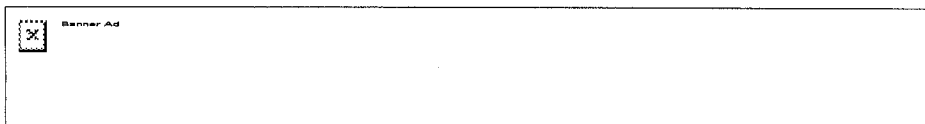




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The Globe and Mail

Reunion stirs memories of jet fighter's glory days

Experts called Avro Arrow the world's fastest

Monday, March 28, 1988

BY SHAUN WATERS

The Globe and Mail

It was billed as a reunion, but for many of the more than 1,000 people who solemnly circled tables holding parachutes, gauges and other remains of the first and last Canadian-built supersonic jet fighter, it more closely resembled a memorial.

They were at a Toronto hotel Saturday to attend the Canadian Aviation Historical Society's reunion marking the 30th anniversary of the first flight of the CF-105 Arrow.

Among the crowd were the planes' two test pilots and several hundred of the workers who built what was hailed by aviation experts in the fifties as the fastest, most advanced jet fighter in the world.

"This is now my only consolation," 73-year-old former test pilot Jan **Zurakowski** said as he ran his fingers over a ragged piece of fuselage from the one of the Arrows. "It is like a wake for the best days of my life."

Mr. **Zurakowski**, a veteran of the Battle of Britain and a Polish war hero, flew the single-seater Arrow on its maiden flight out of Malton Airport on March 25, 1958, in front of thousands of cheering workers and their families.

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"All I could think of was all the buttons I had to watch and make sure I landed in one piece," Mr. **Zurakowski** said. "On the flight simulators, I always crashed after nine seconds."

Within a year of his successful flight, all five Arrows were cut up for scrap after prime minister John Diefenbaker cancelled the Avro Canada project. At the time, Mr. Diefenbaker said manned fighters were considered obsolete and the \$2-million price tag for each Arrow was too high for a country caught in a recession.

Canada would buy nuclear-tipped Bomarc missiles instead, Mr.

Diefenbaker said.

All blueprints, brochures and official reports for the project were destroyed. Thirteen thousand workers at the A. V. Roe plant and the Orenda jet engine factory lost their jobs.

Former test pilot Wlaysia (Spud) Potocki, 68, remembers workers wandering around dazed and crying in the hangars after the cancellation was announced over the public address system.

"It was the saddest day of my life," he said. "I would put the Arrow up against any fighter they build today. It was such a beautiful aircraft.

They couldn't duplicate its speed for 20 years after."

The decision was so heartbreaking for employees that the government was forced to hire a Buffalo, N.Y., firm to dismantle the planes, he added.

Mr. Potocki was originally hired to test the Avro flying saucer for the U.S. Government but transferred to the Arrow after the saucer only managed to hover a few centimetres off the ground and was scrapped.

Mr. Potocki said he believes the Arrow's speed may have frightened off the Diefenbaker government. During one high-speed landing, after he had broken the sound barrier, all four tires on his plane burst and engineers said the plane had come within three seconds of disintegrating from vibrations.

After the project was cancelled, Mr. Potocki and several hundred fellow employees joined the U.S. space program. Mr. Potocki trained 20 astronauts for NASA's moon missions.

"I don't think the United States would have landed on the moon if Canada hadn't shut down the Arrow," Mr. Potocki said. "It's strange that one of the worst times in our history is to blame for one of their happiest."

Mr. **Zurakowski** retired from his job as a test pilot to build canoes and sailboats and eventually opened a tourist lodge in the Muskokas.

He has not flown since the Arrow test flights. He was given a mock-up of an Arrow control stick for a memento. Other workers scrounged pieces of the aircraft off the runway.

"Diefenbaker flushed the brightest moment in Canadian history right down the toilet and we haven't climbed out since," said Tom Dugelby, a design engineer for the Arrow.

Bill Breadman, an electrician on the Arrow project, said the decision to cancel the program was an insult to Canadian expertise. "We lost a lot of good people to the States and I don't think our aviation industry will ever recover," he said.

He felt lucky to be a qualified auto mechanic when the project was cancelled. "Some others took it harder - killing themselves or boozing it up. I just switched to cars," he said.

"But it was a strange feeling. One day I'm repairing the most advanced machinery on the planet, the next day I'm stuck under the hood of a station wagon."

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