Shepard is 1st American to travel into space, May 5, 1961

Jessica MacNeil - May 05, 2019

In 1961, Alan Shepard flew into history.

The astronaut became the first American to travel into space on May 5, just three weeks after cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was the first human in space.

Shepard piloted the Freedom 7 capsule, which was launched by a Redstone rocket from Cape Canaveral. It was a ballistic trajectory suborbital flight that did not include an Earth orbit, as Shepard flew to an altitude 116 statute miles at a maximum speed of 5134 mph and returned 15 minutes after launch, parachuting into the Atlantic Ocean.

A Marine helicopter retrieves Freedom 7 from the Atlantic Ocean. Source: NASA
The cone-shaped capsule was made of titanium with a layer of mineral wool insulation and nickel-chrom alloy stamped shingles, Beryllium shingles, and a cast-titanium heat shield on the exterior.

The mission was originally scheduled for October 1960, but was delayed a number of times. It was the first manned flight of project Mercury, which had an objective to determine man's capabilities in space. See a timeline of the flight below (Source: NASA).

![Timeline of the Mercury-Redstone 3 mission](image)

Less than a year later, John Glenn, became the first American to orbit the Earth.

Freedom 7's success was a big step for NASA and soon after, President Kennedy announced the goal of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely before the decade's end. President Kennedy also awarded Shepard the NASA Distinguished Service Award in 1961.

Recently described by a biographer as "Don Draper in a spacesuit," Shepard was selected as one of NASA's first seven astronauts in 1959 and went on to command the Apollo 14 mission, which landed on the moon on February 15, 1971. Shepard participated in two moonwalks where he did research, including hitting two golf balls on the moon's surface.

Alan Shepard died in 1998 after being diagnosed with leukemia. The Freedom 7 capsule is on display at the John F Kennedy Presidential Library as part of the Space Race exhibit.

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