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The Ottawa Citizen

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Dief 'didn't destroy Arrow'

Eccentric A.V. Roe boss had planes scrapped, ex-minister says

Kathryn May**With files from Charles Enman.**

CP Photo / Pierre Sevigny, a minister in the Diefenbaker cabinet, said the prime minister was wrongly blamed for destroying the jets.

The myth about the cancellation of the Avro Arrow is being challenged by a former Diefenbaker minister who claims cabinet never ordered the destruction of the fabled aircraft.

Nearly 40 years after the project was cancelled, Pierre Sevigny, an associate deputy minister in Mr. Diefenbaker's government, says the decision to destroy the planes and its blueprints was made by the Arrow's manufacturer, A.V. Roe.

In an interview, Mr. Sevigny said he had decided to set straight the record of what happened in February 1959 to clear Mr. Diefenbaker of blame for the famed Avro Arrow's demise. Most of the other key players in Mr. Diefenbaker's cabinet have died.

"I came forward with it because for a long time I knew that the true story should be told. Frankly, old Diefenbaker was being blamed for something he didn't do ... He never gave an order like that," said Mr. Sevigny.

Instead, he lays the blame on A.V. Roe's colourful boss, Crawford Gordon, who died in 1967. Mr. Sevigny speculates it was Mr. Gordon, enraged at the government's decision to cancel the project because of its spiralling costs, who ordered the planes scrapped.

"It's logical that it was Mr. Gordon who did it. He was the one who was actually in charge of the show. He was the man responsible," Mr. Sevigny said in a from his home in Montreal.

Mr. Sevigny, now 80, was associate defence minister from 1958 to 1963. His affair with a German woman, Gerda Munsinger, became public in 1966 and

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caused a furore over potential security risks. Mr. Sevigny was cleared of any wrongdoing.

Mr. Sevigny said immediately after Diefenbaker stood in the Commons to announce the Arrow's cancellation on Feb. 20, 1959, Mr. Gordon fired about 15,000 employees, from the design team to the production line, at A.V. Roe Canada's aircraft and engine companies.

The six completed Arrows and another five on the assembly line were soon to be cut up for scrap.

But Mr. Sevigny said Mr. Diefenbaker's orders were simply to cancel the project and stop any further development and production. Cabinet never intended, nor did it order, the planes to be destroyed. Similarly, he said, then-Defence Minister George Pearkes never made such a "foolish order."

"All he (Diefenbaker) announced to the Commons was that the project be stopped. Halted. There's a big distinction between halting a project and ordering everything to be scrapped.

"And it wasn't cabinet that ordered the destruction," said Mr. Sevigny. "It was the place where it was being built."

Mr. Sevigny also said the Americans offered to help salvage the project by helping to finance its construction to equip RCAF squadrons but cabinet refused the offer. The Americans have long been accused of contributing to the project's demise by refusing to buy anything but American-built aircraft.

Mr. Sevigny also confirmed reports that he claimed that a distressed Mr. Pearkes asked Mr. Diefenbaker to go public with A.V. Roe's decision to scrap the planes and blueprints but the prime minister refused.

Nearly 40 years after its demise, the legendary aircraft lives on in books, stories, souvenirs and, more recently, a TV movie. The supersonic interceptor fighter plane was considered ahead of its time, a plane unparalleled in its speed and performance.

Mr. Sevigny said Mr. Diefenbaker did all he could to save the project but the Canadian market for the expensive plane was too small and there was no external market. Cabinet documents show the cost of 169 Arrows for the Royal Canadian Air Force would hit \$2 billion by 1964. Also, military thinking changed about the threat of Soviet bombers and shifted to missiles for defence.

"What was the use of building the planes É if there was no one to buy them and if there was an attack it would be by a missile," said Mr. Sevigny. "So we realized that the time of that plane was past and it would cost a fortune to keep on with the construction. The government had no choice except to abandon the project."

A former Conservative caucus member from the time of the Arrow, retired Senator Heath Macquarrie, says his memories confirm those of Mr. Sevigny.

"I have always believed exactly what Sevigny appears to have said," he said yesterday. "As a member of caucus, I was always told that it was the A. V. Roe Company that did the destruction (of the planes and blueprints)."

Then why did former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker not scotch rumours that he had ordered destruction of the prototypes and blueprints?

"Well, there was simply nothing at the time to contradict," Mr. Macquarrie said. "The myths (about the demise of the Arrow) that we've seen on TV weren't very much around at the time." Mr. Macquarrie also sides with Mr. Sevigny in saying that the Americans, in his recollection, were not opposed to the Avro Arrow program.

"I have no memory of their opposition, and if it were true, I can't believe that Dief wouldn't have mentioned it. He never hesitated to mention things he didn't like about the Americans."

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