

Post-War Politics 1946-1984

Avro Arrow

"I thought to myself, well, I had to make these decisions; I know people blamed me for a lot of it; but I did what was right in my opinion."

(Interview #61, April 5 1967. ACC 74-1 Box 6)



The Canadian aircraft company A.V. Roe was a world leader in development and design. Avro's post-war achievements included the CF-100 jet fighter (1950), which served Canada in NATO for a decade, and the Avro Jetliner (C-102) which flew in August 1949; this was the first jet airliner in North America. Despite the Jetliner's innovative design, and interest from foreign buyers, it never went into production; government Cold War priorities pushed instead for high CF-100 production.

The Avro Arrow (CF-105) supersonic, twin-engined, all weather interceptor, began development in 1949 and was accepted by the Liberal government in 1953 as the eventual replacement for the Avro CF-100. In addition to the airframe, the Arrow's "Iroquois" engine and the fire-control and missile systems were also being developed in Canada. In 1958 the Canadian fire-control and missile program was cancelled. In 1959, the government cancelled the Arrow project and ordered all planes scrapped. Avro laid off 14,000. Many of the highly skilled former employees were to emigrate to the U.S. where they played important roles in the space program and covert aviation development. Many Canadians still believe the cancellation was a landmark in the loss of Canadian technical leadership and independence.

The reasons given for the Arrow's cancellation are diverse and depend on whom is asked. Rising costs, and the perceived shift from a Soviet bomber to an ICBM threat, are reasons central to the supporters of the scrapping. Pressure from the U.S. is commonly mentioned by opponents of the cancellation.

Repeated attempts had been made to sell the aircraft to the United States, but the U.S. had its own fighter program and was at the same time promoting the nuclear-tipped Bomarc anti-bomber defence missile. After the Arrow, the Canadian government was to purchase American fighters and install the problematic, and soon defunct, Bomarc system.

In perhaps the most heated controversy in his career, George R. Pearkes, as Minister of Defence at the time of the cancellation of the Arrow, made key decisions regarding Canada's defence system. Dr. Reginald Roy recorded interviews with Pearkes and other military men who commented on the Arrow project. George Pearkes never wavered in maintaining that he had made the correct, though very difficult, decision. The transcripts and tapes of Dr. Roy's interviews are part of the Special Collections holdings at the University of Victoria.

To read excerpts of George Pearkes's interpretation of events influencing the cancellation of the

Arrow Decisions

The following is George R. Pearkes' interpretation of events as related in an interview conducted by Dr.

Reginald Roy - April 5, 1967:

(ACC 74-1 Box 5, Interview #61)

"I took chances - we were defenceless against the high powered bomber - we had the old CF-100, it couldn't compete with the modern Russian bomber; we had no supersonic fighter, but the Americans emphasized the fact that they had lots of them. Now then, the question I had to face...was, if you scrapped the Arrow, you'd got nothing; what will you do? Will you buy American aircraft to fill in this gap - cheaper American aircraft...That's where people began to tear their hair and say 'you scrapped the Arrow, now you're turning round and buying cheaper (and they would say "not so good") aircraft - although I think the American aircraft was just as good as the Arrow would have been at any time - or say, 'here, you can rely on American aircraft, not having bought them, but putting your pride in your pocket' and saying 'here, we will give facilities for American fighter squadrons to come and be stationed in Canada so that they can get the advantage there, or if not actually stationed in there, when the situation deteriorates they can move forward and operate from Canadian airfields. And I had the assurance that the Americans at this time had lots of fighters...and I was talking to the Under Secretary of Defence...he said to me, 'If I was you, I wouldn't put all that money into that aircraft - if you don't want to buy aircraft from us, you may rest assured that we've got lots of them which we can use in the help of the defence of the North American Continent if a crisis comes. And that's what convinced me more than anything else..."

R: I must say I sympathize with the position you found yourself in with respect to the Arrow because...I can't help but think that at this time there must have been one devil of a lot of pressure on you to carry it on.

P: To carry on the Arrow? Oh, we were besieged by A.V. Roe people - they were always knocking at the door. And mind you, a lot of the airforce people themselves wanted it. Oh yes, the airforce were bitterly...a lot of the airforce people, I don't say all...the airforce had senior officers working with A.V. Roe and had been there and their attitude was "get more money out of the government - let us have this - why don't you get more money out - are you trying hard enough - we like this, why this will be a wonderful Canadian fighter." I don't say all the airforce, but there was quite a large percentage.



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