



## **Light This Candle: The Life & Times of Alan Shepard--America's First Spaceman**

*Neal Thompson*

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## **Light This Candle: The Life & Times of Alan Shepard--America's First Spaceman** Neal Thompson

Alan Shepard was the brashest, cockiest, and most flamboyant of America's original Mercury Seven, but he was also regarded as the best. Intense, colorful, and dramatic --the man who hit a golf ball on the moon -- he was among the most private of America's public figures and, until his death in 1998, he guarded the story of his life zealously.

**Light This Candle**, based on Neal Thompson's exclusive access to private papers and interviews with Shepard's family and closest friends -- including John Glenn, Wally Schirra, and Gordon Cooper -- offers a riveting, action-packed account of Shepard's life. Among the first men to fly off aircraft carriers, he was one of the most fearless test pilots. He endured long separations from his devoted wife and three daughters to fly dangerous missions, working his way up the ranks despite clashes with authority over his brazen flying maneuvers and penchant for risky pranks. Hugely competitive, he beat out John Glenn for the first Mercury spaceflight and then overcame a rare illness to return to space again on Apollo 14.

He took every challenge head-on and seemed to win every time.

Long overdue, **Light This Candle** is a candid and inspiring account of a bold American life.

## **Light This Candle: The Life & Times of Alan Shepard--America's First Spaceman** Details

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## **From Reader Review Light This Candle: The Life & Times of Alan Shepard--America's First Spaceman for online ebook**

### **Sattik Deb says**

This is one of the best books about the space race you may read. It's actually one of the best overall biographies I've ever read. True to its title, the book covers the life as well as the times of Alan Shephard in effectively constructing a compelling narrative. This book is what James Hanson's "First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong" sought to be.

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### **Amy Gourley says**

I didn't care for the writing style that much and some passages made me think, huh? I didn't know much about Shepard's pre NASA days so this was the most interesting part of the book to me. The NASA part of the book didn't tell me anything I didn't already know and I would recommend *The Right Stuff* by Tom Wolfe or *A Man on the Moon* by Andrew Chaikin for a better view of the space program. The ending had me saying huh too. Alan Shepard was already dead when this book was written and it seemed like there was a lot of guessing about what he actually thought about various things.

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### **Lenny Neslin says**

I was very excited to read my great uncle's biography, and I was not disappointed. The author takes you through Shepard's entire life, detailing his time with the Navy and NASA.

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### **Scott Short says**

I have read a lot on NASA history, scientists, and astronauts. This by far has been my favorite book of them all. It really brings into perspective to early days of space flight and the flawed heroes we hurdled into space.

It was very interesting to use the books I have read on the subject and my two trips to NASA to 'compare notes'. This book passes the test and again shows how poorly accurate, *THE RIGHT STUFF*, was.

Highly recommend it if you are a space buff. Great read and will probably read it again.

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### **Jake says**

Light This Candle is a biography that adopts the swagger of its subject: Alan Shephard. Mixing new interviews with material from earlier records, author Neal Thompson delivers a book that proceeds at a steady, confident clip. As such, Light This Candle achieves a gut-level intensity that seems appropriate given the ambitious man it depicts.

At times, this book feels like a piecemeal eulogy. While the bulk of the narrative recounts Shephard's storied career, chapters dealing with his youth and post-flight years have a summary quality. Even accounts of memorable flights have a no-frills aspect. And this is generally to the author's credit. It could be tempting to weigh down descriptions of aerial adventure with extravagant prose. However, Thompson wisely takes a no-nonsense approach to rehearsing Shepard's past.

Light This Candle falls short of feeling revelatory. But this appraisal is not meant as harsh criticism. As the author remarks, Shephard vigilantly maintained privacy in spite of his fame. Like the many who brushed shoulders with the first American in space, Thompson doesn't gain full-access to Shephard's personal life. Readers may even be left with the impression that no one, not even Shephard's beloved wife Louise, was privy to the real story.

Ultimately, Light This Candle is about taking stock of a man who competed and won often. Shephard's exploits in and out of the cockpit dominate the pages, as they should. In a broader context, Light This Candle is a worthy tome about the American test pilot. It proves a lively read that can stand shoulder to shoulder with other notable books and films about Shepard and his fellow explorers.

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### **J. York says**

In chronicling the life of America's first (and one of its most private) astronauts, "Light This Candle" fills a void, and thus is worth reading just on that basis. But it disappoints on several levels.

