

# Avro and the Aviator

The innovative Jetliner created a sensation 50 years ago, and Howard Hughes wanted a fleet of them. With a biopic of the billionaire poised to reap Oscars, **GRAHAM CHANDLER** talks to the aircraft's designer and test pilot about why the grand plan never took flight

The closing scene of *The Aviator* sees Howard Hughes wandering off, repeating, "Jets are gonna be the way of the future, the way of the future, the way of the future..." At the time, Avro Canada had designed, built and flown the first and only jet airliner in North America — Britain's de Havilland Comet beat it as the world's first by just 13 days — and Mr. Hughes wanted a fleet of them.

So before political squabbling and Cold War politics doomed any production of Canada's record-breaking C102 Jetliner, the legendary aviator coaxed Avro into flying it to his California base. Among those on board were the plane's chief designer, Jim Floyd, and its chief test pilot, Don Rogers.

The crew arrived at Mr. Hughes's Culver City airfield on a late-spring afternoon in 1952 and the next day the billionaire arranged to meet them at their airplane. So they waited beside the Jetliner. And waited, and waited.

"My first impression was here was someone who was almost, what shall we say, a phantom," says Mr. Floyd, 90. "He drove up in a car, and stayed in the car about two hours talking to somebody."

Finally the car door opened and Mr. Hughes walked over to meet the team. "Crawford Gordon [then president and general manager of Avro Canada] held his hand out and Howard didn't respond," Mr. Floyd says. "He thought there were germs on everybody's hands."

Mr. Rogers, 88, remembers that Mr. Hughes, who "looked just like the actor did toward the end of the movie," climbed into the cockpit and wanted to go flying. He sat him in the co-pilot's seat. "He didn't say very much. He just took the ride in the right-hand seat for a few circuits, then I put him in the left seat for a few circuits."

Mr. Rogers says Mr. Hughes was a fast learner, and didn't do many of the things featured in the movie such as wrapping the control wheel with cellophane or performing daredevil theatrics in the cockpit.

But there's one aspect of Mr. Hughes's flying in *The Aviator* that he remembers well: his cavalier disregard for flight plans and radio instructions. "Flight plans weren't mandatory in those days," he says. "He'd just take off on his own private strip and I'd be searching the sky very carefully for other aircraft because we hadn't announced our departure to the main airport at Los Angeles. And there was quite a lot of traffic there."

After their first flight out of Culver City, Mr. Hughes taxied the Jetliner to the other side of his airport, parked it under a tree and put guards around it. No one else was allowed near it. "His pilots never did get to fly the airplane," Mr. Rogers says.

Mr. Hughes had been intrigued by the Jetliner for a while. Just two years before, on April 18, 1950, the airplane made what was probably the most widely publicized airliner flight in North American history when it left Toronto and blew into New York City in less than an hour.

Scores of newspapers, including the prestigious New York Times, carried headlines such as "Canadian Jet Liner Makes Air History" and "Jet Airliner Cuts Flying Time in

