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Calgary Sun

Scrapping the Arrow made good sense

by Paul Jackson

Canadian patriots and military aficionados keep phoning to ask why I haven't yet penned a column on the much-championed CBC-TV mini-series on the Avro Arrow jet fighter.

After all, as an honorary commander in the Calgary-based Honorable Guard to the Museum of the Regiments, an honorary life member of the Royal Canadian Legion, honorary life member in the Ex-Air Gunner's Association of Canada, a member of the Mewata Officers' Mess, and a member of the Victory Services Club in London, I consider myself something of a patriot and military enthusiast.

So didn't I see the CBC production on Canada's great fighter plane?

Yes, I did.

You see, I, too, believed in the myth of the Arrow.

And, for a long time, I anguished because the death of the Arrow has been blamed on the vindictiveness or the shortsightedness of one of my greatest friends, John Diefenbaker, and Dief's photographs and personal letters to me line the walls of my office and den.

I'd planned to glue myself to the TV set when the CBC production aired. So why am I not lauding it?

Because, friends, the show was a load of typical CBC junk.

What we got was just another round of third-rate half fact and half fiction.

Most laughable, the CBC even went so far as to write in a part for an utterly fictitious woman jet pilot!

A woman jet fighter pilot -- blond bombshell, too -- in 1959?


What an absurdity.

Another absurdity was the spot in which U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower and Prime Minister John Diefenbaker are seen sitting in a row boat in the middle of a lake fishing together.

Their supposed conversation -- and how could anyone ever know what happened out on the


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middle of a lake -- had Eisenhower telling Dief the Arrow had to go. U.S. blackmail, no less. The evil U.S. military-industrial complex!

The truth is Diefenbaker didn't kill the Arrow because he was blackmailed by the U.S. or because it had originally been a Liberal government project.

He killed it because of vast cost over-runs, major design weaknesses, and the fact that no one other than the Royal Canadian Air Force wanted to buy it. He also listened to the best military experts in the world, who told him about the rise of Soviet rocketry, and explained why, as magnificent as the Arrow was, it was obsolete.

Dief also killed the project even though many Progressive Conservative MPs begged him to keep it going.

Ontario Premier Leslie Frost-- that great old man of conservatism -- also tried to pressure Diefenbaker into putting the plane into full-scale production. Frost promised all kinds of things to Diefenbaker, but Dief knew it would be irresponsible to repay Frost for political favors. (Unlike Jean Chretien's Liberal government, which will pour billions of dollars of the Canadian taxpayers' money into any useless project just to win votes.)

Today, we're repeatedly told Dief killed the project mainly because it was initially a Liberal government initiative.

Not true.

A goodly number of Grit MPs had doubts about the Arrow from Day 1. Veteran Sun columnist and former MP Doug Fisher has pointed out that biographies by or about Lester Pearson, Paul Martin Sr., Jack Pickersgill and C.D. Howe voice these doubts clearly.

Though 12,000 jobs were at stake, politicians on all sides of the Commons felt the jobs were too expensive to save.

It just didn't make sense on any front -- militarily, economically or politically.

Yes, the Avro Arrow was a beautiful plane.

So is the British-French Concorde jetliner.

The Concorde is a supreme example of technological prowess and beauty.

But the Concorde has lost billions, and so would the Arrow.

Still, we should have kept the prototypes. And used the Arrow at military flypasts all over the nation for years to come.

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