



— Photo by CP

Jan Zurakowski was the chief development pilot of the all-Canadian Avro Arrow fighter jet.

Arrow's end still baffling

BARRY'S BAY, Ont. (CP) — Jan Zurakowski still blinks back tears when he thinks of that day, nearly 30 years ago, when Ottawa cancelled the Avro Arrow.

Now 74, Zurakowski, chief development pilot of the Arrow from 1951 to 1959, still cannot understand why the government of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker trashed the most advanced fighter jet in the world.

He recalls the cheers of thousands of people at Malton Airport, now Pearson International, as he flew the Arrow on a 35-minute test run on March 25, 1958.

"It was a thrill — Once you opened it up, it was really fast," he says of the fighter that could move at twice the speed of sound.

Telegram sealed jet's fate

In a telegram issued in 1959, the fate of the Arrow was sealed. The Diefenbaker government had decided the fighter would be obsolete in a year and cancelled it.

About 13,000 workers found themselves jobless.

Zurakowski was 44 and one of the world's best test pilots when he was flying the Arrow. When it was axed, he walked away from the 25-year flying career that started in his native Poland in 1934.

"The Avro Arrow was the high point of my career," he said. "Once the cancellation of the Arrow took place, I decided to make a change."

Zurakowski, his wife and two sons moved to this Ottawa Valley community, about 200 km northwest of Ottawa, where he turned to building boats. He also learned construction and road-building as he developed a tourist retreat beside a local lake.

He never worked again as a test pilot and he never forgot the Arrow.

Like today's fighters

"I had flown the British Javelin before, but this aircraft was more like all the new fighters today.

"Destroying the Arrow was wrong. In the end, it destroyed our aircraft industry, resulted in the export of the brains of our country . . .

"And what did we gain from it? We saved some money."

Zurakowski, who still follows the aircraft industry, says information about new Soviet jets shows they perform at the same level as the Arrow did 30 years ago.

"Now, in the aircraft industry, I don't think we can ever catch up because we're too far behind."