

Alan Shepard: no rocket to success

Even those who wind up on the leading edge may not start out perfectly.

Take Alan Shepard, the first American in space, for example. Of the seven characteristics that make a good pilot—skill, judgment, composure, enthusiasm, aggressiveness, combativeness and endurance—Shepard had trouble with the first two... at least early on.

- While at the U.S. Naval Academy, Shepard's mediocre academics and waywardness nearly got him expelled. Only the death of his cousin during Marine Air Corps training seemed to stiffen Shepard's spine and pull up his performance.
- In basic flight training after World War II, Shepard almost washed out because of scary grades on his flight checks. Of 24 maneuvers on his first one, he scored "good" on only one and "borderline" in five; a less accommodating flight instructor could have ended his flying career right there. On one flight, Shepard led his formation the wrong way; on another, he pulled a failing grade for not looking left or right. Shepard finally resorted to breaking the rules: Secretly, he took private lessons that honed his skills and saved his career.
- Later, the judgment-challenged Shepard narrowly averted a court martial for "flat-hatting," or flying extremely low, over a crowded beach (blowing the bikini tops off several women), doing a loop under and over the half-built Chesapeake Bay Bridge, and buzzing hundreds of soldiers at a rural test site. Only some fast-talking to a sheriff and strong intercessions from two officers kept him from losing his wings.

But, ultimately, one other quality—refusal to accept complacency—saved Shepard from ruin, landed him in the space program and led him to be chosen as the first astronaut.

"Did you goof off yesterday?" Shepard would ask himself daily, in front of a mirror. "Did you get complacent?"

"Every day, you've got to say that," Shepard once told a reporter. "That kind of complacency is so insidious. And complacency occurs in everyone. None of us is immune."

— Adapted from *Light This Candle*, Neal Thompson, Crown Publishers.