

# SHEPARD



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Alan Shepard in the Capsule Cockpit by Ted Wilbur  
(c) 1970, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

**A**lan Shepard is best known as the first American into space. On May 5, 1961, he made one sub-orbital circuit of the earth. Ten years later, in February 1971, he walked on the moon, as the commander of Apollo 14.

Less well known is the fact that Alan Shepard was also a Naval Aviator. He served with VF-42 and VF-193, making several deployments to the Med and western Pacific. In 1950, he graduated from the Naval Test Pilot School at NAS Patuxent, and participated in several development programs, including aerial refueling and the angled deck.

After retiring from the Space Program and the Navy, RAdm. Shepard became a successful private businessman. We caught up with him during the Naval Aviation Museum Foundation's Space Symposium at Pensacola.

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**Approach:** At the beginning of your aviation career, NATOPS and the Naval Safety Center did not exist. Did you have any organized safety programs or was it mostly gouge and seat-of-the-pants flying?

**RAdm. Shepard:** In my early days, particularly with my test pilot work and also with the space program, we didn't have things like simulators, so it was a lot of seat-of-the-pants stuff. I think the one thing that saved us, though, was having the discipline not to press the limits of a new aircraft right off the bat. There's always a tendency when you're put in a new hot rod or new automobile to see what it can do, to really ring it out. In the test-pilot business it's a more methodical approach. I'm sure you know the old expression, "There are old pilots and bold pilots but no old, bold pilots." That certainly applies. That attitude not only kept me alive during those days but also provided a basis for the astronaut program later.

**Approach:** In 1949 the first emergency ejection occurred from a F2H Banshee, which happens to be one of the jets you flew. How did you feel about the ejection seat, since it was basically an untested piece of gear at that time? We've heard that many pilots kept the seat pinned.

**RAdm. Shepard:** My feeling has always been that you have to go along with the invention and improvements that are made. You've got to trust the "white hats," the engineers and designers. If you're involved in the development, as I was, you've got to make them like and respect you. You've got to inspire them. Beyond that you have to take your chances. Obviously, I don't have anything against inventions and new ideas. I've been involved in pushing out the frontiers for over 30 years. You can't quarrel with those things. You still have to rely on the people.

**Approach:** Was the ready room feeling that "It must work because otherwise they wouldn't have put it in the jet"?

**RAdm. Shepard:** I think there's always doubt about new things. I remember, when I was a young pilot, how I reacted against simulators. As I matured, I realized that any training you can get prior to being in the actual environment is good. The space program would not have



During desert survival training in 1960, LCdr. Shepard (c.) poses with the other six original astronauts. Left to right, L. Gordon Cooper, M. Scott Carpenter, John H. Glenn, Alan Shepard, Virgil I. Grissom, Walter M. Schirra, and Donald K. Slayton. (NASA Photo)

such highly trained people without simulators.

**Approach:** The angled deck was developed in the early 1950s, and made for a safer environment around the boat. How were you involved with the development and testing?

**RAdm. Shepard:** I was one of four guys at TPS who was chosen to do the acceptance work on the *Ani-etam* (CVA-36) when it first came out. Whitey Feightner had the F7U Cutlass, Bud Sichel had the XFJ-2 Fury, "Gorgeous" George Watkins had the swept-wing F9F-6 Cougar, and I had the F2H-3 Banshee. The four of us did all the angled deck trials, catapulting and landing, day and night.

**Approach:** Was it love at first sight?

**RAdm. Shepard:** You could see the advantages of it right off, particularly when you combined the angled deck with the descending approach. This was opposed to the level pass. People always

<sup>1</sup> Then LCdr. E.L. Feightner was a World War II ace, early member of the Blue Angels, and jet test pilot. He retired as a rear admiral. (See interview on page 14.) Lt. H.G. Sichel was an early test at Patuxent and was involved in development of the early XFJ-2 Fury, including spin research and aerial refueling. Lt. George C. Watkins was also a member of the early Patuxent test pilot group, and, in 1958, set a world altitude record of 80,000 feet in a Grumman F11F Tiger. — Ed.

say to me, "Gosh, it must be wild landing on the moon." From a purely piloting standpoint, it was much tougher to bring a Banshee back aboard at night using a level approach with the deck moving and no horizon, than landing on the moon in broad daylight.

**Approach:** Pilots joke that the fresnel lens is only a crutch for bad deck spotting. Did you feel the same way about Paddles, or was your scan: LSO, lineup, AOA? In other words, were the LSO's signals doctrine or a backup?

**RAdm. Shepard:** It was sort of advisory until you got into the final 15 degrees. At that point, you really relied on him, particularly at night. You can't see the deck pitching very much at night. You can't judge your altitude, so we really relied on him to give us fine alignment and deck position. When we went on liberty we were always good to the LSOs. We bought them a lot of drinks.

**Approach:** Tell us about your early work with the in-flight refueling system.

**RAdm. Shepard:** TAC test had the first XAJ-1 Savage with the first British in-flight refueling system. We used an F9F Panther and an F7U Cutlass. I did an airshow in Dayton flying the Panther.

**Approach:** What type of probe did it

have?

**RAdm. Shepard:** Straight, non-retractable. We did a lot of dry plugs. The British design wasn't that good. It took us a while to get the airflows sorted out before we actually started transferring fuel.

**Approach:** Did you lose many baskets?

**RAdm. Shepard:** We lost some hoses. If things got hairy we'd just back out. My refueling tests weren't nearly as tough as landing on the boat at night.

**Approach:** Let's talk about the space program. In Naval Aviation it's generally felt that the aviator is ultimately the one responsible for his safety. Tom Wolfe's book, "The Right Stuff," gave the feeling that the only ones concerned with safety were the Mercury astronauts themselves. Was this true?

**RAdm. Shepard:** Let me be brutally frank about Tom Wolfe's book, and also the movie. From an outsider's standpoint both are entertaining and interesting. They tell a good story. But from the standpoint of fact, and the personalities described, he was so far off in so many cases that, aside from being a good story it really wasn't worth very much. He didn't talk to any of us when he was writing it. He talked to our friends and got to know us that way. Of course, this was a mistake as far as personalities are concerned. The details as far as selection of the astronauts and engineering changes were pretty well distorted. As a documentary piece it just was not worth very much.

**Approach:** Where does safety fit into the hierarchy of considerations? For instance, the Navy feels that no mission is so important during peacetime that lives should be lost. Was that the attitude back in the 1960s, when President Kennedy set the goal of a man on the moon before the end of the decade? What is the attitude today with regard to the space race in general?

**RAdm. Shepard:** Safety has always been paramount. Despite what you might hear, the relationship between the astronauts and the engineers in the design phases of Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo was good. Of course, you're going to have differing opinions because as a pilot you may want things that are going to take time and money. There's always a give-and-take.



LCdr. Shepard is brought aboard the Marine Corps helicopter after his suborbital flight in May 1961. (NASA Photo)

My experience was always good. So many contingencies had been thought out; parallel and backup systems saved an awful lot of lives.

Thirty years ago, when we started manned space flight, we couldn't know

we'd have only two accidents in those 30 years. We would have said "Gosh, we just hope we're that good." Only two in 30 years, in an R&D, pushing-out-the-frontiers-type of project is pretty good.

- Lt. Ward Carroll



Three days after his suborbital flight, now-Cdr. Shepard visited the White House where President John F. Kennedy awarded him NASA's Distinguished Service Medal. (NASA Photo)