

Canada

The Globe and Mail, Saturday, January 11, 1997

TOO EXPENSIVE, TOO LATE

The myth of broken Arrow

BY J. L. GRANATSTEIN
Special to The Globe and Mail
Toronto

ALTHOUGH it is only 40 years since the CF-105 Avro Arrow made its maiden flight, no single event in our history has been so mythologized.

Canadians have been told repeatedly that the Arrow was ahead of its time, the best fighter in the world. Moreover, it was wholly Canadian, and when John Diefenbaker wrongfully cancelled its production in 1959, he did so because he was pressured by the United States.

None of these tales is true, and viewers of the CBC-TV broadcast of *The Arrow*, a dramatic re-enactment of events leading to the airplane's cancellation, which airs tomorrow and Monday, might want to watch out for further attempts to peddle conspiracy theories and burnish myths.

First, how good was the Arrow? Unquestionably, it was a beautiful piece of technology, the first modern-looking fighter aircraft. It could fly fast and high, even with the American engine it was using temporarily until the high-powered and Canadian-developed Iroquois engine was ready. Its intended role was to destroy Soviet bombers seeking to hit North America from over the pole. Armed with the American MB-1 air-to-air nuclear missiles it was eventually supposed to carry, the Arrow would have performed well.

Unfortunately, its prototypes began to come off the lines at A. V. Roe Canada's plant in Downsview, Ont., just as the missile age burst upon us. The day the Arrow was put on public display, in fact, the Soviet Union launched the earth satellite, Sputnik I. The bomber threat, therefore, seemed to recede, and the Arrow was expensive, about \$12-million each, a figure six times the cost of comparable U.S. fighters.

Moreover, the United States Air Force had doubts about the Arrow's worth, and unless Ottawa could persuade our allies to buy the aircraft, the cost of the small number Canada could use was too expensive. Regrettably, the aircraft had been designed in Canada without any effort to ensure that it could meet U.S. needs, something that made selling it to the Americans much harder. The Arrow was too heavy, its range too limited, and it could not use SAGE, the new ground-based computer system developed to direct the interception of attacking bombers. And the Americans' F-101B and F-106 fighters were in the same class as the Arrow, while their F-108 was more advanced.

With their own large aircraft industry, the Americans had good reasons to belittle the Arrow's merits. If they bought CF-105s from Canada, the howls of outrage from industry lobbyists would have been fierce. But since Canadian efforts to sell the Arrow to European NATO partners also failed, it just may be that the Canadian aircraft was not quite the breakthrough it has been painted.

Contrary to the belief of many Canadians, prime minister John Diefenbaker was doing the right thing when he cancelled production of the beautiful fighter aircraft.

But surely the U.S. government pressured Canada to scrap the Arrow? Again, not so. The U.S. Secretary of the Air Force actually suggested to Norman Robertson, Canada's Ambassador in Washington, that one way to help Canada bear the high costs of developing the Arrow might be if the United States purchased a few squadrons and gave them to the Royal Canadian Air Force. Ambassador Robertson did not think this charity would go over well: Canada had refused Lend-Lease from the U.S. during the Second World War and had never accepted aid from any country. Then, one of the secretary's staff asked if perhaps a swap of aircraft could be worked out to get more Arrows off the production lines and reduce the unit cost. Again this did not seem possible at the time.

The greatest pressure to ground the aircraft, in fact, came not from the Pentagon but from the Canadian Chiefs of Staff and defence minister George Pearkes. The Arrow's development, initially approved by the Liberal cab-

inet in December, 1953, had suffered from constantly ballooning costs, from difficulties with untried weapons systems and from the vagaries of a changing strategic environment. No one believed Arrow squadrons could be operational before 1961 or 1962. With production of the intercontinental ballistic missile just over the horizon, with the bomber threat receding, with strategic thinkers everywhere uncertain, and with other pressing demands on the country's military, did it make sense in 1957 to put huge sums into developing the Arrow?

