

# Powassan resident talks about his Avro Arrow collection of photographs

Pete Bonell was at the plant almost from the beginning

By **Rocco Frangione, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter** Almaguin News

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Pete Bonell and the model Avro Arrow he built during the mid '70s from memory and pictures he has of the iconic plane. - Rocco Frangione/Metroland

People in general who have an interest in Canada's Avro Arrow interceptor jet can thank individuals like Pete Bonell of Powassan who scooped up photographs of the doomed jet when former prime minister John Diefenbaker scrapped the project in 1959.

When Bonell left the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1957 he immediately landed a job as an electrician in the production bay at Avro Canada and was at the plant almost from the beginning.

A short time later Bonell left the production bay to become a flight safety technician and it was his job to work on components of the Arrow, like the plane's ejection seat, its drag chute, harness and survival equipment.

Bonell said the Arrow was flown at Malton Airport (now known as Toronto Pearson International Airport) from 1957 to 1959. He said it was no exaggeration that the Arrow was a supersonic jet considered to be ahead of its time.

"We realized we had cutting-edge technology," Bonell said. "The company was very secretive about releasing information about the Arrow because it didn't want anything getting out about it. It was an exciting time to be there."

But then February 20, 1959 arrived and the federal government announced the project's cancellation.

"That's when things started getting shredded," Bonell said. "They scrapped everything. They took pictures off the wall and shredded them. They didn't want any trace of that plane left around."

However, Bonell said he and quite a few former employees were able to save a number of the photographs from the shredder to keep as mementos.

"But you had to sneak everything out and get it by security," he said. "I don't know what would have happened if any of us would have gotten caught."

Among the photographs Bonell salvaged, which he has to this day, are black and white images of the Arrow in flight as well as other pictures associated with the Avro plant.

Part of Bonell's collection includes pictures he personally took of the Arrow well before the project was cancelled. But he broke the rules to get them.

Avro Canada had its own photographers to take the pictures the company wanted of the plane, equipment and personnel.

"We weren't allowed to take any pictures," Bonell said. "But against all the rules I took my camera out to the runway and managed to take a few pictures of the Arrow landing and taking off," Bonell said.

Bonell is an avid model builder and former pilot so it's no surprise that he has several large model planes in his home. One such model is a replica of the Arrow he built in the mid 1970s from memory and photographs. The 12-pound model is about six feet long and made from lightweight materials like blue foam, balsa wood and fibreglass.

"I designed it to fly but could never get a reliable thrust and the engine would quit on me," Bonell said. "I was able to taxi it though. If I ever did get it off the ground I don't know how long it would have remained airborne. Maybe it might have crashed and I wouldn't have it today."

Bonell's wife Lindy recognized his love for planes and for Christmas and birthdays she would buy him prints of various aircraft. One picture was of the Arrow which he hung up on the wall in his office when he began working for the North Bay airbase after leaving Avro. The picture of the Arrow had been hanging in the office for so many years it looked like it had always been there.

Consequently, when Bonell retired from the airbase and began packing his things, he removed the Arrow print prompting some employees to ask him "where are you going with that?"

"I guess they thought it belonged there," recalled Bonell.

Many of the Avro Canada photographs in Bonell's possession remain unframed although he has plans to have them framed at some point.

And at 86 he remains undecided about what to do with his Arrow collection to safeguard its continuance when he's no longer around.

*Rocco Frangione is a Local Journalism Initiative reporter. The Local Journalism Initiative is funded by the Government of Canada.*