

## **LIGHT THIS CANDLE: THE LIFE & TIMES OF ALAN SHEPARD, AMERICA'S FIRST SPACEMAN**

### **PROLOGUE**

John Glenn was furious. He thought he'd played it just right, made all the right moves, and that he would surely become the first American in space. It's what they all wanted, all seven men who'd been chosen to vie for the job.

When Glenn wasn't picked first, or even second, he tried to tell his bosses that they'd made a mistake. You don't want Alan Shepard, he said. You don't want this guy, the one we call the "Icy Commander," with his egotistical insouciance, his questionable morals, his disregard for authority and disdain for the press. Glenn moped, fumed and bitched, wrote letters and complained to family and friends. But it was no use. NASA ordered him to stop "backbiting" and deal with it.

When the decision finally became public a few months later, on May 2, 1961, the press wanted answers, too. They had adored John Glenn from the start and expected all along he'd be America's first spaceman. So they pestered NASA's gruff little spokesman, Shorty Powers, for an explanation. Why Shepard?

Shorty, in his mellifluous and condescending military voice, tried to explain how the Mercury Seven astronauts were all exceptional men and among the nation's most dauntless test pilots. But one had to go first, and Shepard, he said, "had what all the others had, with just enough to spare to make him the logical man to go first."

Whatever that meant. The truth, which NASA chose not to acknowledge at the time, was simply this: Alan Shepard was the most capable of the bunch. In 1961 - at the height of a seething Cold War against a seemingly evil empire, and in the early days of a young president's tentative new administration - NASA couldn't take any chances. As one NASA official involved in the Glenn-versus-Shepard decision put it: "We wanted to put our best foot forward." So they picked the best of the best of the best.



A few minutes past 1 a.m., six hours before launch time, Bill Douglas, the astronauts' gentle and soft-spoken physician, poked Alan Shepard on the shoulder.

"Come on, Al," Douglas said. "They're filling the tanks."

"I'm ready," Shepard said, rising and pulling on a white bathrobe. "Is John up?"

"John's awake," Douglas said. "We're all awake. Did you sleep well?"

"Very well," Shepard said. "No dreams."

Shepard whistled as he took a brief shower, shaved, then shuffled into an adjacent office where Glenn, already wide awake and wearing an identical terri-cloth robe, sat waiting for him. The cook brought in two nearly identical trays of food.

"Here we go again," Glenn said. "You ready?"

Shepard nodded. The breakfast menu was the same as it had been for a week: filet mignon wrapped in bacon, toast and jelly, eggs and orange juice - a so-called "low-residue" diet, so Shepard wouldn't find himself in need of a toilet in space.

"What a tough life, huh?" Glenn said. "Filet mignon every morning."

Shepard appreciated that, preferring jokes to any of Glenn's "maudlin sentimentality." He didn't want to think about the importance of the coming event, only about the technical tasks at hand. When asked later about his feelings at breakfast, Shepard said that when you're preparing to roost atop many tons of high explosives, "the last thing on your mind is being a page in a history book."

But May 5, 1961 was a day for the history books. The entire Earth was watching. A battle between the world's superpowers was being fought in strange new non-military ways, and the Soviets had struck first three weeks earlier when cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had circled the Earth - a stunning achievement that could have, should have been Shepard's. Now it was the United

States' turn and they couldn't afford any mistakes. Shepard kept reminding himself of that: Don't fuck up.

To Shepard's relief, the weather report looked good. No signs of rain.

As he finished eating, Shepard became vaguely aware that people - technicians, photographers and doctors - were milling around him, watching him. Some were more nervous than him; they didn't want to screw up their part of the mission, either. Yet they were amazed that the guy headed for the hot seat appeared so poised and rock-steady.

After breakfast, Glenn rode out to the rocket to make final preparations on the capsule. Shepard strode into Bill Douglas' exam room, took off his bathrobe and let the doctor survey every inch of his sinewy, 5-foot-11, 165-pound, 37-year-old body. Douglas asked how he felt, and Shepard acknowledged a few butterflies - but happy ones. When he finished looking down Shepard's throat one last time, Douglas rapped his patient playfully on the chin, and Shepard broke into a toothy smile.

