

DAVE CHAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Janusz Zurakowski, who took the Avro Arrow on its inaugural test flight, is seen at his home in Barry's Bay, Ont. In July, a municipal park was named in his honour, featuring a model of the famed Canadian fighter jet and a stone carving of Mr. Zurakowski. The park was constructed using more than \$100,000 that neighbours raised through donations.

The day a dream crashed to earth

Although the Avro Arrow died, the jet's first pilot has become a Canadian hero

BY LUMA MUHTADIE

Janusz Zurakowski pulls the bedcovers over his frail body and recalls the pivotal decision that darkened one of the brightest spots in Canadian aviation history, and led him to rechart the entire course of his life.

On a blustery March morning in 1958, Mr. Zurakowski had been the pilot to take the Avro Arrow fighter jet to the sky for its inaugural test flight.

Eleven months later — on Feb. 20, 1959 — former prime minister John Diefenbaker's Conservative government killed the groundbreaking development of the first Canadian supersonic fighter jet, for reasons hotly debated to this day. Many believe Mr. Diefenbaker was poorly served by advisers who knew little about the aviation industry and were reluctant to pour dollars into the Canadian air force at the expense of the army and navy.

Crushed by Ottawa's decision, Mr. Zurakowski resolved never to fly again.

"When the Arrow was being built, the war had ended and everybody was hopeful in this country," he says. "Many people say the destruction of the Arrow was the end of optimism in Canada."

Now, in what doctors have called his final days, the 89-year-old former pilot spends all his time indoors, surrounded by photos of his youthful self in the cockpit of a plane or strolling across an airfield in uniform.

Certificates and awards hang on his wall testifying to his accomplishments. He was a decorated Royal Air Force veteran of the Second World War, and astounded spectators at Britain's Farnborough Air Show in 1951 with the first new aerial manoeuvre — coined the "Zurabatic cartwheel" — in 20 years. He was recognized as one of the country's most gifted test pilots and the first person to break the sound barrier in a Canadian aircraft.

Sitting still, his once robust body emaciated by illness, his clouded blue eyes staring into the distance, Mr. Zurakowski speaks of his colleagues who left the country after the Arrow's cancellation to accept lucrative jobs elsewhere. Of his three Arrow co-pilots, the late Wladyslaw (Spud) Potocki was recruited by North American Rockwell in California; the late Jack Woodman went to work for Lockheed Aircraft in California; and Peter Cope was hired by the Boeing Company in Washington.

Mr. Zurakowski received lucra-

tive offers, but steadfastly refused to leave his chosen country. Instead, he sold his Toronto home and moved to a remote area in northern Ontario.

He bought a 57-hectare property that he'd spotted more than a year earlier while flying overhead, and decided to live there for the rest of his life.

"I was so fed up with my life up to that time," Mr. Zurakowski says in soft, slowly spoken words. "I fought for five years for Poland and we lost independence, a wasted effort," he says with a weak laugh.

"I fought the Battle of Britain, then worked a number of years in the English aircraft industry, where my critical reports of the aircraft were not taken seriously by my boss."

"Then I came to Canada and worked for Avro and everything was showing well and the government did this."

"I said I'll never work in the aircraft industry again. Forget about it — start a new life."

In an area near Algonquin Park called Barry's Bay, Mr. Zurakowski set out to clear a thicket of northern birch, beech, pine, hemlock, spruce and sugar maples that backed onto shimmering Kamanisk Lake.

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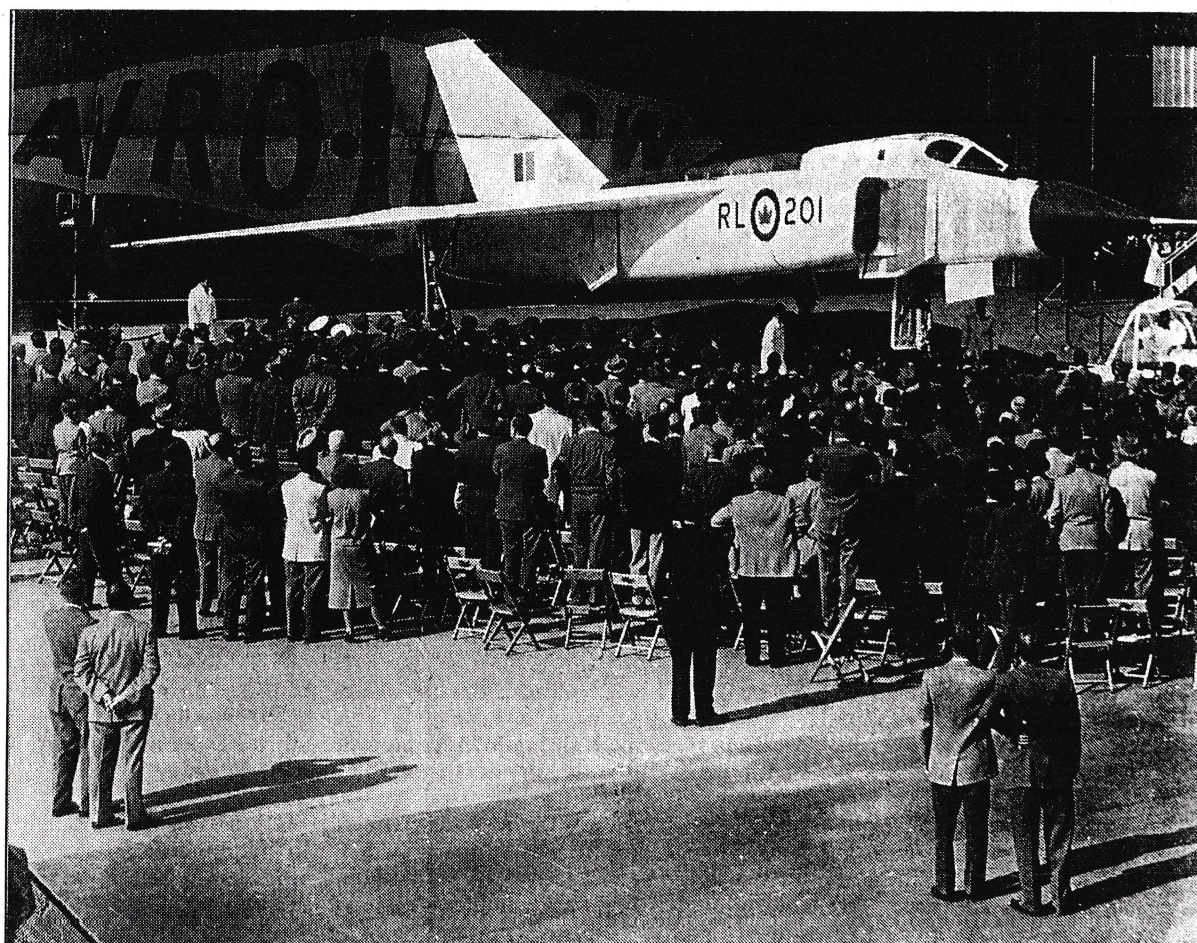
For half a year, he and his wife Anna and two sons lived in a hut without heat, electricity, running water or a telephone line and took their children by boat to a school five kilometres away. In the meantime, they built a tourist lodge called Kartuz.

