The three X-15’s, built by North American Aviation in the 1960’s were to determine if manned aircraft could be built to safely withstand speeds of up to Mach 6 and to reach extreme altitudes above 100,000 feet.

Because the plane must be small and contain huge quantities of rocket fuel, the X-15 was designed to be carried aloft under the wing of a modified B-52 bomber, then dropped. This saved all of the on-board fuel for speed and altitude tests.

The first glide-drop was made on July 24, 1959. On its first powered flight, occurring on September 17, 1959, the plane immediately exceeded Mach 2. By the end of the program, in October, 1967, the three planes had made 199 flights, reached Mach 6, or 4,520 mph, and climbed to an altitude of 354,200 feet, both unofficial world records. (Unofficial because the X-15 did not take off under its own power.

In flights above 270,000 feet, or about fifty miles, the pilots were awarded the coveted astronaut wings.

The X-15A-2, depicted by this Monogram model, is now on display at the Air Force Museum. It was the second of the three built. Although it was nearly destroyed in a crash landing on November 9, 1962, the plane was rebuilt with a stretched fuselage and redesignated X-15A-2. A pair of giant fuel tanks could be strapped onto the new version to extend its powered flight. On October 3, 1967, the speed record was set in this plane. Painted overall white with a heat-resistant paint and a dummy scramjet mounted beneath the lower fin, the plane reached the incredible speed of 4,520 mph. This was the last X-15 flight, number 199, in a fantastic series of tests that ultimately led to the successful development of the space shuttle.