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This NASA photo depicts both the first American in space (Alan Shepard) and his pre-launch space capsule. NASA gives us this description: "On May 5, 1961, Mercury Astronaut Alan B. Shepard, Jr. (right, headed to launch) blasted off in his Freedom 7 capsule atop a Mercury-Redstone rocket (left). His 15-minute sub-orbital flight made him the first American in space."

It was "T minus 1 and counting" on May 5, 1961. Nearly every school-aged child in America had eyes glued to black and white television screens brought into schools just for this moment. They were witnessing an exciting, historic event.

The first American ever, to be launched into space, was strapped in a tiny space capsule at the top of a Redstone MR-7 rocket. At 9:34 a.m., Alan Shepard, one of the original "Mercury Seven," was blasted into the unknown. (There was an escape tower at the top of the capsule, in case things didn't go well and the astronaut had time to get out.)

It was about time, most Americans thought. If the Russians could successfully launch and safely return a manned space capsule from orbiting the earth, why not the U.S.? Except that Alan Shepard wasn't going to orbit the earth on May 5th.

His mission was just to survive a launch, leave and reenter earth's atmosphere, and return safely to earth. His entire flight, from launch to landing, would take about 15 minutes.

While that may not sound like much by today's standards, it was an awesome undertaking at the time - and spellbinding for school children. It was also spellbinding for Shepard who had named his capsule Freedom 7. At launch, his pulse rate jumped from 80 to 126.

Eighty-eight seconds after the Redstone rocket hurled him out of the earth's atmosphere, Shepard's head and helmet were shaking so hard he could not read the instruments on his control panel. Seconds later, he was "pulling six Gs" (the force of gravity times six), roughly half the g-forces (11.6) Shepard and his space capsule would endure minutes later during their reentry into earth's atmosphere. He was traveling at 5,134 miles per hour.

Stunned by what he saw 116.5 statute miles above earth, Shepard took pictures and exclaimed, "What a beautiful view!" Then, just as quickly as he had left earth, he returned to it.

At 10,000 feet, his parachute activated and *Freedom 7*, with Shepard doing well, hit the Atlantic Ocean. The

U.S.S. *Lake Champlain* was standing by with a helicopter to recover America's first man in space and the tiny capsule which had brought him there.

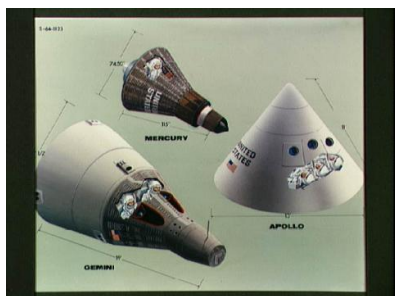
See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/ALAN-SHEPARD-S-FLIGHT-History-of-Flight>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/ALAN-SHEPARD-S-FLIGHT-History-of-Flight>

Media Stream



Space Capsule Display

Image online, courtesy NASA. NASA image: S64-01123

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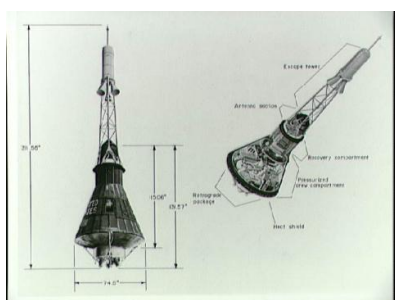
Mercury Seven Astronauts

Image, above, depicts a photo by Bill Taub; online, courtesy NASA.

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Mercury Space Capsule - Illustrated Detail

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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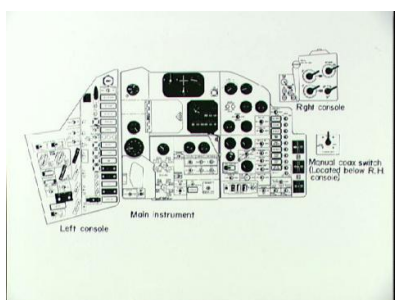
Freedom 7 - Piloted by Alan Shepard

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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Freedom 7 - Main Instrument Panel

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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Freedom 7 - Recovery Operations

Image online, courtesy NASA.

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Alan Shepard - Recovery After Landing

Image, described above, online courtesy NASA.

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