Shepard, 1st American in space, dies at 74

WASHINGTON (AP) — Astronaut Alan Shepard, the first American to fly in space and the fifth human to walk on the moon, has died at age 74.

Shepard, one of the revered original seven Mercury astronauts named by NASA in April 1959, died Tuesday night at Community Hospital near Monterey, Calif., said Howard Benedict, executive director of the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation in Titusville, Fla., who had talked to Shepard's wife.

Shepard's family declined to reveal the cause of death, but the astronaut said in a CNN interview earlier this year that he had leukemia.

The former Navy test pilot made a 15-minute suborbital flight — five of those minutes in space — on May 5, 1961, aboard the Freedom 7 Mercury spacecraft.

Ten years later, after overcoming a serious inner-ear disorder that affected his balance for six years, Shepard returned to space for his second and last flight as commander of Apollo 14 on Jan. 31, 1971. It was the third of the six Apollo lunar landings and made Shepard one of only a dozen people to walk on the moon.

"Those of us who are old enough to remember the first space flights will always remember what an impression he made on us and on the world," President Clinton told an audience after being passed word of the astronaut's death. "So I would like to express the gratitude of our nation and to say that our thoughts and prayers are with his family."

Daniel Goldin, the current administration of NASA, said Shepard's first flight inspired the generation that is now running America's space program.

Goldin, then in college, said Shepard's first flight "made a whole bunch of us engineers excited about the space program.

"His flight was a tremendous statement about tenacity, courage and brilliance," said Goldin. "He crawled on top of that rocket that had never before flown into space with a person aboard and he did it. That was an unbelievable act of courage."

Only four of the original seven Mercury astronauts are now living: Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Scott Carpenter and Walter Schirra.

Shepard spent 33 hours on the moon during the third landing mission and became the only lunar golfer, playfully whacking golf balls with a six-iron. On that flight, Shepard, Edgar Mitchell and Stuart Roosa spent nine days in space; Mitchell and Shepard stayed on the moon for two days.

Years later, in a book on the space program he co-authored with fellow astronaut Donald K. Slayton, Shepard said that when he finally reached the moon, he was so touched by the beauty and by the fragility of Earth that he wept.

Mitchell said all the Apollo astronauts were extraordinary, but even in that group "Alan had something special. He was chose because he was very, very competent."

Although Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin beat Shepard into space by 23 days, Shepard's 1961 flight marked the beginning of the U.S. manned space program. He prophetically called that first flight "just the first baby step, aiming for bigger and better things."

On the historic launch morning, Shepard — and the nation — waited impatiently for more than four hours as NASA corrected problems with an electrical system, a ground computer and the rocket's fuel pressure. It was the second launch attempt; the first one three days earlier was foiled by storms.

The Redstone rocket finally ignited at 9:34 a.m. and lifted Shepard 116 miles high and 302 miles downrange from Cape Canaveral, reaching a speed of 5,100 mph before plopping into the Atlantic Ocean.

"Everything is A-OK!" an excited Shepard said after the flight as his capsule bobbed in the Atlantic Ocean. The phrase became a part of American slang.

Less than three weeks later, on May 25, 1961, President Kennedy set the nation's goal of landing a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

Asked 30 years later how he hoped to be remembered, Shepard said: "I only hope they spell my name right."

Known for his cocksure determination and ready wit, Shepard also could be perceived as icily distant and stubborn. He had been characterized as the most eager to be picked from among three astronauts who were finalists for the famous first flight.

"There are lots of answers why I want to be the first man in space, but a short answer would be this: the flight obviously is a challenge and I feel that the more severe challenge will occur on the first flight and I signed up to accept this challenge," he said before his selection from the trio in early 1961.

In an interview 30 years later, Shepard looked back on his historic Mercury flight — which he said he considered the most exciting point of his career — and marveled that the U.S. space program had encountered only two fatal accidents: the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger on Jan. 28, 1986, which claimed seven lives; and the burning of the Apollo I cabin Jan. 27, 1967, on the Kennedy Space Center launch pad, which killed three astronauts, including Gus Grissom, one of the original men of Mercury.

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>
> **President Clinton**

"Thirty years ago, the large percentage of population thought we were crazy sitting on the top of a rocket and allowing ourselves to be thrust into space," Shepard recalled. "There was a lot of doubt ... especially from some of the more learned members of the medical community who thought that man shouldn't be in space; it wasn't his place to be there.