The Chiefs of Staff in Ottawa did not think so. The Army needed new equipment for its brigade group in Europe, the Royal Canadian Navy was seeking more ships and the RCAF itself faced having to re-equip the air division in NATO, which was still flying obsolete F-86 Sabres. If the Arrow went ahead, there would be no money — in the straitened circumstances of the late 1950s — for anything else. Canada simply could not afford the Arrow

and a modern military. The Chiefs, therefore, told the government in August, 1958, that the Arrow should be scrapped and, to counter the existing Soviet bomber threat, Canada should build two Bomarc surface-to-air missile bases.

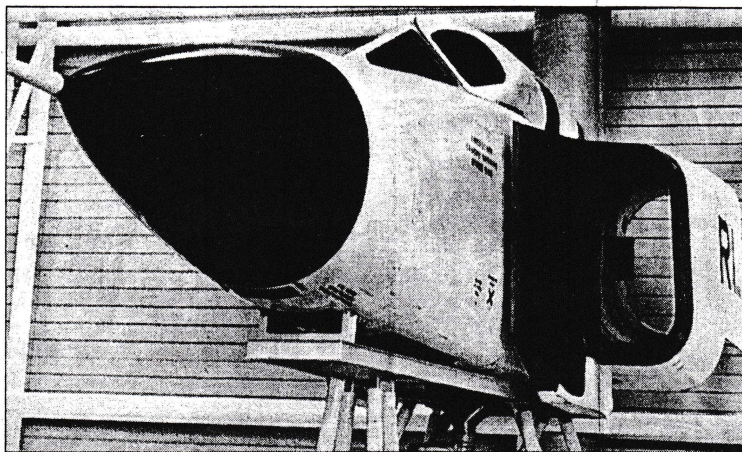
Defence minister Pearkes agreed. The Arrow "cost too much," he said at the time, adding that the CF-105 "was, in my opinion, getting out of date." But Mr. Diefenbaker's cabinet twice refused to scrap the aircraft fearful that cancellation would add to the country's high and rising unemployment rolls. But by November, 1958, when he was preparing the defence estimates for the next year, Mr. Pearkes said he "proposed to assume that the [Arrow] contract would be cancelled and to include only the cancellation costs." The Arrow was all but dead.

In February, 1959, the Chiefs of Staff concluded that "in the light of the changing threat" the return to be gained from the Arrow did not justify the expenditures required. On Feb. 17, the government at last agreed, the prime minister deciding to announce the cancellation in Parliament without prior notice to A. V. Roe. At the same time, the cabinet agreed Mr. Diefenbaker would tell the country of the government's intention to acquire U.S.-made, nuclear-armed Bomarc missiles.

The announcement of the Arrow's cancellation, on Feb. 20, caused a furor across Canada, especially in Toronto where Avro laid off 14,000 workers at once. Mr. Diefenbaker, whose government quickly destroyed the existing prototypes of the aircraft, ever after was blamed for crippling the aircraft industry and damned for his lack of faith in the Arrow.

But in fact, after much hesitation, the Chief had made the proper decision. The Soviet threat to North America had begun to change, and the government's inability to sell the Arrow to Canada's allies made the costs of its continued development insupportable. The Arrow was a fine aircraft but one too rich for Canada's blood.

By choosing to replace the Arrow with the nuclear-armed Bomarc and then, a few years later, by hesitating to accept the Bomarc's nuclear warheads, Mr. Diefenbaker laid the groundwork for his defeat at the polls in early 1963. The Conservatives fell from power under attack on their nuclear-weapons policy from the United States, the Opposition parties and the military. Prime ministerial indecision turned Mr. Diefenbaker's casual acceptance of nuclear weapons in February, 1959, into something that became, almost without notice in the shouting about the Arrow, the root cause of his government's fall.



All that remains of the Avro Arrow aircraft ordered destroyed by the Diefenbaker government in 1959. The nose and cockpit section of the aircraft is an exhibit at the National Aviation Museum in Ottawa.

(CP)

J. L. Granatstein is Rowell Jackman Resident Fellow at the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and author of *Canada 1957-1967: The Years of Uncertainty and Innovation*.