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Alberta Report

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The Arrow myth still flies

Canada's post-war flirtation with a domestic fighter jet inspires a CBC movie

by Chris Champion

Roll-out of CF-105 Arrow in 1957: Production was never in the cards.

Canada at the end of the Second World War 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 jet, however, critics are less forgiving. The long-range, high-altitude, all-weather fighter-interceptor, designed for the Royal Canadian Air Force by Avro Aviation


Ltd. in the 1950s, was meant to propel Canada to the forefront of international aeronautics. But within a year of the Arrow's 1958 maiden test 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, two-part CBC movie to air early next year. To nationalists, the Arrow still symbolizes opportunity squandered. "There are some interesting parallels," Phyllis Platt, CBC director of arts and entertainment, told the Globe and Mail July 20. "Not just to what's happening in the country, but what's happening in the entertainment industry. We're a world leader in the industry...But in this time of technological change, there's a real question of, not whether we'll have an industry...but whether we'll be able to continue to tell our own stories. That's not why we [decided on the Arrow series] of course. We did it because it's a story, about a dream and the death of that dream."

Most of the funding, says production spokesman Ches Yetman, is from private Toronto-based Northstar Entertainment Corp., with the CBC, Telefilm Canada and the Manitoba government picking up the rest of the tab.


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Last week, cast and crew were in Gimli, Man., filming a "pivotal" scene with Diefenbaker fishing at a lake with U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower, Mr. Yetman reports. As played by Michael Moriarty of the Law and Order TV drama, 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 Mr. 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 Liberal agreement with A.V. Roe Canada Ltd.

Diefenbaker is played by veteran Canadian television and stage actor Robert Haley. A much bigger name is Ottawa-born Hollywood star Dan Ackroyd, cast as Avro president Crawford Gordon. Nominated for an Academy Award for his part in *Driving Miss Daisy*, but best known for his deadpan roles in comic films, Mr. Ackroyd actually resembles the Winnipegger he portrays, albeit with more hair.

Starring as the CF-105 itself is the full-scale steel, wood and fibreglass replica of the aircraft begun by Arrow enthusiast and former Avro employee Allan Jackson of Wetaskiwin, Alta. and completed by set designers. When the film crew are finished with it, Mr. Jackson's six-year "labour-of-love" will be dry-docked at the Reynolds Alberta Museum.

Screenwriter Keith Ross Leckie, his producer wife Mary Young Leckie and co-producer Paul Stevens last collaborated on *Where the Spirit Lives*, a 1990 TV movie alleging maltreatment of Indian children at Christian-run residential schools, which won a Gemini award. Veteran CBC watchers worry the trio may be unfairly targeting another left-wing bogeyman: the military. "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 *The Valour and the Horror*, Mothercorp's revisionist 1992 assault on the performance of Allied bombers in the Second World War.

Brig.-Gen. Christie, who was present at the first flight of the Arrow on March 25, 1958, as a squadron leader, thinks too much fuss is made about the Arrow. "We'll have to wait till 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 filmmakers' key sources. Larry Milberry, author of a half-dozen books on aviation and the RCAF, 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 October 4, 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.

B.C. 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 Mr. 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 everything 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, Mr. 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 Prof. 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 the Second World War 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 Mr. Milberry. "But the taxpayer was getting screwed up and down." Gen. 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."

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