First, it works at a huge disadvantage in that its subject, Scott Carpenter, is no longer around to tell his story, and left little record to tell us what was really going on inside his head and in his private moments. There is always in the book a sense of distance and uncertainty, and the reader is constantly left to wonder how much of its narrative is based solidly on fact, and how much on imagination and supposition.

Given this first weakness, my confidence in the book was further shaken in the way it kept tripping over technical details. To give a few examples, the book repeatedly describes rocket stages as "engines," and describes the affects of acceleration on the human body, but attributes them to speed instead. These are small things, but they serve to further undermine the verisimilitude of an already shaky book.

I can't unreservedly recommend this as a stand-alone book, but it makes a useful counterpoint to other astronaut biographies and histories of the early space program.

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### **Sarah Eckert says**

Having read the autobiographies of Chris Kraft (first flight director), Gene Krantz (second flight director) and Jim Lovell (of Apollo 13 fame), it intrigued me that this book was written by a journalist, of all things, and had started out as an article on the life of Alan Shepherd after he'd died.

Obviously, there's more to the man than meets the eye, so the piece quickly spiraled out of an article and into a book (and a long one at that). It was very interesting to see how the author got details on this very private and reserved man. I have to wonder if he took literary license, especially when the author described Alan

telling his wife that he was chosen to be America's first spaceman. Alan's wife died five days after Alan did, so there was no time for the author of Light this Candle to talk with her about Alan. I don't think Louise opened up about it, either because she was rather a reserved individual, too -- and she especially didn't like reporters (snicker, snicker).

But the author's intent was good. It was kind of neat to see how he created a large book given so little information. For Alan's story before space, he probably found out on what ship Alan had served and the stories of his flat-hatting were probably well known (infamously as they might have been) by the Navy.

I especially liked the "after space" part, probably because I'd heard the same thing (and probably the author had, too) from all the other astronauts. I mean, what do you do after you've gone to the moon? Turns out Alan was a pretty good business man, so he was able to cope with life after the moon.

Before the death of his colleagues, Gus Grissom, Ed White & Roger Chaffee in Apollo 1, Alan was known as the Icy Commander. It was kind of neat to see how he demonstrated how close he was to his colleagues: after their death, he was the Icy Commander no longer. I liked him a lot better afterward, and I wished it hadn't taken their deaths to create the man that I wanted Alan to be.

There are so many other things I liked about this book, and Alan's life. I liked that Louise "stuck it out" with him when all the other astronaut's marriages were ending in divorce (some multiple times). I like his poise when Scott Carpenter was using up fuel cavorting after "fireflies" and admiring space. I liked that Alan became almost Chris Kraft's right hand man (both during Glenn's flight when they thought the heat shield might be loose and during Carpenter's flight when he talked him down). I liked that he was frustrated with NASA's slow progress in getting a man into space ("we could have gone," he said when the Russians beat us to space) and the astronaut's nickname for the Presidential Space Advisory Committee (PSAC -- which the astronauts called "pee-sack").

I like the fact that America's first spaceman was also going to fly the first Gemini (but he had his ear problem) & the first Apollo (that might have been the reason for the change after Grissom, White & Chaffee died -- he could have been on that flight), but was again sidelined by his ear problem. Alan was also supposed to fly Apollo 13, too, but NASA wasn't sure he was ready yet (the Apollo 13 astronauts then teased him mercilessly that he "could have Apollo 13 back" anytime he wanted), and he got Apollo 14. I liked that he was the only Mercury astronaut to fly Apollo and also the oldest astronaut (although Glenn eventually surpassed him when Glenn flew the Shuttle in his late seventies, early 80s).

I heard a quote once that the speaker didn't want to finish life in good condition; he wanted to screech in, used up and empty, saying, "What a life!" Alan certainly lived a full life and ended it used up and empty. Since he didn't say it, I'll say it for him: "What a life!"

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### **Dustin says**

Overall, a pretty solid biography of America's first man in space. It's as detailed as can be, considering how private Shephard was. So much of his exploits are public and historical record, though. What this book did was try and fill in the gaps about the man, and I felt it did a decent enough job. It's also like a Cliff Note version of projects Mercury, Gemini and Apollo. It's worth it if you're a space nerd, like me.

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### **Kirk says**

For those of us "older" folks that actually remember the original Mercury 7 astronauts and the space race, this is a great book. These guys are the real hero's of the 20th Century. Talk about flying by the seat of your pants!