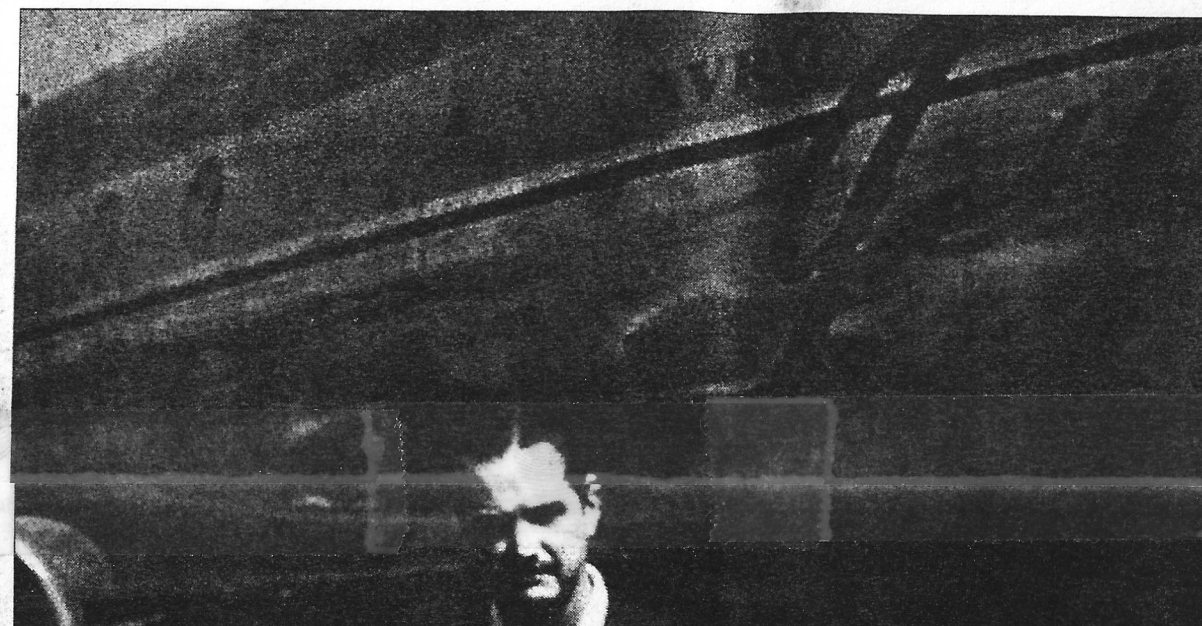


PHOTO COURTESY OF DON ROGERS

Howard Hughes wanted Avro to build 30 Jetliners for TWA.

Half." Recognizing Canada's huge jump on U.S. airliner manufacturers, many also blasted the lagging state of the American industry.

The Jetliner then went on to break almost every passenger transport record in the book.

The forward-thinking Mr. Hughes, who at the time controlled Trans World Airlines, needed a one-up on his long-time rival, Pan American Airways.

He knew that the Jetliner cruised at double the speed of the prop-driven airliners of the day so wanted to get intimate with the new jet's technical details. He took a suite in the Beverly Hills Hotel and invited Mr. Floyd to sit down with him and

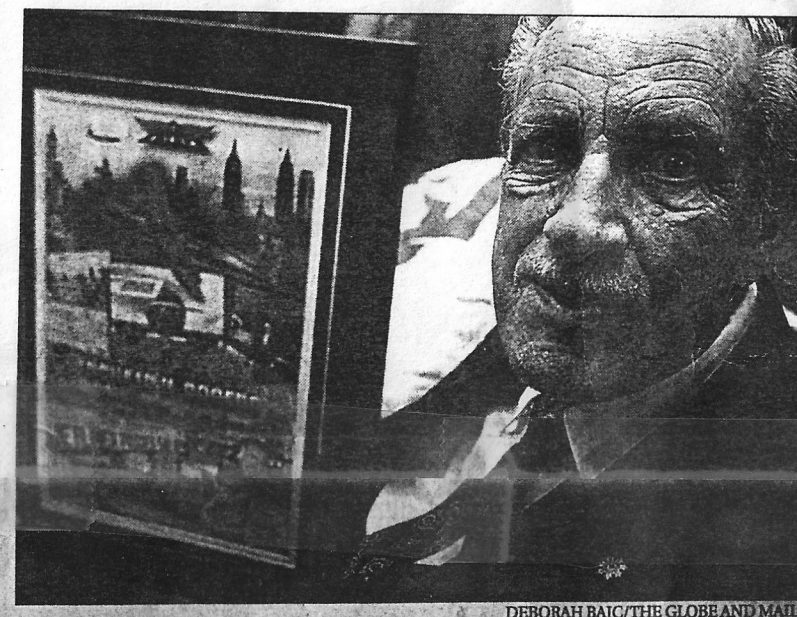
pore over the rolls and rolls of blueprints the team had brought along.

"We stretched all the drawings out on the dining-room table, starting off about 7 o'clock at night or thereabouts," Mr. Floyd says. "I hadn't had my dinner, and it went on till about 6 o'clock the next morning. All he had was a glass of water throughout the night. I think he got me a glass of orange [juice] or something."

After 11 hours alone with Mr. Hughes talking nothing but Jetliner particulars, Mr. Floyd came to admire his engineering acumen. "My God, he really asked the questions that should be asked," he says. "He was absolutely at home with the

drawings and all the things we were talking about. I thoroughly enjoyed that. He came across as a very knowledgeable engineer. And he was."

