

## Naval Cover Fakes, Forgeries and Frauds, Part VIII

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### U.S. Space Recovery Ship Cancels & Charles Riser

In the continuing series of Naval Cover Fakes, Forgeries and Frauds, this chapter involves the strange case of Charles R. Riser of Bowie, Maryland and his 1974 Federal Grand Jury indictment for mail fraud which specifically involved the fraudulent use of the naval cancels from seven US Navy ships which were all involved at the time with the United States Space Program as recovery ships.

Before addressing the details of how Riser proceeded with his illegal activities and how the space cover collecting community brought him down, we should review the space program and the attraction for Riser to consider forgery of these naval cancels.

The US Navy involvement in the space program was massive. According to Don Blair and his excellent publication *Splashdown! NASA and the Navy* (ISBN 1-56311-985-4) published in 2004, 236 different ships participated in 32 manned spacecraft splashdowns from the first, named Freedom 7 on 5 May 1961 through the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project on 24 July 1975. If one counts the several repetitive ship appearances in splashdown activities over the 15 years, there were some 459 appearances.

This article will also review and compare two space events, the first manned event Mercury-Redstone 3/Freedom 7 on 5 May 1961 with USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN (CVS 39) as the recovery ship and CDR Alan Shepard aboard Freedom 7 as the astronaut. The second will be the Mercury-Atlas 7/Aurora 7 on 24 May 1962 with M. Scott Carpenter as the astronaut and recovery aboard USS INTREPID (CVS 11).

#### USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN (CVS 39) 5 May 1961

The main focus of recovery ship naval cancel collecting is the USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN (CVS 39) cancel with a date of 5 May 1961 (Figure 1). This particular cover carries certificate #37590 dated 23 June 1979 from the American Philatelic Expertizing Service.



Figure 1: USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN (CVS 39) cancel and 4-line cachet.

Opinions vary widely on the number of cancels and types of cancels produced that day. The original estimate from a journalist aboard for the recovery estimated the number at about 44; however, with a crew of several thousand aboard plus visiting dignitaries it is hard to believe that only 44 cancels were struck that day.

“Freedom Seven” was Commander Alan Shepard’s choice for the name of America’s first manned effort into space as he felt “Freedom” was patriotic and “Seven” because it was the seventh Mercury capsule produced. The flight duration was 15 minutes and 28 seconds reaching an altitude of 116.5 statute miles and velocity of 5,134 miles per hour. It covered a distance of 303 statute miles and was recovered at 9:49 am on 5 May 1961. The capsule is now on display at the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, MD. LAKE CHAMPLAIN was one of 10 ships in the recovery fleet and CDR Shepard was plucked from the ocean by Marine helicopter squadron HMR (L)-262 out of New River, North Carolina.

Shepard went on to Apollo 14 (and golf on the moon) to retire as a Rear Admiral in 1974. He passed away in 1998 at the age of 74.

The value of the LAKE CHAMPLAIN 5 May 1961 cancel has remained strong over the years and a Harmer-Schau/APS auction in 2007 had a final sale price of \$2600 (the fake cancel of the same date realized \$300 at the same auction).

In 2002, a different auction company listed the 5 May 1961 cancel for auction at an estimated \$3500-\$5000, a few days later it was withdrawn when they realized it was a Riser fake cancel. In that same auction, a USS RANDOLPH (CVS 15) cancel of 21 July 1961 (Gus Grissom/Mercury 4) was estimated at \$1500-\$2500. It too was withdrawn from sale when identified as a Riser cover.

The LAKE CHAMPLAIN cover (Figure 2) was used in the Riser case as evidence, the INTREPID cover (Figure 5) was not. Both of these covers were obtained by the writer in 1979 in an auction lot of about 20 similar covers when they were sold by a reputable New Jersey space cover dealer who marked all covers on the reverse side with a statement to the fact that they were fraudulent.



Figure 2: Riser faked USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN cover. See chart shown as Figure 3 for comparison points.

