

Author's preface

When I set out to write a five-volume series to commemorate the first 50 years of our adventure in space, it seemed a big project, though relatively straightforward and something that I have always wanted to do. An obsessive space enthusiast for as long as I can remember, I received my first space book at the age of five, was given a toy Space Shuttle for a birthday present soon afterwards and by the time I reached my seventh birthday I had watched in childish astonishment as Enterprise – mounted atop a Boeing 747 carrier aircraft – hurtled over my primary school in Birmingham, during sports day. It caused me to drop the egg from my spoon, unfortunately, but the sight was so spectacular and awe-inspiring that it hooked me for life. The Moon landings excited me – and still do – beyond compare and I began writing articles at the age of 15 for the British Interplanetary Society's *Spaceflight* magazine and, later, for *Countdown* and *Astronomy Now*. As I grew older, it became a goal of mine to someday write a 'meaty' history of the human exploration of space, which I continue to believe firmly is one of the greatest adventures ever undertaken by our species, but everything I read seemed to 'lack' something. Some were overloaded with facts and figures, others were devoted solely to the 'popular' audience, while still more simply lacked the detail and human interest factor. I cannot promise the reader that my series fulfils each of these gaps, but what I *can* say with certainty is that I have spent an enjoyable three years researching the history of our adventure, told through news sources, books, the memoirs of those involved, magazines, press kits and oral histories, and have learned an immense amount. The reader may love or hate my book – they may find it hard to put down or may simply find use for it as an expensive additional castor for their sofa – but I have derived great joy from researching and writing it.

It has been impossible to track entire decades within the pages of each volume. The first, *Escaping the Bonds of Earth*, had to take into account some of the achievements of the 1950s, as a prerequisite to focusing on 'its' decade, the 1960s. In a similar vein, the second volume, *Foothold in the Heavens*, needed the focus to fall in considerable depth on some of the most remarkable achievements of the Space Age – Apollo 11 being the obvious example – at the expense of covering an entire decade. Only with this fourth volume did it become clear that I was punching above my

weight. My determination to cover each mission with the level of detail that it deserved, including biographies of each spacefarer, turned this book into something much longer; so long, in fact, that I had barely covered the 1980s and the extent was already rapidly approaching 600 pages. As a result, with the approval of Clive Horwood, the series has expanded from five into *six* volumes, to cover the first half-century in its entirety, whilst maintaining the kind of depth that the reader would expect. That depth has been easier to fulfil in some areas than others. The Soviets, even in the late 1980s, with the advent of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), proved notoriously secretive about their activities and in several cases it has been impossible to offer biographies of a handful of their cosmonauts in more than just a few words or paragraphs. That secrecy extended to the West, too, when the Americans staged a number of military Shuttle missions, many of whose precise objectives remain classified to this day. I have attempted, using the sources and contacts at my disposal, to shine a meagre light on these shadowy flights and I fervently hope that a few years from now they will emerge from the shadows to take their rightful place in history.

I have learned much about the human space programmes of the United States and Russia and, equally importantly, have learned a great deal about the political events which shaped their progress. Starting with Yuri Gagarin's pioneering voyage in April 1961, the journey has carried me through a succession of dramatic decades, punctuated by conflict and reconciliation, meddling and political manoeuvring, and has seen the first men land on the Moon, the first men occupy an Earth-circling space station, the first men pilot a reusable vehicle beyond the atmosphere, the first men from other nations – Czechoslovakia, Poland, Vietnam and Mongolia, to name but a few – and, of course, the first members of *womankind* to carry their dreams and aspirations into the heavens. My intention has always been for something a little more than a basic log of crewed expeditions into space, but as time has rolled on, the project evolved into something much larger and more complex than I had envisaged. The *human* side of the story has always been profoundly important to me. Take Sergei Korolev: a man who endured so much physical and psychological trauma in his youth – dreaming, even as he was transported to a living death in the Kolyma gulag, of one day sending a rocket into space. Deke Slayton is another example: a man chosen in his prime as one of America's finest, the 'Mercury Seven', whose hopes were cruelly dashed by a devastating heart condition, yet who sprang back as the man who guided the astronaut corps to the Moon, chose Neil Armstrong to take the first historic steps on its dusty surface, and eventually overcame every obstacle in his path to fly into orbit. Their remarkable stories and their individual trials and tribulations, from childhood to the grave, carry just as much weight and drama and excitement and adventure as the missions they flew. Yuri Gagarin pissing on the wheel of the bus as he prepared to board his space capsule, Wally Schirra conceiving another legendary 'gotcha', Alexei Leonov and his love of cowboy hats and boots, John Glenn and his competitive yearning to be first, Alexander Serebrov and his penchant for fast cars, Christa McAuliffe and her passion to carry education to the final frontier and Shannon Lucid and Svetlana Savitskaya, who both refused to accept that their gender should tie them to Earthbound pursuits and who both strove

for the stars. The story of our adventure in space is not simply about who spent the most time there, who performed the most spacewalks or who flew the most missions. It is a collection of *stories*: the stories of how a few hundred remarkable people, all of whom achieved an uncommon goal, forever changed our perspective on the world in which we live and fixed our eyes and our minds and our imagination on the Universe around us.

Ben Evans
Atherstone, December 2011