

The Arrow Myth Still Flies

Canada at the end of WWII possessed among the world's largest sea, land and air forces. In demobilizing those forces, some believe successive federal governments squandered a chance to remain a major world player. But post-war governments concluded the country lacked the industrial base and manpower necessary for such status even if Canadians wanted it. Consequently, most analysts agree that a measure of downsizing - though not to today's skeletal levels - was the only realistic policy for a middle-rank power.

When it comes to the supersonic CF-105 Arrow, however, critics are less forgiving. The long-range, high-altitude, all-weather fighter-interceptor, designed for the RCAF by Avro in the 1950's, was meant to propel Canada to the forefront of international aeronautics. But within a year of the Arrow's 1958 maiden flight, Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker cancelled the project, citing unmanageable costs and the advent of missile defence. All six prototypes were cut up for scrap.

Nearly 40 years later, the CF-105 will fly again - this time across Canadians' television screens in a \$7.8 million, CBC miniseries to air in Jan 1997. To nationalists, the Arrow symbolizes opportunity squandered.

In July, cast and crew were in Gimli, Man, filming a "pivotal" scene with Diefenbaker fishing at a lake with U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower confides his growing fear of the "military-industrial complex" - a warning he later broadcast.

A similar suspicion of self-serving military and industry planners, according to the CBC account, helps convince Diefenbaker to terminate the project. "It would be unfair to blame the whole thing on Diefenbaker," says production spokesman Ches Yetman. "So the series doesn't hit him too hard." Indeed, the treatment sounds decidedly less severe than the beating the "Chief" has received from detractors who charge he was motivated by a partisan desire to terminate a project that had its origins in a 1953 Lib-

eral agreement with A.V. Roe Canada Ltd.

"There is some concern that the CBC has a very bad track record with military history," says Bob Christie, a retired air force brigadier-general, citing *The Valour and the Horror*, Mothercorp's revisionist 1992 assault on the performance of Allied bombers in WWII.

BGen Christie, who was present at the first flight of the Arrow on 25 Mar 1958, as a squadron leader, thinks too much fuss is made about the Arrow. "We'll have to wait til we've seen the film," he says, "but I suspect they're looking for something that's not there."

Many authors have presented the Arrow's cancellation as a national tragedy. Greig Stewart's 1988 *Shutting Down the National Dream*, for example, is one of the film makers' key sources. Larry Milberry, author of a half-dozen books on aviation, allows that the CF-105 was state-of-the-art in its day. But since then, the prototype "has attained cult status that has taken on a life of its own."

The Arrow was first rolled out in Malton, Ont, on 4 Oct 1957 - the same day the Soviet Union launched the first Sputnik satellite. In over 70 hours of test flight time it clocked a top speed of Mach 1.96, just short of twice the speed of sound. Originally planned at \$2 million apiece, by 1959 the government faced a \$12.5 million bill per plane. Engine, fire control, landing gear and missile system problems contributed to escalating costs.

British Columbia Reform MP Jack Frazer was an RCAF flight lieutenant at the time of the Arrow's cancellation. "We had been aching to get our hands on it, of course," recalls Frazer, who finished his career as a colonel. "It was leading-edge technology."

For all that, he says, airmen also understood there were entirely legitimate reasons why it was scuppered. "We were aware that Avro had done itself some damage. They knew they had a captive market and were trying to milk the cow for every-

thing she was worth and the cream as well. It was also doubtful that the Yanks would buy a foreign airplane."

Another reason for cancelling the Arrow, explains University of Carleton aeronautical engineer Julius Lukasiewicz, was that missile defence came into vogue, "So Diefenbaker brought in the Bomarc." In 1961 Ottawa added American F-101 Voodoos as interceptors, Milberry notes, "which were more than adequate and saved taxpayers a lot of money" compared to the Arrow. "The big problem was not cancelling the Arrow," says Professor Lukasiewicz, "but starting it in the first place. It was not a viable project because Canada had no market for it."

He adds that it is a myth that Canada was almost alone in working on ultra-high-speed planes. "It was trendy after WWII to get into high-speed aircraft." Argentina, Egypt and India were all trying to build interceptors, "and they were all cancelled for the same reason as Canada's. None of the supposed technical advantages of [the Arrow] matter anyway," Prof. Lukasiewicz says. "The fact is Canada is not a country that can support that type of technology."

It is no surprise that the plane's developers promoted a more sinister explanation for the grounding of their dream. "Of course the Avro people were upset when their gravy train came to a screeching halt," remarks Milberry. "But the taxpayer was getting screwed up and down." BGen Christie even excuses Diefenbaker from the blame for the large-scale lay-offs Arrow supporters assigned to the Tory prime minister. "It was the best thing that could have happened to the employees," he insists, as it allowed them to grab lucrative jobs at other firms in the U.S., Canada and Britain. "They'd all have been laid off anyway, because the Arrow would never have gone into service." ☺

(Ed note: Reprinted courtesy of Alberta/Western Report. Chris Champion is a staff reporter with the Report.)

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