

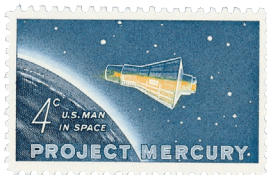
This Day in History... May 5, 1961

Alan Shepard Becomes First American in Space

On May 5, 1961, Alan Shepard became the first American to travel into space when he successfully took a sub-orbital flight aboard *Freedom 7*.

A year after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik into space, the United States created Project Mercury – its first manned space program – in 1958. Project Mercury had three specific objectives. One, to orbit a manned spacecraft around Earth. Two, to investigate man's ability to function in space. And three, to recover both astronaut and spacecraft safely.

A major step toward the first of these goals came in 1961 with the launch of the *Freedom 7* spacecraft in the Mercury-Redstone 3 mission. The *Freedom 7* was selected for the first US manned suborbital flight in October 1960, but additional preparation changed the launch date to May 1961. In January, three astronauts were announced as potential pilots for the mission – Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, and John Glenn. It was not until the May 2nd launch was canceled due to weather that America discovered it was Shepard who would pilot the spacecraft.



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

On the morning of May 5, 1961, an estimated 45 million Americans eagerly waited in front of their television sets for the *Freedom 7* liftoff, which occurred at 9:34 a.m. Within minutes, the craft left Earth's atmosphere, making Alan Shepard the first American to reach space.

The *Freedom 7* spent 15 minutes, 28 seconds in flight, reaching an altitude of 116.5 miles. Shepard's mission in that short time was to demonstrate control of a vehicle during weightlessness and high G stresses. Shepard traveled 302 miles at a speed of 5,134 miles per hour. Both spacecraft and astronaut were recovered in excellent condition. There were significant differences between the earlier flight of Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin and Shepard.

Gagarin had merely been a passenger, and had parachuted from his spacecraft. Shepard controlled *Freedom 7*, and maneuvered it to a near-perfect landing. America reclaimed its technological superiority. Although the Mercury-Redstone 3 mission was brief by today's standards, its accomplishments were great. By proving that humans could perform certain necessary tasks in space, this historic flight paved the way for every US space flight that has followed since.

Almost instantly, astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr. became a national hero. He even got a telephone call from President Kennedy, just minutes after boarding the aircraft carrier *Lake Champlain*. The Mercury Project was a smashing success. In fact, just three weeks after Alan Shepard's historic sub-orbital flight, President John F. Kennedy announced the goal of landing a man on the Moon before the end of the decade. Project Mercury provided the US with the necessary experience to make this vision a reality.

All of the Project Mercury goals were accomplished during six manned flights, between 1961 and 1963. After Shepard's success, John H. Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth. And on the last manned Mercury flight, Leroy Gordon Cooper Jr. conducted the first US-manned space mission to last more than 24 hours.

The success of this mission was an important milestone in American space exploration. It led to one of the world's greatest space achievements – landing a man on the moon, which occurred just eight years later.



Stamp issued for the 50th anniversary of Shepard's flight.

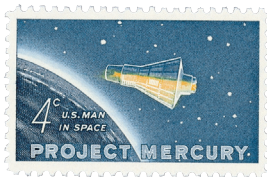
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