A little past 2 a.m., Shepard went to the astronauts' office and called his wife, Louise. "I was hoping it was you," she said. She had wanted to be down at the Cape watching the launch, but he suggested she avoid the hype and the media crush and stay in Virginia Beach. Louise had decided ever since the first days of his Navy career, during the final year of World War II, that it was best to give him space to do his job. Theirs was a relationship built around long distances and lengthy separations; telephone calls had become their lifeline.

Three days earlier - when NASA finally announced that Shepard, not Glenn, had been chosen to ride a Mercury-Redstone rocket into space - the press found Louise, anyway. Reporters cawed and pecked like a flock of crows outside the squat brick ranch house until Louise, hunkered inside with her daughters, taped a sign on the front door: "There are no reporters inside. I will have a statement for the press after the flight."

When her husband called, Louise had a dozen things to tell him - about their girls, the house, the pesky press, her golf game - but she forgot them all. None of it seemed important now. She knew it could be the last time they spoke. Ever. "We'll be watching you on TV," she said. "Be sure to wave when you lift off."

"Right," he said, and laughed. "I'll open the hatch and stick my arm out."

Shepard, uncharacteristically, didn't have much else to say that morning, either. Finally, Louise told him to "hurry home."

"I will," he said.

"I love you."

Shepard hung up, then walked into the suit-up room. Technicians and engineers avoided any conversation with him. If he wanted to talk, he'd have to be the one to start. Suit technician Joe Schmitt barely shared a dozen words with Shepard as Schmitt worked himself into a sweat squeezing Shepard into the tight, silvery space suit.

Just before leaving the hanger that housed the astronauts quarters' and exam rooms, Shepard winked at Dee O'Hara, the astronauts' kewpie-doll-cute and devoted nurse, who stood near the exit clutching her rosary beads. "Well, here I go, Dee," he said, and Dee just waved, fighting back tears.

Shepard climbed into a transport van, leaned back in a reclining chair and placed a portable oxygen tank on the floor beside him. He looked and acted like a space-alien businessman riding a commuter bus, with his silvery briefcase by his side.

The van pulled up at the foot of the Redstone rocket, bathed in floodlights, plumes of blue and white oxygen fumes venting from its wafer-thin sides. At 83 feet, the rocket was no taller than a mature birch tree. It would take nearly seven of them stacked end to end to reach the height of Washington Monument. But Shepard was proud of his little capsule-topped rocket and called her "that little rascal." As he approached the rocket, he asked Mission Control for permission to exit the transport van ahead of schedule. He knew he'd never see the "bird" again, so he stopped to symbolically kick the tires.

*She's got an air of expectancy, he thought. A lovely sight ... long and slender.*

Suddenly, the crewmen behind him broke into applause, and for a moment the emotions of the day caught up with Shepard. Life magazine photographer Ralph Morse, the scrappy little New Yorker who had become a good friend, began snapping away, and one of his shots would occupy half a page in the New York Times. Shepard turned to speak to the crew but his throat choked up and he just waved.

On the elevator ride to the top, Douglas gave him a box of crayons - "So you'll have something to do up there." Shepard laughed loudly, almost fogging his visor, but grateful for the tension-breaker. He handed the box to Douglas, telling him he was going to be a little busy. At the top of the gantry - in an ante-chamber whose translucent green walls, like those of a beachside motel earned it the nickname Surfside 5 - stood Glenn.

Glenn wore sterile-white coveralls and a paper cap like a butcher's. He greeted Shepard as he exited the elevator, then helped him squeeze through the two-foot-square opening of the capsule Shepard had named *Freedom 7*. As Shepard settled into the couch that had been contoured to his body, he looked up at the instrument panel and laughed into his visor. Taped there was a sign that read, "No handball playing in this area." Beside that was a centerfold ripped from a girlie magazine. Shepard took one look at Glenn's giggling face, impressed that the boy scout was capable of such a crafty gotcha.



