain his flight conditions.
6. What was the impact of Shepard's flight on the world?
 - Why? What was different to Gagarin's flight?



Myths and Heroes

Places and Forms of Power

The Idea of Progress

