

Bruderheim resident connects with museum about his father's secret Avro Arrow ties

BY JANA SEMENIUK

While Bruderheim resident Steve Todd has been wrestling with a shipping company for the past month trying to track down his wife's deceased parents' missing box of treasured keepsakes, he has also been carefully keeping treasured items of his own: documents and artifacts that belonged to his late father Desmond Todd who was chief planning supervisor for the Avro Arrow; a supersonic jet aircraft that could travel faster than the speed of sound.

There were five Arrows built in total, designed in the 1950s to intercept soviet bombers and protect Canada from the threat of the Cold War. It was the most advanced aircraft in the world. But without warning, the program was cancelled in Feb. 1959, breaking the hearts of those who put their lives into the project for most of the decade, including Steve's father Desmond.

This past weekend, Steve and Dolores travelled to the Calgary Air Show to meet Fred Wildeman; coordinator of the Calgary Avro Museum and share their documents and items.

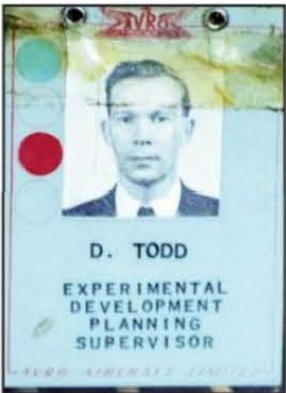
"These documents and artifacts are really special," said Wildeman. "Plans, artifacts, and documents pertaining to the Arrow were top secret and the day the program was destroyed; employees of the Avro were warned not to take anything from the buildings. But thankfully, many of them did."

Among the articles Steve's father left him are various rare black and white photographs of the Arrow, his identification cards, and a large model of the arrow that was used for testing in wind tunnels.

"I have no idea how he snuck that model out," said Steve. "And no one seems to know what it's made of."

Desmond Todd was born an only child in England in 1923 to wealthy parents who owned a factory. He grew up in affluence, developing a love of aviation after his cousin snuck him for a ride in

an airplane at the age of 10. While being colour-blind prevented him from becoming a pilot, he was able to secure work in the aviation field at the age of 23 when he was offered an engineering job for the Ontario aviation company A. V. Roe.



"My dad went to university and was a trained engineer when he started working for Avro (1947)," said Steve. "My grandparents sold the factory in England and moved to Malton, Ont. with him."

The first project Desmond worked on, was the Avro Jet Liner; a plane that doubled the speed and tripled the altitude of conventional propeller driven transport aircraft at the time, according to avromuseum.com. It first flew in 1949 but was discontinued when the government wanted Avro to focus on the fighter jet, Arrow.

Meanwhile, Desmond met his wife at Toronto Island. They had their first of two children, a daughter in 1953, and Steve in 1955 while Desmond continued his work on the Arrow. Employees of the fighter jet were extraordinarily committed to seeing it through to completion, and Desmond was no exception. Steve remembered a story his father told of a landing gear problem that required extra focus and Desmond, who would not leave the office until it was finished, only took small breaks to sleep and eat but remained at his desk until he was satisfied with the outcome.

"He would work literally like that for three days non-stop. He would not leave. They would just work until it was right," said Steve.

On Feb. 20, 1959, known as Black Friday, the Avro Arrow program

came to a screeching halt when officials ordered production stopped immediately. While reasons for the cancellation have been speculated on for years, the official reason provided by the Diefenbaker government was its high cost. The cancellation of the Arrow negatively affected the employees, who felt hurt and betrayed watching blow torches being taken to break apart the aircraft, their years of hard work and ingenuity destroyed.

"He (Dad) said it hurt and it was chaos. He said it was people running and screaming and crying in every direction. They were all committed employees," he said. "They're not just punching the clock; they were all very committed to building this thing. So, to see their work that they poured so much into, to watch it get destroyed. It hurt."

Wildeman said that after the Arrow, many employees went to work for NASA, including engineering genius Jim Chamberlain.

"He was the chief aerodynamicist and got an award from NASA," said Wildeman.

Chamberlain earned numerous awards over the years and was inducted into Canada's engineering hall of distinction in 1978. He passed away in 1981.

Meanwhile, Desmond did not leave Canada, instead choosing to work closer to home. After working as a service manager for Case Construction, Desmond designed and built fire prevention systems for Levitt safety until he retired.

"He got more into the troubleshooting side of it, and he's always done a lot of travel," said Steve.

Desmond passed away from a heart attack in 2003, his wife passing away three years later leaving Steve with the treasured stack of priceless photos, ID cards, documents, and a large model Avro Arrow.

Steve said his father was never the same after the Arrow ended.

"There was always a small hole there and he never had the same cali-

bre of job," he said. "He had a lifetime opportunity to come and do this and then it was all destroyed."

Meanwhile, Wildeman said he was grateful Steve and Dolores made the trip to visit with the items and explained why it's important for Canadians to know the Arrow's history.

"The most important thing about it is pride in what we did. What the Canadians did. So many things got invented, because of what Avro was doing. Transistors were invented totally wiping out the need for vacuum tubes," he said. "And the list just goes on and on and on."

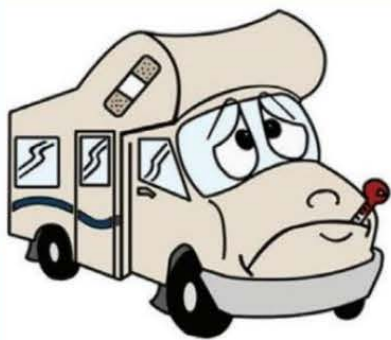
A.V. Roe, who came to Canada in 1945, had their assets sold in 1962 for 16.2 million dollars. The Malton airport where the first Avro Arrow prototype was rolled out in 1957 is the Toronto Pearson International Airport today.



One of Todd's rare photos shows an Arrow after it crashed due to a landing gear issue. Todd's father Desmond is shown wearing a tie and standing next to an unknown person.



Bruderheim resident Steve Todd (L) holding a model of the Avro Arrow, chats with Calgary's Avro Arrow museum coordinator Fred Wildeman (R) about the Arrow's history. Todd's father Desmond was an engineer on the project in the 50s. Photo: Jana Semeniuk



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