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### **Kenneth Flusche says**

The Life and Times of ALAN SHEPARD. The title says it all

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### **Jerry Smith says**

I have an interest in the early years of the space program and therefore I am pre-determined to like biographies like this one - particularly as Al Shepard strikes me as one of the more interesting characters in the Mercury drama.

Having said that this book surpassed my expectations and is really a page turner. I am not sure how all the material was gathered but it all hangs together really well and provides a genuine insight into the character of the man, and one that is not always heroic. There were a lot of complexities there but in the end I for one, admire what it took to be a space pioneer even more after reading this fascinating biography

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### **Stephanie says**

A highly interesting biography of a person I didn't think I'd be interested in. Here is Alan Shepard - warts and all. Neal Thompson does a bang-up job of showing us the complexities of the man. I chose this book after reading the TERRIBLE Astronaut Wives' Club. That book was awful but left me wanting to read something good about the space-race era. A Google search alighted me upon someone's "10 Best Books About the Space Race" and I chose this one.

I think my favorite parts were not about the space program but about his test pilot days. The skill and nerve it takes for that kind of work was astonishing to me. And the landing on the aircraft carriers...harrowing!

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### **John Orman says**

A very revealing biography of Alan Shepard, the first American into space. Noted to be the "bravest, cockiest, and most flamboyant" of the Mercury astronauts, Shepard was legendary for his icy demeanor at all times. But this book reveals the subdued humanity behind the man.

A revealing look at a competitive and heroic American legend.

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## James says

As part of my ongoing quest to read all of the available biographies of the men and women who've made it into space, in chronological order of first launch, I finally made it to number 2!

You never really hear much about Alan Shepard any more, even though he was America's First Man In Space. And when you do, it's often from clips of his *Apollo 14* moon landing when he hit a golfball on the moon's surface.

The biographer reveals that this is due in large part because Shepard, though by no means a quiet man or someone who hated the spotlight, did not care to share much about his personal life or feelings until his later age. So *Light This Candle* is the first full biography of his life, published a little more than a decade ago, and only a few years after the astronaut's death at the age of 74.

While I greatly enjoyed Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*, both in movie and book form, it's obvious there were a number of artistic licenses taken with the real stories and exaggerations made to make the tales of America's first space heroes more dramatic and interesting. *Light This Candle* peels back some of that lens flare but still makes for a fun read.

The general impression I got about Admiral Shepard was that as a boy and young man Alan was quite unsure of himself, nowhere near the best at anything, until he discovered one day the concept of "fake it till you make it". After that point he frequently told himself and others that he was, in fact, the very best on Earth and somehow convinced everyone, *especially* himself, that that was the case. You definitely got the impression he could be a hot-headed jerk, but he damn well knew his stuff.

When reading stories from the early space program days I always love it when Henri Landwirth makes an appearance, and in this book it's more than just a cameo as he was in *The Right Stuff*. Holocaust survivor, owner of the Holiday Inn of Cocoa Beach during the early days of the space race, close friend of the astronauts, and founder of my favorite charity **Give Kids the World** where I frequently volunteer, Henri Landwirth is an awesome dude. It sounds like he and Alan Shepard were dear friends, and I got a little misty eyed reading about how Alan was one of the biggest initial supporters of GKTW.

In the last few pages of the book (SPOILERS FOR A BIOGRAPHY I SUPPOSE) the author details how friends of Shepard claimed going to the moon "changed him". He was no longer as much of a self-serving competitive hothead and wanted to do as much as he could to make the world a better place. Seeing a distant, fragile Earth unmarked by state or national lines made him realize we all gotta figure out how to get along somehow.

That seems to be a common theme of sorts when I read this stuff. Space makes people soft.

What an awesome dude. One day I'll get around to honoring him by playing *Mass Effect*, where they named the protagonist Commander Shepard after America's First Spaceman.

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### **Willizcool says**

+This Book is a well written account on the extravegent life of mercury astronaut Alan B Shepard. Noted as the cockiest of Americas original astronauts, Shepard had surely enough past experiences for him to deserve the prize of being the first american into space on a suborbital 'hop' into space. From serving in the pacific during world war two, to Flying a ballisitic missile to teh edge of the atmosphere, I definatley advise this book to be read as action is evident on every page. I definatley tremble in awe of Neal Thompsons brilliant writing style, his reporting skills, and his detailed discription of Shepards character. The book also deals with Alan Shepards persistence, for instance when he caught an ear disease, and was removed from flight status (he was not allowed to fly into space) his raw determination pushed him to eventually win the title of fifth man on the moon. Thank you for reading this review and I hope you enjoy it as much as I did :D

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