

# Movie blurs line between fact, fiction

Diefenbaker told one version of Arrow tale, CBC film another

**BOB BERGEN**  
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If there is one hot button that has the potential to ignite the flames of Canadian nationalism the way an afterburner would have lit up an Iroquois Jet engine, it is the debate over the Avro Arrow the jet was supposed to power.

That is evident after last weekend's CBC mini-series on the legendary Arrow, which some say was a technological triumph that would have launched Canada into the forefront of worldwide military-aircraft design and construction.

Still others say that the expensive 1950s-era Arrow was doomed to cancellation by the Conservative government of prime minister John Diefenbaker because a developing Cold War threat from missiles rendered fighter-interceptors obsolete.

Yea or nay, it's a debate that has touched me deeply for four decades now. Yet, far from answering a lot of the still-burning questions in the debate, the CBC series dedicated to the issue has created new ones — such as the merit of marrying fact and fiction to fill in historical blanks.

My father was a machinist who worked at Orenda Engines — a division of A.V. Roe Canada in Malton, Ont. — building the parts for the revolutionary Iroquois engine.

As a kid growing up on the Lakeshore in west-end Toronto, I watched in awe as early versions of the Arrow majestically banked on



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trial runs over Lake Ontario bound for landings on the north-south runway of what is now the Toronto International Airport.

My dad was among those fired on the spot in 1959, when Crawford Gordon, president of Avro Aircraft, announced over plant loudspeakers that the terminations were due to Diefenbaker's cancellation of the Arrow program.

Fast forward to 1977, when, as a young journalist writing for The Albertan, I had the opportunity to meet and interview Diefenbaker in a Palliser Hotel suite on his then-recently released memoirs, One Canada.

I told Diefenbaker I remembered the first time I recalled hearing his name. My dad, just fired from Orenda Engines, came home drunk and used Diefenbaker's name in vain, to put it mildly. My mother was crying.

Dief told me how deeply it still hurt him, almost 20 years later, to run into Canadians whose families suffered as the result of the decision to cancel the Arrow.

I could accept that, but I asked Diefenbaker about the decision to torch the planes and to destroy the blueprints and plans so they could never be used. He was adamant that decision was not among those he had made.

Fast forward another 20 years to the CBC mini-series which had the actor portraying Diefenbaker say — after scrapping the program — that he wanted to get rid of every vestige of the existing Arrows.

When another actor says Diefenbaker can't

destroy them all, he says: "Yes, I can. I want to be rid of these infernal airplanes."

I called Keith Ross Leckie, who wrote the Arrow screenplay, and asked him what evidence he had that allowed him to put those words in Diefenbaker's mouth — in effect rewriting Dief's own version of history and making him out to be a liar.

"In terms of Diefenbaker saying: 'Scrap the damn thing,' um, it may well not have happened," Leckie said. "He (Diefenbaker) never does say cut it up and destroy, he says: 'Get rid of it.'"

Leckie explained he cut about 20 minutes of running time to four minutes when the planes are torched, to better dramatically show the effect of a decision that is historical fact.

The mini-series was an admitted dramatic fiction based on historical events, and, as such, at least served a purpose by introducing a new generation to the Arrow story.

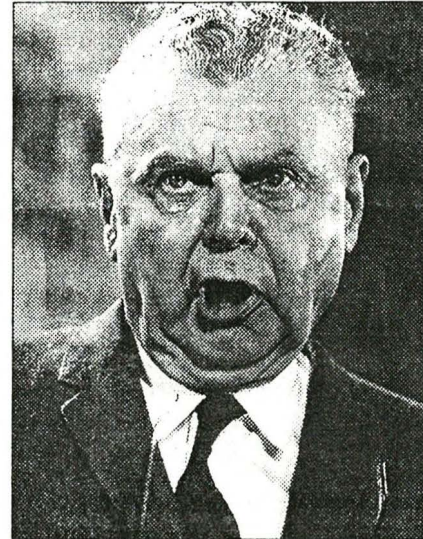
However, there's a danger here: disclaimers only go so far. A viewer learning of the Arrow for the

first time would find it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction.

I'm no great fan of Diefenbaker. Perhaps he did lie to me about the Arrows' destruction and to countless others through his memoirs.

But is it fair that someone, taking the widest possible latitude with artistic licence, can play fast and loose with established history — in the absence of facts — simply in the interest in telling a good story?

(Bob Bergen is a Herald reporter.)



**DIEF:** Claimed he didn't order the destruction of planes and plans

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