

EX-MP sets Avro Arrow myth on head

Tories didn't order jets' destruction, Diefenbaker cabinet member says

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Canadian Press

A member of John Diefenbaker's cabinet has rattled decades of conventional thinking on the fate of the revolutionary Avro Arrow jet by asserting that the cabinet never ordered the planes destroyed and that the United States actually offered to help salvage the program.

Pierre Sevigny, associate defence minister in Diefenbaker's government from 1959 to 1963, said in a recent interview that it was Crawford Gordon, the mercurial boss at A.V. Roe - the Arrow's manufacturer - who ordered all 37 planes and the blueprints destroyed.

Furthermore, Sevigny said, the Americans were in favour of continuing production of the CF-105, as the Arrow was known, and offered to finance its construction to equip RCAF squadrons after the Diefenbaker government canceled the program because of its rising cost.

The Americans have long been accused of instigating the Arrow's demise. But Sevigny, now 80 and a lecturer at Concordia University, said the cabinet categorically refused the American offer. "The U.S., perhaps in an effort to prevent any disruption in the Canadian economy, offered to pay for the construction of the Arrow," Sevigny said.

'ABOMINABLE FRICTION'

"They were the only rich country in the world and were financing all the NATO countries. It caused an abominable friction, and Canada replied it didn't need anyone's charity."

Sevigny served in World War II before he lost a leg and was eventually promoted to colonel. He is an officer of the Order of Canada. He's also remembered for his affair with Gerda Munzinger, a German woman with a shady background, from 1958 to 1961.

When the liaison became public in 1966, it caused a scandal. But subsequent investigations determined there was never a security risk as the Liberals alleged, and a book on the affair said in fact Sevigny was framed.

It has been almost 40 years since the Avro Arrow project was canceled and the prototype planes destroyed. Sevigny's account of some of the circumstances are viewed as one of the last available sources of first-hand information on the matter. Other key members of the Diefenbaker cabinet have died, as has Crawford Gordon.

"What Sevigny says is important because the Americans are blamed in the myth," said military historian Russell Isinger, a researcher at the University of Saskatchewan who is co-writing a book on the Arrow.

AMERICAN SUPPORT

"The Americans fell over themselves to support the program. But I'm not sure the story is as interesting (to mythicists) when there's no controversy. It's much more interesting when the Americans are involved."

But Ron Page, an aeronautical engineer who worked on the Arrow and was an RAF pilot at the end of World War II, said Diefenbaker was to blame, despite Sevigny's and Isinger's statements.

"The cancellation (of the program) and the destruction (of the planes) are the same thing - you can't divorce one from the other," said Page, who co-wrote a leading technical book on the Arrow. "It's a moot point."



RYAN REMORE, CP

Pierre Sevigny at his home in Montreal.

Sevigny is categorical in deflecting blame for the Arrow's destruction from the Tories.

"That order did not come from the cabinet," Sevigny said. "We wanted to put those planes in storage and keep at least one model. There was no reason for eliminating the plans."

"The orders were in fact to suspend production, keep the project on ice, and keep the blueprints for ulterior events, just in case."

Designed as a defence against Russian bombers during the Cold War, the supersonic, twin-engine, delta-winged Arrow was a source of great pride for Canadians. The airframe and engine, the missile armament and electronic radar systems were all planned to be products of Canadian minds and engineering.

FLAWED TESTIMONY

With its cancellation came inevitable and surprisingly durable accounts that have become the Arrow myth and legend.

But Sevigny's testimony is partly flawed, Isinger said.

National Defence files made public in the late 1980s indicated General George Pearkes, defence minister until 1960, and then-air marshal Hugh Campbell ordered the destruction of five of the planes and some blueprints - documents, Isinger said, which Sevigny would not necessarily have known existed.

"There's no denying (Avro boss) Gordon was a hard man to like and thought the world owed him a living," Isinger added. "but I don't see any of it coming from him."

"If there's a document that says so, I haven't seen it."

Sevigny said he has never seen or heard of Defence files ordering the planes' destruction and insists the man responsible was Gordon.

Sevigny claimed that Gordon, in a fit of rage, ordered all blueprints and planes destroyed - out of spite and anger toward the Diefenbaker government for canceling the project.

"Gordon took it upon himself to destroy the thing because he thought Diefenbaker's government should have listened to him and was to blame."

"He loathed Diefenbaker ... and was unable, as were many others, to reason with him."

the capital
Montreal
Mon. Feb. 2/98
p. A10
GAZETTE