Right from the start - in 1959, when NASA had chosen seven test pilots to train to become the first astronauts - it was clear the two front-runners and competing leaders of the group would be Shepard and Glenn. The bad boy and the altar boy.

Glenn, the silver-tongued, freckle-faced All-American, spoke eloquently to the press about God and family and serving his country. The others just shook their heads at him, disgusted at his pandering but secretly impressed by his locution.

Shepard, on the other hand, epitomized the cynical, smart-ass fighter jock. You could see it in the strutting, superior way he carried himself. He didn't grin like Glenn, he smirked. Instead of cloying the press, he snapped at them; when asked why he wanted to be first astronaut, he quipped, "I want to be first because I want to be first."

The opposing personalities of Shepard and Glenn reflected the duality of veteran military men who emerged from cloistered military fraternities to become overnight celebrities. They were, as John Kennedy called them, men of a "new generation" who would compete in "a race for the mastery of the sky." They were also adventurous, combative, indulgent thrill-seekers who performed ludicrous, death-taunting feats in supersonic jets, then rewarded themselves with whiskey, women and fast cars.

Tensions between Shepard and Glenn came to a notorious head in late 1960. Glenn was sound asleep early one morning in his San Diego hotel room when the phone rang. Shepard, calling from nearby Tijuana, Mexico, explained that he'd been out drinking, spending time with a female friend and had let his guard down, allowing a reporter and photographer to tail him. "I need your help," he told Glenn.

Glenn handled the situation with a frenetic round of phone calls that kept the story from ever reaching newsprint. The next day, he told the other six astronauts they had dodged a bullet and should start thinking about keeping their pants zipped. A few weeks later, the astronauts were asked to cast a vote for the man - besides themselves - they'd like to see become the first American in space.

Glenn knew who the others would pick - the bad ass, not the kiss ass. He was right, and when NASA made it official - on January 19, at a secret meeting the night before John F. Kennedy's inauguration - and Shepard stared at the floor, trying not to smirk and offend the other six as their boss announced that he would get the first flight. In the toughest competition of his contest-filled life, Shepard had won - the bad boy had prevailed against the altar boy. And Glenn had no choice but to take an enormous gulp of pride and serve as Shepard's sidekick.

Shepard, meanwhile, just loved calling Glenn “my backup.”



On the morning of May 5, 1961, one of the greatest crowds Florida had ever seen descended upon her beaches. Men and women skipped work, pulled their children from school, and to the north and south of Cape Canaveral arrived early, carrying lawn chairs and binoculars, hoping for a glimpse of history.

Across the nation, millions sat glued to their televisions. President Kennedy stood in his secretary's office with his wife and brother by his side. Shepard's parents sat side by side in their New Hampshire living room; even though Shepard's father had opposed his son's decision to become an astronaut, he now sat in an easy chair, watching calmly and proudly. Louise Shepard kneeled before her television, reaching to touch the frail image of the thin rocket that would soon carry her husband.

At that moment, John Glenn's hands were reaching into Shepard's cramped capsule. Glenn retrieved the handball sign and the centerfold, then helped strap Shepard tightly into his couch and attached the many hoses, wires and sensors from his suit to the capsule's dashboard. In the months leading up to that morning, a certain dignity had befallen the relationship between Shepard and Glenn. They were inseparable during the final weeks of training. To escape the tension-filled cacophony of Cape Canaveral, they'd jog on a nearby isolated beach, chase sand crabs, dive into the cool waves of the Atlantic; at night, they'd sit for hours after dinner, discussing each detail of the upcoming flight, then retire together to the same room, sleeping just a few feet apart.

Just before they closed the hatch, Glenn reached in one last time and shook Shepard's gloved hand. Shepard was suddenly moved by how gracious Glenn had been. He thanked his colleague and then jerked a thumbs up.

"See you soon," said his voice muffled inside his helmet.

"Happy landings, commander," Glenn responded, as the crew standing behind him shouted good luck and goodbye.

