Our story begins on a hot September day in 1951. It was so moist and muggy; you could leave trails in the air just by moving your arm. It was on this particular day that company test pilot Bill Bridgeman was called into Douglas’ Santa Monica, California, executive office. Upon his arrival he was immediately hit with, “Bill, we would like you to take a look at the X-3. Maybe you would like to test her. She’s in the final stages now over in Building Three. Go over and take a look. See what you think.”

William B. Bridgeman was the bachelor son of Willard Bridgeman, himself an old-time barnstormer and later aeronautical advisor to the state of Colorado. Called Bill, like his father, Bridgeman was called into Douglas’ Santa Monica facility between 1941 and 1958, and his team had been working on the X-3 since 1943. Now, Bill was being asked to take a look, to see what fruits Burton’s efforts had borne. When he arrived at Building Three, he was met by company security officers and a very unfriendly sign: “Keep Out Secret Project MX-656.” After checking his pass, the officers opened up the door and there it was — the X-3 awaiting his scrutiny.

He thought, “God! That’s the most sinister, out-of-this-world, extraordinary airplane I’ve ever seen.”

While his first reactions settled in, he carefully inspected the all-white airplane. It was unlike any aircraft he had ever seen, and he seriously doubted it was even capable of flying. Even the X-3’s manufacturer, Boeing, would not accept the challenge.

Bridgeman said later that while he had inspected the X-3 that day during September of 1951, he had also become confused and afraid, “afraid to take on the airplane — afraid that someone else would accept the challenge.”

He reported back to Douglas’ executive office the following morning, and then announced his decision: “Gentlemen, I’ll flight test the X-3.”

At that particular time, the X-3 was scheduled to be flight tested in January 1952, just four months away. However, slow engine development, which would continually plague the project, and problems with the X-3 design delayed its initial flight for more than a year.

In the meantime, Bridgeman continued flight-testing Skyrockets. On 15 August 1951, he had piloted a Skyrocket to a world’s speed record, attaining 1238-mph. Then on 29 August, he rode a Skyrocket to 79,494-feet, establishing a world’s altitude record. For these accomplishments, he became known as the world’s “fastest and highest-flying human.” During Bill’s heyday piloting Skyrockets, which included some 60 flight tests that lasted from 1948 to 1952, he was awarded the Octave Chanute Award by the Institute of Aeronautical Sciences in 1953, “for outstanding contributions to the knowledge of supersonics, resulting from flights at record speeds and at altitudes never before reached in piloted