

# From The Editor

## A man with the Right Stuff



In early 1997, Dan Aykroyd starred in a CBC movie based on the scrapping of the Avro Arrow project, provoking a bout of national hand-wringing about how the Diefenbaker government had shut down Canada's fledgling jet industry. The conspiracy theories ran all the way to a plot by the U.S. military and the CIA to favor U.S. aircraft makers. Never again would Canada have an industry to call its own.

No one, it seems, told Eric McConachie. The Edmonton-born engineer, a rolling tumbleweed of a guy who admits only to being in his "late 60s," is the visionary behind the hottest jet plane in the world—Bombardier's Canadair Regional Jet—the subject of this week's cover package. The 50-seat version is now flown by 16 airlines in 11 nations—including Air Canada, which has 26 CRJs. The jet is revolutionizing the way companies serve the short-haul market and how passengers get around. The plane also is at the heart of Bombardier's commercial success—with revenues of \$4 billion, the aerospace group is the number 3 commercial aircraft maker after Boeing and Airbus—not to mention an employer of 14,000 Canadians.

To be sure, there are problems with the CRJ. The company has had to repair recently discovered stress fractures in the fuselage. And seating and headroom in the small jets is tight, turning reading a paper over coffee into a juggling act. But offsetting that is the convenience of commuting quickly by jet between two towns without having to fly a turboprop to a central hub and climb on a larger jet.

The inspiration for the revolution, refreshingly, was airline customers. Their clear preference for jets over props forced man-

ufacturers to build smaller craft that would be economical over short hauls. Enter McConachie, a freewheeling entrepreneur who moves in and out of companies when he is not working as a Montreal-based consultant. It is the genius of the Bombardier operation that it is willing to give people like McConachie a free hand and support for their vision. Another example is Robert Wohl, an American lawyer who was a manager for Project Mercury, which put the first American astronauts in space. Bombardier hired him to run the CRJ program in 1988. "My vision

was to believe Eric's vision," he told *Maclean's* Senior Writer Barry Came, who wrote this week's cover package on the jet. McConachie, a graduate of the University of British Columbia, MIT and Stanford, knew the Right Stuff. In the 1950s, he had worked on the CP Air team that put the first North American commercial jets in the air. Later at Canadair, he helped to develop the company's fleet of water bombers.

There is a familiar ring to the McConachie story. It conjures up memories of Armand Bombardier, the company founder, tickling and tinkering his way to the invention of the Ski-Doo—the legendary "BOMB-ba-DEER"—in a garage in Quebec's Eastern Townships.

It is the stuff of legend. An engineer from Edmonton has a vision. The son-in-law of the founder builds the plane that becomes the toast of the world. It ought to be a movie on the CBC.



Bombardier commuter jets in Montreal: toast of the world

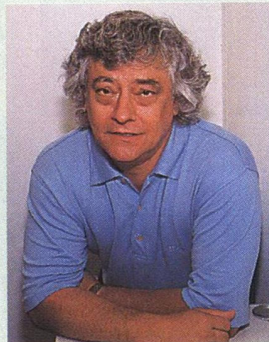
CHRISTOPHER MORRIS FOR MACLEAN'S

*Robert Lewis*

## Newsroom Notes:

### Jet setting

Senior Writer Barry Came was well prepared to report this week's cover package on Bombardier Inc. Before his recent move to Toronto, Came served for seven years as Montreal bureau chief—and the transportation conglomerate made news most weeks. He arrived in Montreal in the fall of 1989, shortly after Bombardier's revolutionary Canadair Regional Jet development program was launched. Earlier in the decade, Came also worked as a reporter



Came: from Rio and Montreal to Cincinnati

PETER BREGG/MACLEAN'S

in Brazil, home of Bombardier rival Embraer.

To test the CRJ, Came boarded an early morning flight from Toronto to Cincinnati, a route made feasible by the smaller, more economical jet. The flight was "comfortable enough, but somewhat cramped," Came said. A small price to pay for most passengers. "I love it," said Came's businessman seatmate. "I used to have to fly to Chicago, then change planes to get to Cincinnati. Sometimes, it would take me all day. Now, I can do it in a little more than a hour."

The story of Bombardier's success, including an interview with CEO Laurent Beaudoin, begins on page 30.