

Arrow That Doesn't Fly

The CBC's mini-series about the interceptor that wasn't is good to look at but ungrounded in facts

By MICHAEL BLISS

HISTORY IT ISN'T. BILLED AS "Dramatic fiction inspired by real events," the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's mini-series *The Arrow*, aired Jan. 12 and 13, plays fast and loose with the facts. The upshot is a drama that never soars as high as the ill-starred jet interceptor itself. For aviation buffs, engineers and romantic Canadian nationalists, *Arrow* can be hot stuff. Others may not feel the need for four hours of mythologizing.

Reality is more like this: as the cold war developed in the 1940s and 1950s, Ottawa thought a job-rich, domestic aircraft industry could be built on defense production. When A.V. Roe Co., Ltd. (Avro), based near Toronto, managed to build a serviceable jet fighter, the CF-100, for the Royal Canadian Air Force, the government decided to fund development of an advanced supersonic interceptor, the CF-105 Arrow. At the behest of nationalist ministers, especially C.D. Howe, the Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent poured hundreds of millions into the project.

By 1957 the Arrow was behind schedule, costs had soared, no other countries had offered to buy the plane, and Avro's president, Crawford Gordon, was sinking into alcoholic irresponsibility. The new Conservative government of John Diefenbaker warned Avro repeatedly that the Arrow program was in trouble. In February 1959 it canned the project. The company laid off 14,000 workers. Many engineers left for good jobs in the U.S., some in the space program. All existing Arrows were cut up for scrap. Legend has it that one survived.

A greater myth sprang up: that the world's finest aircraft, which would have rocketed Canada into global aerospace leadership, had been shot down by bumbling fools acting out an American-

driven agenda. Thus a national dream died, and Canada began its descent into mediocrity. "The Arrow is a wonderful success!" exclaims Sara Botsford, playing a scarlet-haired (and imaginary) engineer, Kate O'Hara. "In this country that's the problem," replies gorgeous journalist June Callwood (Mauralea Austin). "The Arrow is too much of a success."

Never mind that the real Arrow was never fully flight-tested, never flew with

over, and the dumb Canuck takes the bait. The Yanks want to bring down the Arrow, it seems, because it might shoot down their U2 spy planes. In the end, a semicrazed Diefenbaker orders all Arrows destroyed for fear that foreigners will learn how good they are. In a literal flight of fancy, true-believing Arrow-nauts steal the last plane, break world speed and altitude records and fly into the sunset.

The flight scenes are a special-effects tour de force: the Arrow was beautiful to watch. Some viewers will no doubt be caught up in the drama of dedicated men and women trying to realize a dream against all odds. Homecoming star Dan Aykroyd starts off as a fairly wooden Crawford Gordon but warms to the role as Gordon falls apart. Robin Gammell is C.D. Howe reincarnate. The series is family entertainment 1950s-style, remarkably free of sex or cursing. Only poor, doomed Gordon has a mistress and says "goddam."

At its best, *The Arrow* plays to *Boys' Own* magazine fantasies about scientific miracles and to nationalist longings for what might have been if only the Canadian government had given engineers and designers a blank check. In the real world, no responsible government could have continued to support the Arrow, and even if it had, the only result would have been to delay the inevitable integration of North American defense production.

Do we still cherish national myths like the Avro Arrow? How many younger Canadians, citizens of an in-

terdependent world, will buy into an economic nationalism that was already anachronistic 40 years ago? Sensible folk who want to be proud of Canada's real achievements might look at our world-class writers, medical researchers, athletes, yes, even our modern aerospace companies that lend the Yanks a helping hand.

The Arrow's producers were not quite up to date. I tell my history students that the last CF-105 is stored in a barn in Saskatchewan. It's taken out and flown once a year. By Elvis. ■

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TORONTO ARROWNAUTS: Botsford as engineer, Aykroyd as president and Aidan Devine as the superceptor's chief designer

its intended engine or electronics or weapons systems. Never mind that Avro's track record was horrible and the company was a mess. Never mind that the Liberals too had given up on the Arrow but postponed cancellation until after an election they expected to win. Based in part on Greig Stewart's 1988 book, *Shutting Down the National Dream*, the series buys every scrap of Arrow mythology and adds more.

In one scene, two ole boys out fishin' turn out to be Diefenbaker and U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower (to whom Michael Moriarty and Robert Haley bear no resemblance at all). Ike tells Dief that the era of jet interceptors is