"Had we said 30 years ago that we were going to put man in space for 30 years and we're only going to have two accidents, we would have said, 'Boy, we'll take that right now.' Certainly, pushing out the frontiers as we did and still are doing, and having one accident in flight, the other on the ground, really is remarkable."

In the years between the two flights, Shepard headed NASA's astronaut office and began investing — in banks, oil wells, quarter-horses and real estate.

Retiring from the space agency and from the Navy as a rear admiral in 1974, he became a millionaire as a developer of commercial property, a partner in a venture capital group, a director of mutual fund companies and president of a beer distributorship, among other interests. Shepard also was president of the Mercury Seven Foundation, which raises money for science and engineering scholarships.

Shepard was a native of Derry, N.H., and son of a banker.

He showed an early interest in airplanes and started working at a nearby airport while in high school.

He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1944 and saw World War II action in the Pacific aboard the destroyer Cogswell. He earned his aviator's wings after the war and became a test pilot before his astronaut selection.

After his second flight, Shepard served as a delegate by presidential appointment to the 26th United Nations General Assembly in 1971. He continued as chief of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration astronaut office from June 1971 until August 1974, when he retired.

His awards include the Medal of Honor, for space, in 1979.

Shepard is survived by his widow, Louise, two daughters, and six grandchildren.

British agents tried to kill Hitler near war's end

■ Newly released report reveals assassination plots were undertaken in waning days of WWII.

LONDON (AP) — British agents plotted several ways of killing Adolf Hitler in the last months of World War II, considering the merits of a sniper's rifle, a bazooka, high explosives, grenades, a train derailment or poison, according to newly released documents.

The plans came to nothing and Hitler killed himself in Berlin on April 30, 1945.

"Operation Foxley," the assassination plot detailed in a 120-page dossier released Thursday by the Public Record Office, began with a tip from an agent in June 1944 that there might be an opportunity to assassinate Hitler in Perpignan, France.

British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden approved, and informed Prime Minister Winston Churchill — though no action was taken. However, the Special Operations Executive, or SOE, continued planning ways of killing Hitler, the records show.

Air Vice Marshal A.P. Ritchie was among the advocates of assassination, arguing that Hitler was regarded by many Germans as "something more than human."

"It is this mystical hold which he exercises over the German people that is largely responsible for keeping the country together at the present time," Ritchie said. "Remove Hitler and there is nothing left."

But others were skeptical.

"As a strategist, Hitler has been of the greatest possible assistance to the British war effort," said an officer identified only as Maj. Field-Robertson, referring to Hitler's major strategy blunders during the war.

"I have no hesitation in saying that his value to us has been the equivalent to an almost unlimited number of first-class SOE agents strategically placed inside Germany," he said.

The British worked out these options:

■ Assassinate Hitler at Berchtesgaden, his Bavarian mountain retreat, either with a high-powered rifle as he took his morning walk to the local tea house, or with a bazooka as he rode back in his car.

British agents said Hitler usually arose at 9 a.m. or later, and had a breakfast of milk and toast at the tea house at 11 a.m. Agents said Hitler was vulnerable to a sniper because he insisted his guards stay out of sight, according to the papers.

■ Derail Hitler's train by blasting the track as it went through a tunnel, or alternatively throwing a suitcase of explosives off the platform as it went through a station.

■ Bomb Berchtesgaden and follow up with paratroopers to kill any survivors.

■ Poison the water supply in Hitler's train. Agents thought one of the six Frenchwomen who worked as cleaners on the train might cooperate.

Other documents released Thursday detailed how the British forged German stamps with the face of SS chief Heinrich Himmler. The idea was to encourage rumors that Himmler planned a coup against Hitler and had ordered the stamps to be issued afterwards.

Agents inside Germany used the six-pfennig stamps to send letters to neutral European countries.

> *"Remove Hitler and there is nothing left."*
>
> excerpt from "Operation Foxley"

An initial mailing to Sweden got no response. One memo included in the newly released record said: "The mission failed owing to the unobservant nature of the Swedes and their office staff."

But eventually the stamps produced the desired result, and a Swiss newspaper reported speculation about a coup attempt.

The project was expanded in 1943 with mailings to Spain, Portugal and Morocco. Eventually, the records said, German authorities issued a statement admitting the stamps had been published in error.

"The project has worked perfectly," an SOE memorandum said. "Now that the story has got as far as this, it will not be easy for the Germans to put out a weak statement to the effect that the stamp was forged by the British authorities. I do not think anybody would believe such a fantastic story."