

## Author's preface

I once had the privilege – the very memorable privilege – of meeting Rear Admiral Alan Shepard. Sadly enough, it would be the only occasion. In 1993, under gloomy skies, an air show was held at Avalon airport outside of Melbourne, Australia, and I was there in uniform in my capacity as a Customer Service Manager with Qantas Airways to usher attendees through our 747 and 767 aircraft. I knew that special show guest Alan Shepard was to do a signing session outside of the Qantas VIP tent at a certain time, so I carefully orchestrated my break to be there 15 minutes ahead of that time.

As I'd assumed, Shepard was by himself in the private rear part of the VIP tent, sleeves rolled up and enjoying a quiet beer. I introduced myself, saying as we shook hands, "It's a great pleasure to meet you, Rear Admiral. I've been waiting quite a while to meet you." With that he looked at his watch and almost apologetically said, "Oh, how long have you been waiting?" At which I replied, "Since the fifth of May 1961." He laughed out loud. I then enjoyed a couple of precious minutes chatting with the man before he was called to face the public and sign a whole bunch of prints – curiously of the Space Shuttle undergoing flight tests mounted atop a 747. I really felt that something far more appropriate could have been found, but as he signed one for me it's a great souvenir of a wonderful day and an extraordinary person.

After he'd rolled down and buttoned his sleeves once again and walked out to the waiting line of autograph 'customers', I noticed Louise Shepard sitting quietly in a far corner of the tent, so for a few minutes we had a friendly, animated conversation about the places that she would dearly love to see in Australia.

The memories of that day came flooding back as I began work on this book, and I'll always be grateful that the opportunity to meet Alan Shepard came my way. It made the writing of his flight story so much more personal.

The adulation that swept most of the world – and particularly the United States – in the wake of his suborbital flight was something quite new and largely unexpected, with the sheer scale of it taking many by surprise. Following his post-flight reception and being presented with a NASA medal by President Kennedy at the White House, the Shepards traveled as planned to the Capitol building in an open limousine along with Vice President Johnson. The other Mercury astronauts trailed behind in other vehicles. Amazingly, it had been decided by NASA officials in Washington, D.C. not to organize any sort of showy parade for the nation's first astronaut. However, nobody had told the people of the nation's capital, who turned out in their thousands to line the streets and cheer Alan Shepard and his colleagues as they drove by in a fleet of limousines. Several thousand more had gathered at the steps of the Capitol to catch a glimpse of America's first astronaut, and he was obviously overwhelmed by the excitement and sheer patriotism displayed by the citizens of Washington, whom he acknowledged prior to eventually heading in to address a news conference. There was a further surprise in store when he made his way to the waiting microphones. All the news reporters and photographers stood and applauded as he fronted the gathered media – something almost without precedent.

By the time John Glenn orbited the Earth the following year, everyone knew what to expect post-flight, and true to predictions the nation exploded as the freckle-faced Marine enjoyed exultant parades throughout the country. He had become the latest, and one of the greatest, American heroes. The triumph of Shepard's history-making Mercury suborbital flight had to take something of a back seat to the man who had once served as his backup and who now enjoyed a celebrity status the like of which had not been seen since the days of Charles Lindbergh.

In 2011 our attention was turned once again to Alan Shepard's Mercury-Redstone flight, as we remembered the golden anniversary of sending America into space in a tiny capsule he had named *Freedom 7*. Sadly, he was no longer with us, having died of a lingering disease back in 1998.

As someone who has found fascination and enthrallment in the ongoing history of human space flight for the greater part of his life, I feel proud to be able to present this book on the flight that made Alan Shepard and *Freedom 7* famous.

Of necessity there is some biographical material on the life of Alan Shepard, but as the name of the book suggests, I've principally focused on his historic flight. For those seeking information on the life and other achievements of Alan Shepard, there is one biography that covers his entire lifetime; Neal Thompson's 2004 publication, *Light This Candle: The Life & Times of Alan Shepard, America's First Spaceman*.

Just as I feel so privileged to have met the first American to fly into space (and Apollo moonwalker), I am also grateful that I happened to be around and historically aware in an era in which we took, in Shepard's own words, "those first baby steps" into the astonishing wonderment and glory that is our universe.

Freedom 7

The Historic Flight of Alan B. Shepard, Jr.  
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