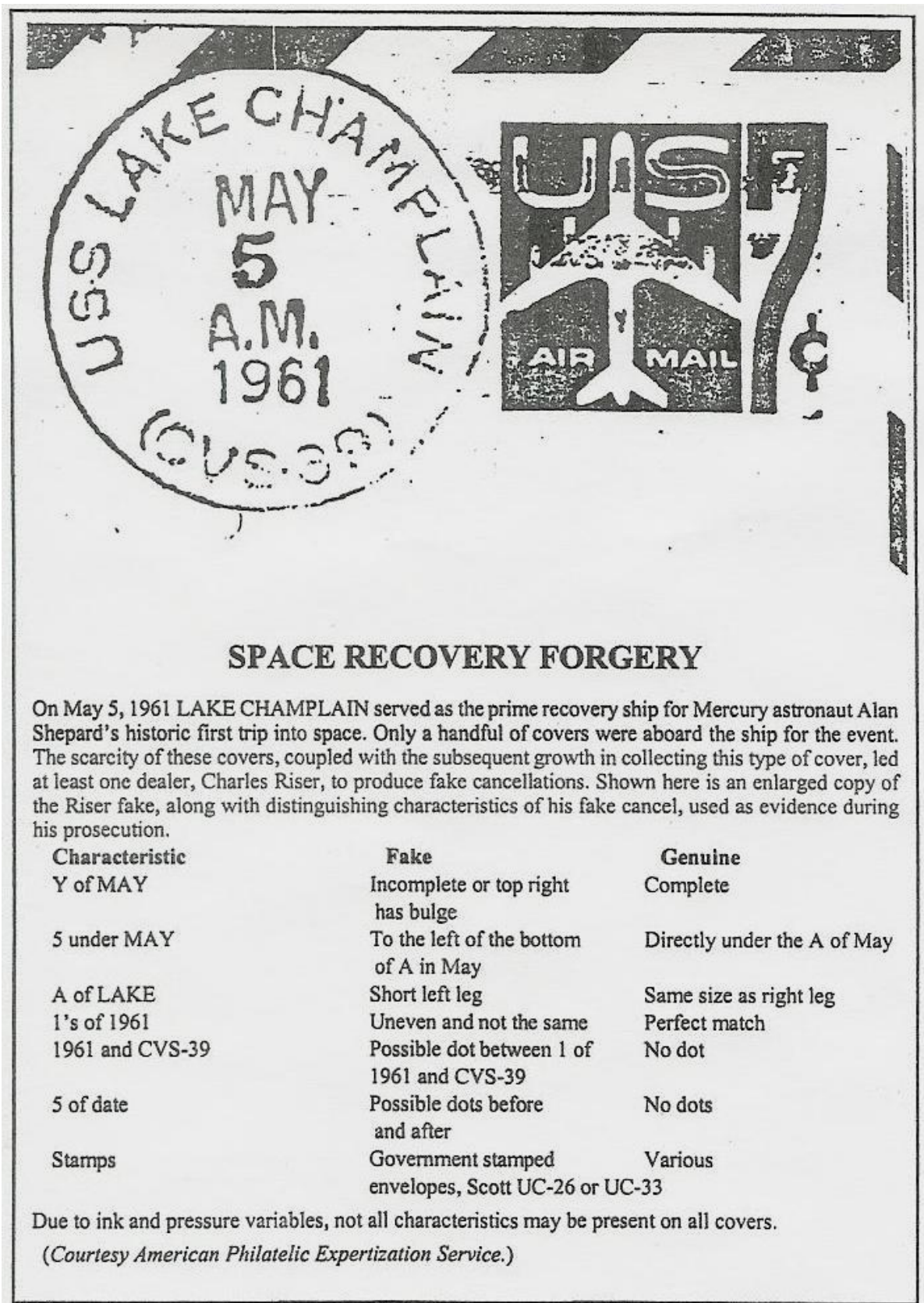


Figure 3: January 1975 "ASTROPHILE" by Lester E. Winick and Dr. Reuben A. Ramkissoon.  
As shown in Catalog of US Navy Postmarks on page L-2

The article concludes with the details of the United States Government's case and subsequent conviction of Charles Riser.

