

LEN BOLGER, ENGINEER AND PILOT 1930-2007

Test pilot who was slated to fly the Avro Arrow was in training when Ottawa cancelled the program. 'It broke his heart'

BY F.F. LANGAN, TORONTO

Len Bolger was one of the handful of top pilots picked to test the Avro Arrow, the great Canadian hope in the jet fighter sweepstakes of the Cold War. Already a test pilot for the Royal Canadian Air Force, he worked out of Cold Lake, Alta., and happened also to be a mechanical engineer. He was just the kind of man the RCAF needed to test new specialized weaponry to go along with the new aircraft.

The testing of a new plane falls into several categories, and Len Bolger's job was to try out the armament picked for the Arrow, the Sparrow air-to-air missile. Ottawa had put aside an initial \$65-million for the Sparrow program and testing took place at Point Magoo naval airbase in California.

There were no Arrows to test so the RCAF flew several older CF-100s to California to test-fire the missiles. It came to a sudden stop on Feb. 20, 1959, when the Diefenbaker government, shocked at the spiralling costs of the program of

building a homemade supersonic fighter, cancelled the Arrow.

"It broke his heart," said his wife Jean. "They took his toy away and he couldn't see anything on the horizon, so he left the air force."

Len Bolger grew up in Sudbury, Ont. He never knew his father and was raised in his grandfather's house. His mother made sure her son worked hard at Sudbury High School, and he spent much of his spare time in the Royal Canadian Air Cadets. Later, he won an air cadet scholarship to Royal Roads University in Victoria.

During his summers, he learned to fly. After two years, he transferred to Royal Military College in Kingston where he graduated with the top prize in mechanical engineering. At the time, RMC could not grant degrees so the young RCAF officer spent a year at the University of Toronto.

A short while afterward, Mr. Bolger, by then a newly minted pilot officer, was transferred to the RCAF base at Comox, B.C., that was to be equipped with a squadron of new

CF-100 fighters. He travelled to Toronto, where the CF-100 was manufactured at the same Malton plant that would build the Arrow, and flew one of the first of the fighters back to Comox.

The job of 409 Squadron at Comox was to scramble and intercept any strange aircraft that appeared on the radar. It was the height of the Cold War and the Soviet bomber threat seemed real. There were many late-night scrambles in the CF-100's.

The aircraft itself proved somewhat unreliable. There were many crashes, and Mr. Bolger was almost killed while practising for an air show at Comox in 1956. After making a pass over the airfield, he pulled up and the G-forces pushed him against the control stick, causing the engines to cut out. The navigator ejected and, just as he shot out of the plane, Mr. Bolger managed to re-start the engines.

The plane landed safely, and the navigator ended up in the sea but made it to shore. At the time, no one knew the cause of the engine fail-



Len Bolger, circa 1990.

ure. Later, Mr. Bolger and the RCAF were able to analyze the cause of the flame out and modifications were made so that it wouldn't happen again.

After Comox, Len Bolger was transferred to Cold Lake where, as a test pilot, he flew every type of aircraft the RCAF operated. Soon after that he was transferred to the Arrow armaments program in California.

Following the cancellation of the Arrow program, and his dissolution with the air force and aviation, he found a job at Shell Canada. It was months before the RCAF would allow him to leave, since they were not pleased to be losing such an experienced and well-educated pilot.

At Shell, Mr. Bolger worked first

in Calgary and then transferred to Toronto. For a while, he was president of a joint venture with Canadian Pacific called ShellPac that was looking for ways to transport sulphur as slurry in a pipeline.

Later, he transferred to Britain, working for three years at Shell's head office in London. That job involved Shell's coal business and meant travel to Poland and Africa. He finished his career as vice-president of research and technology at Shell Canada in Calgary.

Len Bolger had a long involvement with the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research where he was a director. He was active in a number of professional bodies, including the Canadian Academy of Engineering and the Alberta Energy Research Institute. His hobby was woodworking, which he learned from his grandfather, a cabinet-maker. Len Bolger could turn out full bedroom sets, even a sofa. Except when he was invited to take over the controls of Shell company aircraft, he never flew again.

Leonard Frederick Bolger was born on Aug. 22, 1930, in Sudbury, Ont. He died of cancer on Feb. 27, 2007, in Calgary. He was 76. He is survived by his wife, Jean, and their four children, Karen, David, Lesley and Neil.

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