When Mr. Hughes was too busy, he would send Bob Rummel, TWA's planning director and Mr. Hughes's confidant on technical matters, to go over more details in the design. "I met Bob many times," Mr. Floyd says. "Once, when I went to the Biltmore to meet him there at Howard's suggestion, Bob said, 'Do you realize that Howard has booked the three rooms — your room, the room on the right of you and the room on the left of you — so that nobody will listen in to our conver-



DEBORAH RAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Former test pilot Don Rogers, who now lives in Toronto, and his family were given the use of a California residence by Howard Hughes.

sations? You never knew what he was going to do."

Looking at technical details of the Jetliner wasn't the original intent of taking it to California. Commercial markets for the plane in Canada were thin. "TCA [Trans Canada Airlines, now Air Canada] had certainly made it clear that they didn't want to be the first ones to operate a jet transport," Mr. Floyd says.

But after the airplane's record-smashing Toronto-New York flight, the Jetliner had toured the United States to wide acclaim and more than a few American airlines were interested, as well as the U.S. Air Force, which reportedly had set aside funding for 20 Jetliners.

However, the Canadian government, reacting in part to the outbreak of the Korean War in June, 1950, cancelled the project in 1951 in order to concentrate on the CF-100 interceptor for the RCAF.

To keep Jetliner prospects alive, Avro hatched a rescue plan. "Crawford Gordon got the idea that Howard Hughes is good for new projects and so why don't we get him interested in the Jetliner?" Mr. Floyd says.

At the time, Hughes Aircraft was already designing a new radar and fire-control system for the CF-100 and the Jetliner would make a good flying test-bed for the system. "The Jetliner was nearly as fast as a CF-100 so we could put all the equipment in there and try it out," Mr. Floyd says.

Mr. Hughes encouraged the idea. The CF-100 equipment never got installed, but he kept the Jetliner at Culver City for six months. "We only flew it for about 14 hours the whole time," Mr. Rogers says.

Because the test pilot had to be on standby to fly at any time, Mr. Hughes kindly rented him and his family a luxurious former ambassador's residence in nearby Coldwater Canyon replete with a swimming pool and fruit trees.

"We were arranging for them [his family] to come down on TWA after he had arranged the house for us," Mr. Rogers recalls. "I was speaking to him on the phone from my hotel and said, 'I'll call my wife with the arrangements.' He said, 'Yeah, okay, Don, but wait till after 6 o'clock — the rates are cheaper then.' Here he had just spent a fortune getting this great big house for us, a car and all

that stuff. And then got penny-pinching on the telephone call."

The members of the Avro team were quite pleased with their time in California. They even shared a bit of Hollywood social life with Mr. Hughes.

As in the movie, starlets were ever-present. Mr. Floyd particularly remembers a dinner the billionaire laid on at the Beverly Hills Hotel. "Howard was there, some of the people from Hughes Aircraft, and there were two beautiful ladies there of course," he says. "One was actress Margaret Sheridan. And there was another girl, Al Capp's Wolfgal. She was the model for his comic strip, a beautiful girl."

By the end of Avro's California sojourn, Mr. Hughes still had his starlets but never did get his Jetliners. "He wanted Avro to build 30 for TWA," Mr. Rogers recalls. But C.D. Howe, the Canadian cabinet minister responsible for aircraft production, would have no part of it. He wrote to Avro Canada saying that "having in mind the colossal investment of government funds... any such use of your floor space cannot be tolerated."

Mr. Hughes got Convair in the United States interested in building them, "but they were under the same restrictions that we were — because of the Korean War," Mr. Rogers says. "So the whole [Hughes Jetliner] program fell through and I was told to bring the airplane back to Toronto."

With production prospects bleak, the Jetliner stayed at Avro until 1956, when it was cut up for scrap.

Mr. Hughes continued to request design proposals from Avro on long-range aircraft and supersonic transports until early 1958. "He thought we had a very talented design team here in Canada," says Mr. Floyd, who was later placed in charge of the ill-fated Arrow program.

*The Aviator* has received many honours, including a Golden Globe for best picture and a fistful of Oscar nominations. But Mr. Floyd has his own tribute: an inscription on a Jetliner photograph. "To Jim Floyd, with commendation for this very good design. Howard Hughes."

Graham Chandler is a Calgary-based freelance writer.