Technicians closed and bolted the hatch, and Shepard was alone. Monitors showed that his heartbeat quickened a bit as they shut him inside, and Shepard thought to himself, *Okay, buster. You volunteered for this thing. Now don't screw up.*

It was dawn. He'd been awake five hours, and the rising sun began to shine through the periscope screen two feet from his face. He started going through his checklist - a newspaper the next day would accidentally print that Shepard was reviewing his “chick list.” Then he started through all the procedures he and Glenn had practiced for months. As he did this, he began to think about where he was, and where the others were.

*I'm going to be the first*, he thought. Glenn was on the outside of the capsule, helping disconnect hoses and cables. The other astronauts were performing various backup duties. Shepard's rocket would soon leave them all behind, in its fiery dust, rising higher and farther and faster than any of them - than any American - had ever been.

There would be many battles in the years to come: personal, professional, financial, physical, marital, legal. But in the battle to be first, which was the biggest prize of the astronaut game, it appeared Shepard was about to win. The boy who had been smaller, weaker and slower than the others had forced himself to become better than the rest and had become the man, the flyboy, he always wanted to be.

Years later, when asked about his greatest accomplishment, Shepard would say that being chosen to be the first American in space was the highlight of his career, of his life. A close second was reaching the moon in 1971, but that was more personal. He'd fought back from severe illness to get there, and spoke less about the moon's effect on his life. But 10 years earlier, being picked above the other six, that had *defined* him.

It was never the 15-minute flight itself that symbolized his life. He'd had more thrilling adventures as a test pilot and fighter jock. Landing wounded jets on storm-tossed aircraft carriers

and working the dangerous kinks out of the nation's newest, fastest aircraft, some of those moments had given him more of a heart-thumping rush than riding on a rocket. But being chosen, being first, winning - that was the thing.

Because for Shepard, life was one big competition. And as he sat that morning locked inside his capsule, at the tip of an 83-foot bullet, with America's most sophisticated machinery hissing and humming all around him, he knew he had won.

Just before they pulled away the gantry, leaving him atop his rocket alone, he saw a face in the screen of the periscope. The fish-eye screen made the face appear round and distorted, but it looked "close and friendly."

It was John Glenn.  
Grinning.



Shepard was 37 the day he became the first American in space; 37 years later, I was working at the Baltimore Sun and received a call from an editor, telling me that Alan Shepard had died and asking me to contribute a few paragraphs to his obituary.

A quick Internet search that day told me that, except for a thin 1962 young adult book, no biography existed on America's first astronaut. When I decided to make up for that omission, I quickly discovered why no one had ventured to write about Shepard.

Alan Shepard felt no compunction to explain to the world, to anyone, who he was and where he'd been. He hoarded his privacy, to the point of turning down many lucrative endorsement offers. In death, those loyal to him continued to protect that privacy.

Sure, there were things he was hiding - women, business deals, broken friendships, marital strife - things he knew might tarnish his hero's image. But by venturing beyond that image, into Shepard's past, into a few dark corners, I found a more human, complex and complete man than the Corvette-driving stud I'd been awed by in Tom Wolfe's "The Right Stuff."

This book began as a series of questions: How does a man reach the front lines of the cold war? Where does an edgy, competitive explorer go after he's already gone where few men have? How does someone reach the moon and how does he survive after he's gone there? By picking through the scattered clues Shepard left behind, by enlisting the help of some family members, scores of friends and colleagues, by gaining access to some of Shepard's military records and his FBI files, what emerges in response to those questions is a large, energetic and aggressive life. A life that, before and after space, pulsed with mystery, romance and adventure. Shepard was the military version of what Elvis was to music, what James Dean was to Hollywood, what Kerouac was to literature. Today's man was once a boy who wanted to be Alan Shepard. But, until now, his true story has never been fully told. It's the story of life fully lived, and entwined through it is - somewhat surprisingly for a man so famous for philandering - a love story.

His beautiful wife Louise might have told the story. But after 53 years of marriage, she followed him into oblivion, dying suddenly and mysteriously, five weeks after he did, on an airplane, 40,000 feet above Earth.