### USS INTREPID (CVS 11) 24 May 1962

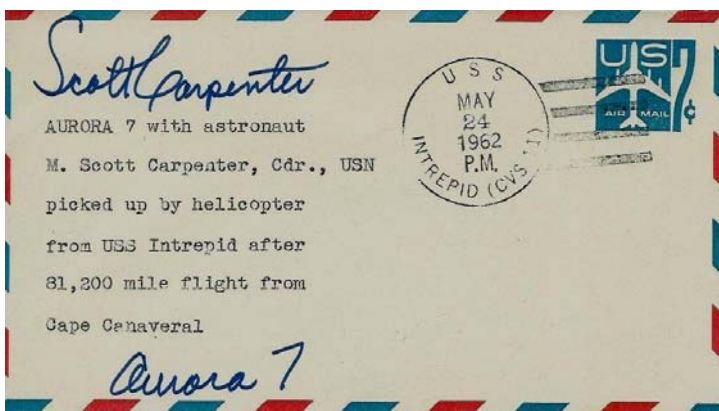
Two months after John Glenn became the first American to orbit the earth, LCDR Scott Carpenter in Aurora 7 launched on 24 May 1962 at 7:45 AM for a flight of 4 hours and 56 minutes making 3 orbits around earth at 17,549 miles per hour, a total distance of 76,021 statute miles.

USS FARRAGUT (DLG 6) was the first to reach Carpenter who overshot the landing point by about 250 miles; eventually, an HSS-2 helicopter from USS INTREPID retrieved him from the sea. Carpenter went on to become an "aquanaut" and was active in the Navy's SEALAB project. He is now 83 years old and lives in his home state of Colorado. The capsule was picked up by USS JOHN R. PIERCE (DD 753) and is now on display at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

The authentic INTREPID cancel of 24 May 1962, a Type 2 (n) is shown as **Figure 4**. Riser's effort is shown as **Figure 5**.



**Figure 4: USS INTREPID (CVS 11) Aurora 7 authentic cover.**



**Figure 5: Charles Riser version of the Aurora 7 cover. See points for verification below.**

The INTREPID cancel was not a part of the case against Riser but was obtained with the other fraudulent covers in 1979.

A web site that specializes in space cover information and provides detailed information on astronaut signatures, ([www.collectspace.com](http://www.collectspace.com)) indicates that there are no known autopen examples of Scott Carpenter's autograph.

Note that the cachet on the Riser cover uses the initial "M" (for Malcolm) as does the signature in the real cover, the letter "M" does not appear on the Riser cover autograph. Carpenter's rank on Riser's cachet shows "Cdr." (O-5) at the time of this flight he was a LCDR (O-4).

Higher prices on selected US Naval Recovery ship cancels are generally due to the strong collecting interest by space cover collectors and the few number of cancels available from earlier missions.

Primary and secondary recovery ships cancels for the most part are fairly common as very large numbers were produced. So called "Captains covers" (those with the Commanding Officer's printed signature) and autographed covers raise the prices a bit but are still reasonable in price. The much higher priced cancels are the aforementioned LAKE CHAMPLAIN and RANDOLPH plus the 20 February 1962 USS NOA (DD-841) which was the back-up recovery ship from John Glenn in Friendship 7 (Mercury-Atlas 6) when the prime recovery ship USS RANDOLPH was too far away to make the recovery and the 16 March 1966 USS LEONARD F. MASON (DD-852) when Gemini 8 landed in the Pacific Ocean rather than in the Atlantic Ocean as planned.

So it is not too surprising to see which cancels were among those that Charles Riser selected for his fake series of recovery ship cancels.

### A Philatelic Detective Story...

Thirty-three years ago in 1975, Sean Marsar of Bethpage, New York wrote an article for *The Western Stamp Collector* called "A Philatelic Detective Story" in which he outlined how he discovered the antics of Charles Riser.

As I was researching material for this article, I decided to telephone Sean Marsar in New York and update his 1975 article, which I had yellowing in my space cover file.