Many shook their heads at his drastic transformation from praised pilot to pioneer.

"Some of my friends were claiming that I'm crazy dropping out of the industry and going into the bush," he says.

While Mr. Zurakowski remained grounded, not even glancing at the Cessnas that frequently buzzed overhead, his love of flying remained a potent force and inspiration that drove him to spend countless hours designing and building vehicles reminiscent of planes.

One was a snowmobile powered



HAROLD ROBINSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Avro Arrow — the first Canadian supersonic fighter jet — is rolled out of its hangar on Oct. 4, 1957. Two years later, prime minister John Diefenbaker killed the groundbreaking project.

by a Volkswagen engine, with a huge propeller attached to a long shaft that jutted out the back. "It looked like an airplane without wings," says his eldest son, George, an electrical engineer now in his 50s.

Another was a 20-foot sailboat with the lateral wings of a glider, a giant vertical sail similar to a plane's wing and nothing but a fin skimming the water's surface. It resembled a plane that never took off, George says.

Jim Floyd, Mr. Zurakowski's good friend and the vice-president and director of engineering at Avro when the Arrow was cancelled, grasped the significance of his friend's decision to abandon his true love forever.

He had himself left the country after the Arrow's cancellation to start an aviation consulting firm in his native Britain, and worked with the government on the Concorde for nine years.

"Knowing what he'd done in his life, that was a big decision for Jan to make," said Mr. Floyd, who returned to Toronto after retiring in 1981.

"Jan was different from other test pilots I met. He combined superb skill with tremendous courage."

"He was not only aware of the best way to flight-test an aircraft, he was also aware of what was going on with respect to aerody-

namics, control response and the 1,001 things required to make an aircraft fly properly. He took enor-

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mous risks, like the time he flew the CF-100 supersonically in a nosedive.

"Some of my engineers had apoplexy — they were absolutely staggered. The aircraft wasn't designed to fly supersonically and he just took it outside the flying envelope."

As much as he tried, Mr. Zurakowski simply couldn't bury his talent, even as he lived in a forest for more than four decades.

And as interest in the Avro Arrow crescendoed into mania over time, Canadians thirsting for information began going straight to the source. Students and teachers, air cadets and seasoned pilots flooded Mr. Zurakowski with phone calls and letters, all wanting to hear from one of two surviving Arrow pilots.

"He's a lightning rod for this episode of Canadian history," his son George said.

In 1973, Mr. Zurakowski was in-

ducted into Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame. In 1996, the Royal Canadian Mint issued a \$20 coin commemorating the flight of the CF-100 reaching the speed of sound and bearing a cameo of Mr. Zurakowski. A year later he was named by the Western Canada Museum as a "Pioneer of Canadian Aviation," and, in 2000, the Canadian Flight Test Centre Building in Cold Lake, Alta., was named the Janusz Zurakowski Building.

But the biggest surprise came in July, when a group of Barry's Bay residents celebrated the hero in their midst by unveiling the Zurakowski Park.

The park features a scaled-down model of the Avro Arrow, its nose thrusting toward the sky, and beside it a stone carving of Mr. Zurakowski. The park was constructed using more than \$100,000 that neighbours raised through donations, and they are now raising more to build an on-site museum.

"I was very proud," Mr. Zurakowski said. "Not because they put my name here, but because of the aircraft Arrow."

"In the end, the prime minister and his supposed experts hoped that the name Avro Arrow would disappear and be forgotten, and instead it went the opposite way."

"Every year, more and more people are trying to remember the Arrow. It has become a Canadian icon."