

Alan Shepard was the first American to be launched into space. With the eyes of school children throughout the country glued to television screens in their classrooms, Shepard blasted-off in a Redstone rocket on May 5, 1961.

NASA provides the following information about that historic flight:

*Named as one of the nation's original seven Mercury astronauts in 1959, Shepard became the first to carry America's banner into space on May 5, 1961, riding a Redstone rocket on a 15-minute suborbital flight that took him and his Freedom 7 Mercury capsule 115 miles in altitude and 302 miles downrange from Cape Canaveral, FL.*

*His flight followed by three weeks the launch of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who on April 12, 1961, became the first human space traveler on a one-orbit flight lasting 108 minutes.*

*Although the flight of Freedom 7 was brief, it nevertheless was a major step forward for the U.S. in a rapidly-accelerating race with the Soviet Union for dominance in the new arena of space.*

*Buoyed by the overwhelming response to Shepard's flight, which made the astronaut an instant hero and a household name, President John F. Kennedy set the nation on a course to the Moon, declaring before a joint session of Congress just three weeks later, "I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth."*

*Over a three and a half year period from July 1969 to December 1972, a dozen Americans explored the lunar surface. Shepard was the fifth man to walk on the Moon, and the oldest, at the age of 47.*

*Shepard, however, was almost bypassed for a trip to the moon. He had to overcome an inner ear problem called Meuniere's syndrome that grounded him for several years following his initial pioneering flight.*

*An operation eventually cured the problem and Shepard was named to command the Apollo 14 mission. On January 31, 1971, Shepard, Command Module pilot Stuart Roosa and Lunar Module pilot Edgar Mitchell embarked for the Moon atop a Saturn 5 rocket. Shepard and Mitchell landed the lunar module Antares on February 5 in the Fra Mauro highlands while Roosa orbited overhead in the command ship Kitty Hawk.*

*Shepard planted his feet on the lunar surface a few hours later, declaring, "Al is on the surface, and it's been a long way, but we're here." During two excursions on the surface totaling nine hours, Shepard and Mitchell set up a science station, collected 92 pounds of rocks and gathered soil samples from the mountainous region.*

*Near the end of the second moonwalk, and just before entering the lunar module for the last time, Shepard (an avid golfer) hit two golf balls with a makeshift club. The first landed in a nearby crater. The second was hit squarely, and in the one-sixth gravity of the moon, Shepard said it traveled "miles and miles and miles."*

Shepard died, at age 74, in 1998.

Credits:

Historic footage of the launch, and its aftermath, online courtesy NASA.

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

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Alan-Shepard-First-American-in-Space>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Alan-Shepard-First-American-in-Space>