

TOYBOX

ALL ABOARD THE ALPHA PROBE

by Rob O'Hara

In the early days of home computing my father once explained to me that there were two kinds of modems: Hayes, and "Hayes compatible." Similarly there are two kinds of building blocks for children: LEGO, and those that are "compatible with the leading brand of building blocks." Even though Kenner didn't invent the 3¾" scale for action figures (that's credited to Takara Toys), their line of *Star Wars* action figures quickly set that size as the action figure standard, a scale that was used by everything from G.I. Joe to the Dukes of Hazzard and the A-Team. In fact, that same scale is still being used for action figures today by companies like Bif Bang Pow and ReAction.

In 1975, three years before Kenner cranked out their first *Star Wars* figures, Fisher-Price launched their line of Adventure People toys. The first Adventure People playsets included a rescue truck, a safari adventure Jeep (complete with animals), an air-sea rescue helicopter, and a daredevil sports plane. Each of these sets came with 3¾" scale action figures with poseable arms and legs, and slightly more head mobility than the average *Star Wars* figure would contain. Additional sets followed each year, sets that included vehicles such as boats and dune buggies and vans and race cars and motorcycles and even a kayak.

By the late 1970s, however, children's eyes were drifting upward, away from lakes and



mountains and up toward the stars. Based on the astronomical (no pun intended) success of *Star Wars*, a new wave of space toys began invading toy stores. Nature-themed playsets were quickly shoved aside by Battlestar Galactica, Buck Rogers, and *Black Hole* action figures and ships, all of them sticking to that same 3¾" scale to ensure Buck Rogers could, in a pinch, escape danger by hot-wiring an X-Wing Fighter if necessary.





In 1980, the same year *The Empire Strikes Back* hit movie theaters, Fisher-Price joined the crowd and launched their own space-themed sets. Sometimes referred to as the "Alpha Series," the first of these playsets was Fisher-Price playset #325 – the Alpha Probe, modeled after the Space Shuttle.

Static, non-movable toys were out of vogue. Kids wanted toys that were configurable and "did stuff," and in that regard the Alpha Probe delivered. The Alpha Probe itself included a pilot seat that slide backwards and forwards to gain entrance, and large pod bay doors that opened to reveal an escape pod hidden inside. On the Alpha Probe's rear wing were three buttons that activated electronic sounds and lights, powered by a single 9-volt battery. Two of the buttons played sounds of rockets

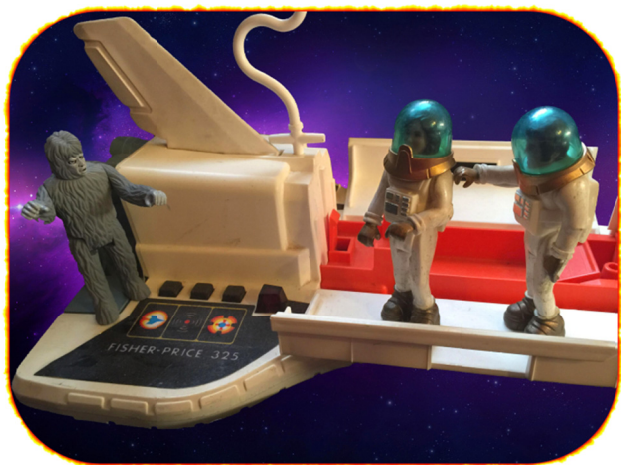
launching and computers chattering, while the third played an alarm sound that also activated flashing red lights on the rear of the probe. The bottom of the shuttle contained three small wheels to accommodate ground-based takeoffs and landings.

The included escape pod (identified as "Alpha Recon" on the outside of the box) could be stored either inside the shuttle's bay or on top of it, thanks to molded plastic rails on top of the bay doors. Alpha Recon contained a single hinge and opened not unlike a Tyrannosaurus Rex's mouth, allowing a single figure to be placed inside. The large rockets on the rear of the Alpha Probe could also be removed and reattached to the rear of Alpha Recon. This is akin to removing a Corvette's engine and installing it on your lawnmower; a modification



that would ensure you would never be late to any engagement in space, ever.

The Fisher-Price Alpha Probe playset contained two Astro Pilots, referred to by collectors as "male astronaut" and "female astronaut." While the male astronaut only came in one style (brown hair and groovy brown sideburns), the female astronaut apparently came in both blonde and brunette varieties. Their blue-translucent and non-removable helmets fairly limited articulation of the astronaut's heads, but their arms and legs (complete with golden gloves and boots) were still poseable. On the shoulder of each figure was an atomic logo, which also appeared on Alpha Recon's hood and Alpha Probe's wings.



The final accessory included was the life-support tether. This molded and non-pliable piece of plastic was shaped roughly like a question mark and included three pegs on each end. Alpha Probe, Alpha Recon, and both astronauts contained holes in which the tether could be inserted. The resulting illusion was that the astronauts (or Alpha Recon) were floating in outer space and connected to the Alpha Probe via the tether. While I always wished that the tether would have been made poseable, the multiple pegs and holes allowed for a lot of creativity when it came to attaching things to other things.



While many vintage *Star Wars* vehicles were somewhat fragile and didn't survive years of rough play, the Alpha Probe itself is pretty solid. With few actual moving parts on the shuttle itself, there were few things to break off. When I do run across these in the wild, most commonly

I find either the Alpha Recon shuttle or, more commonly, the rear rocket jets are missing. The tail wing of Alpha Recon is made of rubber rather than hard plastic, a decision that assuredly kept it from breaking off; unfortunately, the different material tends to "yellow" at a different rate than the rest of the ship, for Alpha Probes that spent too much time orbiting the sun.

Successful sales of the Alpha Probe led to more sets in the Alpha line, including the Alpha Star (a moon buggy with a trailer), the Alpha Interceptor (a smaller space ship with a rotating cockpit), and Firestar 1 (a small one-man speeder). Somewhat confusingly, Fisher-Price released an orange moon buggy *also* named Alpha Recon, the same name as the escape pod included with the Alpha Probe playset. (Apparently they loved the name so much they decided to reuse it.) All of these sets came with unique astronauts and aliens. In addition to those figures, several other space-themed

figures (including Opticon, Brainoid, Clawtron, X-Ray Man and his wife X-Ray Woman) were sold only as carded action figures. Because they were not included in any of the playsets, those additional figures are much harder to find today.

I've always appreciated the fact that Fisher-Price's Adventure People toys were size-compatible with Kenner's *Star Wars* line. Many times, while the Alpha Pilots were off exploring strange new worlds on foot, Han and Chewie would take the Alpha Probe out for a spin behind their back, and it was not uncommon for Hammerhead and Walrus Man to share intergalactic stories with Clawtron and X-Ray Man at the local cantina. I got my Alpha Probe for a birthday present when I was eight years old (probably from someone who rightfully assumed I already owned every *Star Wars*-related spaceship), and it has remained a part of my collection ever since.



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