Sean related that he had begun his dealings with Riser in November 1973 when he started buying space covers from Riser who was then a space cover dealer. When his first package arrived, Sean was a bit surprised to notice that all the recovery ship cancels were on US Government printed air mail envelopes. A few months later he came upon a dealer of postal stationery stock located on Long Island N.Y. who mentioned to Sean that a space cover dealer, Charles Riser had purchased 700 blank envelopes of the 6 and 7 cent airmail variety. The news "hit me like a ton of bricks" Sean related and he decided to immediately contact the U.S. Postal Inspectors. The Government proceeded to mark 95 blank envelopes with a mark that would only show up under ultraviolet light.

In March 1974, Marsar received a Gemini 8 recovery cancel from USS LEONARD F. MASON, he checked the cover under the special light and there was the coded marking.

He forwarded his findings to Lester Winick of Homewood, Illinois who was then the President of the Space Topics Study Group (an affiliate of American Philatelic Society and American Topical Association).

Under the direction of Les Winick and on behalf of the Space Unit and collectors everywhere, the evidence that Sean Marsar had provided, specifically fourteen U.S. space covers were presented in evidence by the US Government against Charles Riser. The fourteen ship cancels used in evidence were from USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN (CVS 39), USS DECATUR (DD 936), USS LA SALLE (LPD 3), USS L. F. MASON (DD 852), USS NOA (DD 841), USS RANDOLPH (CVS 15) and USS STORMES (DD 780).

An excellent study of the material submitted to the government was published as a supplement to the January 1975 *ASTROPHILE* by Lester E. Winick and Dr. Reuben A. Ramkissoon. An example of their work is shown in the USCS *Catalog of US Navy Postmarks* on page L-2 and is shown on page 13 as **Figure 3**.

On 11 March 1975, Riser pleaded guilty to mail fraud and was given four years probation. This may be the only known case in which a person was convicted of forging US Naval cancels. Riser confessed to faking 51 US space covers (it should be noted that he also faked non-naval covers) and the US Postal Inspectors kept 14. Since he had purchased over 700 blank envelopes of the 6 and 7 cent variety that leaves a large number unaccounted for, most probably unwittingly in cover collections and postal history dealer boxes around the world.

**The Name**

The *Freedom 7* spacecraft was delivered to Cape Canaveral FL on 9 December 1960 on. *Freedom 7* was capsule #7, and it had been given special attention at the factory since it was selected for the first manned suborbital flight in October 1960.

Alan B. Shepard, Jr. was riding on Redstone MRLV-7 and in Mercury spacecraft #7. In all subsequent Mercury flights, the number 7 was appended to the astronaut-chosen spacecraft/mission name and call sign, in honor of the fact that there were [7 original Mercury astronauts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7_original_Mercury_astronauts).

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom\\_7](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_7)



*Freedom 7 and Aurora 7 commemorative patches.*

**USCS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION**

I apply for membership in the Universal Ship Cancellation Society and agree to abide by the Philatelic Code of Ethics and the By Laws of the USCS.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Birthdate (if youth) \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Zip Code + 4 \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Membership year begins April 1<sup>st</sup>. Table below includes \$2.00 for registration/initial mailing.

Month Joined	Regular U.S. Address	Sustaining U.S. Address	Canada & Overseas	Youth deduct this amount
Apr, May, June	\$20.00	\$38.00	\$35.00	-\$9.00
July, Aug, Sept	\$16.00	\$29.00	\$27.00	-\$7.00
Oct, Nov, Dec	\$11.00	\$20.00	\$19.00	-\$5.00
Jan, Feb, Mar	\$25.00	\$47.00	\$43.00	-\$11.00

All payments must be in U.S. funds or check/money order drawn on a U.S. bank/USPS, payable to USCS or to [Treasurer@USCS.ORG](mailto:Treasurer@USCS.ORG) from a PayPal account.

Mail to: Steve Shay, USCS Secretary, 747 Shard Ct. Fremont CA 94539-7419