

RISE AND FALL OF THE AVRO ARROW

The killing of a great Canadian achievement



By Lloyd Walton

*Parts of this story appear in Lloyd Walton's historiography, *Chasing the Muse: Canada*. Lloyd is a multi-award-winning director-cinematographer, painter, and writer. His book is available everywhere.*

Black Friday, February 20, 1959 – I remember it well. There was something different about my father when he came up the back steps and into the kitchen after work.

Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, back in the Fifties, was a bustling town with more than 40 seaplanes operating out of the Ontario Provincial Air Service base. Whenever a plane would fly over our house, my dad would drop whatever he was doing and run out to have a look and I'd be right behind him.

He subscribed to flight magazines, several of which had glowing stories of a new long-range supersonic Canadian interceptor being built in Malton, Ontario by the Avro Aircraft Corporation. It was called the Arrow.

The first prototypes of the Arrow were exceeding expectations in speed and performance with highly-advanced features, and at the time was superior to any contemporary all-weather fighter. The Arrow put Canada in the forefront of the aviation world for the high standards of technological achievement and the development of the Canadian aircraft industry employing roughly 15,000 people.

Beyond that, the engineers and designers from Avro had their sights on the moon.

AN INSTANT HERO

The Arrow's chief test pilot, Jan Zurakowski, became an instant Canadian hero. They called him Zura. One evening there was an impromptu hush-hush VIP demo flight arranged by Crawford Gordon Jr., president of Avro Aircraft. The VIP was Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery ("Monty") of England.

A witness to that evening, Crawford Gordon III, (Crawford Jr's son) told me...

"Zura had it screaming down the runway flipped on its side with the wingtip merely feet off the ground. He passed us, levelled off, then shot straight up. After he landed, my dad headed straight for Zura.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to wreck my plane? That is MY plane!"

"Zura replied, 'With all due respect, Mr Gordon. You are the boss on the ground. I am the boss in the air.' "

I was just a kid in 1959, imagining myself being on high alert in my RCAF flight suit at a remote Royal Canadian Air Force fighter base on Hudson Bay. This was during the Cold War, and I sat poised for an invasion of Russian bombers. Red lights flashed, the sirens wailed, and the scramble was on. While still climbing into the cockpit, my Avro Arrow was firing up and automatically moving along a track to its launch position. By the time I was strapped in, helmet secured and canopy locked, I was unhooked at the end of the runway and released to go.

Two minutes later, with the snowy night 65,000 feet far below, I was heading for the stars in my Arrow, accelerating to three times the speed of sound. My radar officer in the back seat was locking on to the target. It was the new Mark 5 version. I could have gone to 100,000 feet doing Mach 5 with an operational radius of 1,000 miles.

OUR BLACK FRIDAY

Black Friday, February 20, 1959, I remember well. There was something different about my father when he came up the back steps and into the kitchen after work. He headed straight for the radio and turned up the five o'clock CBC news and sat down with his head in his hands.

That's when I first heard of the cancellation of the Avro Arrow. To make things worse, orders were to cut up, crush, and take to the dump five completed Arrows, those nearly completed on the assembly line, and all of the parts and components for the 37 aircraft awaiting final assembly. Roughly 14,000 employees were given their termination notice. A brain-drain of engineers left Canada to the U.S.A. to work on NASA's Mercury, Gemini and Apollo missions and to England to design and build the Concorde.

Many books and articles have been written speculating about the reasons for the shattering of our aviation supremacy. I suspect that the real names and issues lie deep in the files at a secure location both here and in the United States.

THE AMERICAN DECEPTION

The Arrow with its many advances could have cut into the burgeoning fighter aircraft industry on the American West Coast. Canadian government and RCAF brass, convinced by experts south of the border that the age of the jet fighter-interceptor was over, opted for purchasing and installing the American BOMARC missile defense system.



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President John F. Kennedy later told a good friend, Ted Sorenson, "At a Pentagon meeting today, I learned that we sold the BOMARC Missile Defense system to the Canadians knowing that it was completely useless." Prime Minister John Diefenbaker later blamed that blunder on the previous Liberal government, but it was he who delivered the message in the House of Commons that the Arrow program would be terminated.

Fifty years later the Arrow was back in the news. Jim Floyd, the chief engineer on the Arrow, had been in the news in conjunction with the anniversary of the first man on the moon. He said, "It could have been us first."

The vast hangar of the Ontario Provincial Air Service in Sault Ste. Marie was later transformed into the Canadian Bushplane Heritage Museum. The museum

was hosting a group of 100 pilots on a stopover from a cross-Canada fly-in. I gave a speech to the pilots as I was donating two of my paintings, titled *The Rise and Fall of the Arrow*, to the museum.

TEARS THAT NEVER END

One man stood up and spoke after my speech. He said, "It was the most wonderful job I ever had. All of my fellow workers would get up in the morning and rush to work with a big grin. Then they told us to put down our tools immediately and go home." His wife told me that occasionally he still weeps over the decision.

Since that time, I have met many workers that helped forge that great aircraft. I have been privileged to see classified footage of it in its attack mode. There is something quintessentially Canadian about the Arrow. When you look at its sleek outward appearance it looks slick and peaceful. But when push comes to shove, and when that weapons bay dropped, it turned into a very nasty vicious adversary. As Canadians, we too tend to keep that side of us hidden.

The mystique of the Avro Arrow continues to haunt and ignite the souls of aviation enthusiasts across the country.

Lest we forget. 🇨🇦

