

Janusz Zurakowski, 89



Photo: Sal Sacco/CP files

Jan Zurakowski, shown in this March 22, 1998 file photo, was the first pilot of the revolutionary Avro Arrow aircraft.

By LUMA MUHTADIE  
Globe and Mail Update

UPDATED AT 8:48 PM EST

Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2004

Janusz Zurakowski was chosen to take Canada's first supersonic fighter jet on its maiden flight one blustery March morning almost 46 years ago.

And though he vowed never to fly again after development of the Avro Arrow was suddenly cancelled 11 months later, his reputation as an accomplished pilot and gentleman continued to soar.

His decision to stay on the ground capped a long and daring career: He fought in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War; stunned British spectators at a 1951 air show by performing the first new aerial manoeuvre in 20 years Zurabatic cartwheel and became the first to break the sound barrier in a Canadian aircraft.

"Jan was different from other test pilots I met," Jim Floyd, the director of engineering at Avro when the Arrow was cancelled, once told The Globe and Mail in an interview. "He combined superb skill with tremendous courage...and he was a classy human being."

Mr. Zurakowski died peacefully at his home in Barry's Bay, Ont. on Monday evening. He was surrounded by his wife of 55 years, Anna, and two sons George and Mark. He also leaves five grandchildren. Mr. Zurakowski had been battling a rare blood disorder called myelodysplasia for nearly two years, succumbing to the illness at 89.

Despite his countless achievements in the air, he was cherished by friends and colleagues for being down to earth.

"I've known him for 15 years and I never saw any conceit," said Marek Kusiba, the pilot's friend and biographer.

Mr. Zurakowski once showed Mr. Kusiba a news article that had been published in The Toronto Telegram in 1952 -- the year the pilot moved to Toronto from Britain to work for A.V. Roe Canada Ltd.

In it, Mr. Zurakowski was described as "small, balding and anything but a test pilot," Mr. Kusiba recalled. "He just laughed about it, and said 'according to this report I should be a Hollywood macho man, like Gary Cooper or Ernest Hemingway.' After being through so much in his life, he always knew how to put things in perspective."

Janusz Zurakowski was born on Sept. 12, 1914 in Ryzawka, Russia, the third child of a Polish doctor and a young housewife. When he was six, the family fled Soviet Russia and settled in Garwolin, a town south of Warsaw.

As a boy of 15, Mr. Zurakowski took his first ride in a glider and was completely enchanted. He then resolved to spend the summers of his youth at the Polichno-Pinczow Gliding School in southern Poland, where his fondness for flying only deepened.

The young adventurer next set his sights on airplanes, much to the annoyance of his father, who had envisaged him becoming a doctor.

He applied to an aviation school, but was rejected for failing the medical test as the result of a "mysterious" illness, eventually discovering that his father had asked colleagues to rig the results.

Still, Mr. Zurakowski remained adamant about flying, and at 20 joined the Polish Air Force. Five years later, and a day after Hitler invaded Poland, he engaged in his first air combat.

The following summer he and members of the Polish Squadron fought in the Battle of Britain, in which he shot down three German planes and received the British Cross of Valour and bar.

He was known for a quirky habit he developed of planting gardens at the air bases where he was posted, his wife once told the Globe. Even when his colleagues remarked that it was pointless because the base was so transient, he insisted the plants could still be enjoyed by others.

After war's end, he was eventually posted at the Aircraft and Armament Experimental Establishment in Boscombe Down, where he tested Britain's first jet fighter, the de Havilland Vampire.

In 1952, the Zurakowskis decided to move to Canada, where Janusz worked as a test pilot for A.V. Roe Canada Ltd. "It's a great loss to the Gloster Aircraft Co." the Gloster

Bulletin in Britain wrote, "he will be missed by everyone."

After successfully unveiling the CF-100 and the CF-105, or Avro Arrow, Mr. Zurakowski was forced into yet another transition when the Diefenbaker government put a sudden end to the Arrow project. Though he had received lucrative job offers following the Arrow's cancellation, his heart had been broken by the industry and he opted for a life without flying.

He and Anna and their sons moved to a remote area in northern Ontario and built a tourist lodge called Kartuzy, where Mr. Zurakowski would spend the next 44 years until his death.

Despite being chastised by his friends and colleagues for dropping out of aviation and retreating into the woods, he shrugged off their criticism and relished the simpler life, designing and building boats and working in the garden.

Still, Mr. Zurakowski's contributions to aviation could not be buried.

In 1973, he was inducted into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame and in 1996, the Royal Canadian Mint issued a \$20 coin bearing his cameo. Last summer the residents of Barry's Bay built the Zurakowski Park and Museum in his honour.

A day after his death, his 20-year-old granddaughter Krysia reflected on the immense influence the late pilot had on her life.

"He was a role model, but he was also a grandpa," she said. "He was someone to look up to for his great skill in aviation, but he never showed the slightest bit of arrogance."

As a young girl Ms. Zurakowski and her grandfather spent hours immersed in conversation about flying, an interaction that inspired her current pursuit of a university degree in aerospace engineering as well as her role as an officer with the Cadets Instructor Cadre.

"I wanted to take him in a glider with me, but I never got the chance to do it before he got sick," Ms. Zurakowski said. "Every time I go into the air, I'll think of him."