

FALLEN ARROW

by Leanteri Polvikoski

Forty years ago, the Avro Arrow fighter plane was cancelled by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, touching off a firestorm of controversy that has not yet subsided fully. The Canadian Post Office was caught in the eddies of this controversy, for three days after the cancellation, they issued a postage stamp commemorating fifty years of aviation in Canada. Unfortunately the stamp depicted delta-wing fighters, and since the Avro Arrow was the only such Canadian plane, official denials that they were not it did not ring true.

Diefenbaker rose before the House of Commons on February 20, 1959. In his speech, he gave as the primary reason for cancelling the CF-105 Avro Arrow the fact that the bomber threat they were to have repelled no longer existed. Intercontinental ballistic missiles were the new threat, against which a fighter plane could do nothing. Having spent \$400,000,000 on the prototype development, he saw no point in throwing good money after bad, and cancelled the project.

The A.V. Roe company, prime contractor to the Arrow, immediately laid off 13,800 workers. About 650 sub-contractors supplying parts and services brought the layoff totals up to 30,000 people. Diefenbaker was stunned by these layoffs, and accused the companies of trying to make him look bad by the sudden impact of the cancellation. Many commentators feel Diefenbaker never appreciated what his decision would do to the Canadian aerospace industry. The cancellation has produced one of Canada's few homegrown conspiracy theories. Some say it was a plot by the American aerospace industry to eliminate the competition, as the Arrow was considered the finest fighter plane in the world at the time.

The sudden decision caught other people off guard. February 23, 1959, was the 50th anniversary of the first aircraft flight in Canada. The aircraft engine manufacturer Pratt & Whitney took out an ad in that day's *OTTAWA JOURNAL* newspaper (page 16). It was too late to cancel the display ad depicting its part in the Arrow project and honouring itself for its role in aviation history. The Canadian post office that day issued a stamp for the anniversary, showing the Silver Dart, the primitive biplane flown by J.A.D. McCurdy. In the background were three Arrows climbing vertically under full throttle. Caught short by the sudden cancellation, the Post Office could do nothing but deny that the planes were Arrows.

To this day, books are still being written about the Arrow. An organization has been founded to build a 2/3 replica of the doomed plane. The Arrow 2000 Project can be reached at 6808 Ogden Road SE, Calgary, T2C 1B4.



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