

“Why don’t you fix your little problem and light this candle.”
—Alan Shepard, to NASA technicians at the liftoff of America’s first manned spaceflight.

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Neal Thompson's highly acclaimed biography, *LIGHT THIS CANDLE: The Life & Times of Alan Shepard* is being released this month in paperback by Three Rivers Press.

The paperback contains a new introduction by former NASA flight director Chris Kraft (who calls Shepard "an egotist bent on being first") as well as an endorsement from former president George H.W. Bush, who had been a close friend and neighbor of Shepard's.

"Alan Shepard captured the imagination of America perhaps more than any other astronaut," President Bush said. "He was a good man ... and I loved him."

Alan Shepard was also an complicated, mercurial and elusive man who for decades prevented potential biographers from accessing his full, true life story. After Shepard died of leukemia in 1998, Thompson - then a journalist at the *Baltimore Sun* - spent five years researching this largely overlooked life story. The result is more than the first biography of America's first spaceman, it is the long overdue and inspiring account of a bold American life. Best-selling author Homer Hickam (*Rocket Boys* and *The Ambassador's Son*) called *Light This Candle* "one of the finest books ever written about the space program." And Buzz Bissinger, author of the best-selling *Friday Night Lights*, has called it "a wonderful and gripping biography. Meticulously reported in the best tradition of David Halberstam (and) written with eloquent grace ... The can't-put-it-down story of a modern swashbuckler."

Thompson overcame many obstacles in his search for Shepard's story. "Shepard was an incredibly complex and enigmatic American figure, but during his life he never allowed many people to get close to him," Thompson said. Shepard was so secretive and wary of others that even his closest of friends claimed that they never felt they really knew the man.

"It was only after his death that people felt safe talking about him," Thompson said.

To tell Shepard's story, Thompson relied heavily on his investigative journalism background to obtain never-before-released Navy and NASA documents, such as Shepard's early flying records, as well as a revealing two-inch-thick FBI file, which contains details of Shepard's infidelities and some questionable financial deals. Thompson interviewed scores of Shepard's friends, including astronauts such as John Glenn, Wally Schirra and Gordon Cooper.

Said Thompson: "I'm hoping that with the upcoming return to space of the space shuttle (in May), people will be interested in reading a good story about the early days of the space race and the untold story of a larger-than-life space pioneer." Shepard found himself in a situation similar to that of the upcoming space shuttle crew, which is the first space flight since the

2003 Columbia tragedy. In 1971, Shepard commanded Apollo 14, which launched on the heels of the near disaster of the foiled Apollo 13 (whose 35th anniversary is in June).

Other highlights of *LIGHT THIS CANDLE*:

- Though he never spoke of it, Shepard served in the Pacific during World War II aboard a Navy destroyer that was attacked by Japanese kamikazes and pummeled by tsunamis.
- Shepard's career as a Navy carrier pilot and test pilot included several reckless flying incidents that nearly brought a premature end to his career - and a court martial.
- In their competition to be first in space, Shepard and John Glenn frequently butted heads. Other astronauts accused Shepard of being a "cutthroat" and a "swindler."
- Following his first flight in 1961, Shepard was grounded by a debilitating condition called Meniere's Disease, which he battled for five years until risking experimental surgery.
- In Houston, Shepard befriended future President George H.W. Bush, who helped Shepard in business and in 1971 appointed him as a delegate to the United Nations.
- Shepard's infamous return to space on Apollo 14 was plagued by numerous technical problems but highlighted by Shepard's dangerous mile-long hike up the side of a crater and by the televised images of Shepard hitting golf balls on the moon with a makeshift six iron.
- Shepard was an aggressive and very successful businessman who became the first millionaire/astronaut. He invested in oil wells, race horses, and cattle, sold Coors beer and built K-mart shopping centers. But one of his business deals almost landed him in jail.

** Neal Thompson is a freelance journalist who lives near Asheville, NC, with his wife and two sons. He teaches creative non-fiction at the University of North Carolina's Great Smokies Writing Program and is writing his next book, White Lightning, the untold story of southern moonshiners who helped create NASCAR. To be published by Crown in 2006.*

[Photographs and a copy of this press release can be found at www.nealthompson.com, along with reviews, a book excerpt, a list of appearances and a complete author's bio]

To receive a review copy of *Light This Candle*, please contact Thompson's publicist, Sarah E. Chance - schance@randomhouse.com

LIGHT THIS CANDLE: The Life & Times of Alan Shepard

-Three Rivers Press - Biography/Science & Technology - 512 pages, 1-4000-8122-X - \$14.95

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