

This Day in History... May 5, 1961

Alan Shepard Becomes First American in Space

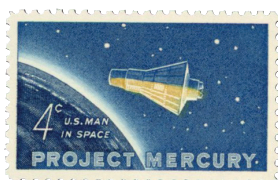
On May 5, 1961, Alan Shepard became the first American to travel into space when he launched aboard *Freedom 7*. The brief suborbital flight lasted just over 15 minutes, but it marked a turning point in the United States' early space efforts.

The mission was part of Project Mercury, which began in 1958 after the Soviet Union stunned the world with the Sputnik launch. American leaders saw space as both a scientific frontier and a test of national strength. Mercury had three clear goals: orbit a human around Earth, study how the human body reacts to spaceflight, and return both astronaut and spacecraft safely.

Shepard's flight, known as Mercury-Redstone 3, was a key early step. NASA selected the capsule, named *Freedom 7* by Shepard himself, in late 1960. The original launch date slipped due to technical checks and weather delays. In January 1961, NASA introduced its first group of astronauts to the public, including Shepard, Gus Grissom, and John Glenn. Shepard was chosen for the first flight, though his selection was not publicly confirmed until just days before launch.

On the morning of May 5, millions of Americans watched live television coverage from Cape Canaveral, Florida. At 9:34 a.m. Eastern Time, the Redstone rocket ignited and lifted *Freedom 7* into the sky. The rocket burned for about two and a half minutes before separating, sending the capsule on a ballistic arc into space.

Within minutes, Shepard passed the accepted boundary of space, about 62 miles above Earth. His capsule eventually reached an altitude of 116.5 miles. During the flight, Shepard experienced both intense acceleration during launch and brief weightlessness at the top of the trajectory. Unlike earlier test flights with animals and instruments, Shepard actively controlled parts of the mission. He used manual controls to adjust the capsule's orientation, testing whether astronauts could function under real space conditions.



Pictures Friendship 7, which John Glenn piloted in the first successful orbit of Earth during Project Mercury.

The entire flight lasted 15 minutes and 28 seconds. *Freedom 7* traveled about 302 miles downrange and reached a top speed of roughly 5,134 miles per hour. As the capsule reentered the atmosphere, it endured high heat and deceleration forces before deploying parachutes for a controlled splashdown in the Atlantic Ocean. Recovery teams quickly located Shepard and the capsule. Both were in good condition when they were brought aboard the aircraft carrier *Lake Champlain*.

Shepard's flight followed the earlier mission of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who had orbited Earth on April 12, 1961. Gagarin's spacecraft was largely automated, and he ejected and parachuted separately during landing. By contrast, Shepard remained inside *Freedom 7* throughout the flight and demonstrated limited manual control of the spacecraft. While the mission was suborbital rather than a full orbit, it showed that American astronauts could operate their vehicles in space.

The success of Mercury-Redstone 3 gave the United States confidence in its space program. Shepard became a national figure almost immediately. Shortly after recovery, he received a congratulatory call from John F. Kennedy. The achievement also helped shape national policy. On May 25, 1961, just 20 days after Shepard's flight, Kennedy addressed Congress and set a new goal: landing a man on the Moon before the end of the decade.

Project Mercury continued with five more crewed missions between 1961 and 1963. In February 1962, John Glenn became the first American to orbit Earth aboard *Friendship 7*. Later missions extended flight times and tested more complex operations. In 1963, Gordon Cooper completed a 34-hour mission, showing that humans could function in space for extended periods.

Shepard himself would not fly again until 1971, when he commanded the Apollo 14 mission to the Moon. However, his 1961 flight remained a foundational moment. It provided data on human performance, spacecraft control, and recovery procedures. These lessons directly supported later programs, including Gemini and Apollo.



Issued for the 50th anniversary of Shepard's flight.

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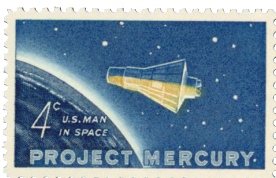
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