

For close on 50 years, test pilot Don Rogers played a central role in developing some of the most legendary aircraft ever produced in Canada.

Testing the Legends

STORY BY STEVEN DELONG



Talk to Don Rogers, 87, and he'll modestly tell you the success of his aviation career as a test pilot was simply the result of "being in the right place at the right time." Perhaps, but a look at this aviator's record suggests that often it was a case of him being the right person for many places. To be sure, elements of luck are present in many successful careers, but what really distinguished Rogers was quiet self-assurance and a dedicated professionalism

to meeting any challenge that came his way. Meeting challenges resulted in quite an interesting career for Rogers, one in which he rubbed elbows with celebrities, traveled the world, and advanced aviation both at home and abroad.

Born in 1916, Rogers' career in aviation began one summer day in the 1930s in a characteristically quiet manner. He was out on the front lawn of his parents' home in Dundas, Ontario, enjoying the warm

weather, when he saw a bird fly from a nearby post and land in the grass. "It glided down so nicely," says Rogers. "I decided that I wanted to do that too."

Wanting to fly was one thing, of course, but getting started during the Great Depression was another. Rogers didn't own a car, and the nearest airport was in Hamilton, a fair jaunt away. Undeterred, he came up with a plan to make the regular commute by riding the bus into Hamilton, and then



Three Canadian Aviation Hall of Famers — Don Rogers (centre), flight engineer Bill Baker (left) and well known Avro test pilot, Mike Cooper-Slipper — pose atop the Avro Jetliner's paired Rolls Royce Derwent engines. Rogers logged over 440 hours on the aircraft before it was cut up for scrap.

bicycling from the depot to the airport. The plan worked and soon Rogers was training on a de Havilland Gypsy Moth.

Flight training in the 1930s was different than today: Rogers says back then \$110 and 12 hours instruction earned him a private pilot licence. Next came the commercial licence and instructor rating, financed with \$500 borrowed from his grandfather. The net result was Roger's first job as a flying instructor at the Hamilton Aero Club, where he taught a mix of civilians and provisional pilot officers for the RCAF. When the Second World War started Rogers became a civilian instructor in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) at the Mt. Hope Airport, instructing on the Fleet Finch and de Havilland Tiger Moth. But before long he received a call which would set him on a whole new career path.

Early in the war, Roger's former flying instructor, Ernie Taylor, was working as the sole test pilot at National Steel Car in Milton, Ontario, where Avro Ansons and Westland Lysanders were being produced. Taylor needed an assistant and Rogers was his

choice. The job involved taking aircraft fresh off the production line, putting them through their paces and finding all the snags. Normal course was for an airplane to go through three or four such flights before heading overseas.

Rogers speaks of the Lysander with fondness, particularly for its remarkable short takeoff and landing (STOL) characteristics. In strong winds it was possible to take off across the width of the runway. He also remembers one occasion when the Lysander literally bit him: flying with the glass cockpit open, Rogers raised his hand to wave to another aircraft. An error, he discovered, as the wind caught his hand sending it back against the frame, nearly breaking his wrist.

Rogers' wartime experience was unique. At one point he was seconded from National Steel Car to the RCAF as a civilian employee. Based in Dorval, Quebec, he ferried Lockheed Hudsons and B-24 Liberators to England. Later, he flight-tested Lancasters.

Rogers recalls seeing a Lancaster for the first time when one arrived from England

on a demonstration flight, prior to the aircraft going into production in Canada. Having never flown anything so large he looked into the sky wondering aloud, "Am I ever going to fly that thing?" Ultimately he did, and Rogers affectionately remembers the Lancaster as, "relatively light on the controls and overall a very pleasant aircraft to fly."

Following the war, National Steel Car closed its shop, but Avro Canada soon moved into Malton and took Rogers on as their Chief Test Pilot. One of his first tasks was to ferry nine Lockheed Venturas from Alberta to Malton for conversion to target towing airplanes. For a test pilot, this task proved more tedious than exciting. The plan was for Rogers to fly out west on Trans Canada Airlines (TCA) and then fly the Venturas back one by one. Unfortunately post-war busi-

ness was brisk at the national airline at the time. Rogers says, "Most of the time not only could you not get a seat on the plane, but it was impossible to get the reservation department on the phone." (Some things never change, it seems.) Consequently, Rogers and another pilot resorted to traveling west by train, flying an airplane home, then immediately rushing to the train for another trip out west.

Such tedium was short-lived, though, when Avro soon became a hotbed of aerospace research and design development, producing such legendary aircraft as the CF-100, the Avro Jetliner and, of course, the Avro Arrow. And Rogers was fortunate enough to be in the thick of it all. Interestingly, he says his greatest memories are of the Avro Jetliner, the first commercial jet airliner built in North America. Over a five-year period, he flew the aircraft 440 hours, often teaming up with other notable aviators such as pilot Mike Cooper-Slipper and flight engineer Bill Baker.

Rogers says the Jetliner was generally an easy airplane to fly, but he did have one bad

experience with it. On the aircraft's second flight — a combination test flight and demonstration for plant staff — things went well until the approach to land when it was discovered the main gear could not be lowered. Engineer James (Jim) Floyd, head of design and vice-president of engineering at Avro, was the designer in charge of the Jetliner project, and he remembers the day well. He says all of the engineers were in the tower and very upset that three of their boys were up there in trouble. But Floyd says, "Don was on the radio, and his voice was so calm that we all began to feel better — sure things would end without incident." Naturally enough, Rogers managed to land the airplane three-point-style on the nose gear and the jet engines, sustaining minimal damage to the aircraft in the process.

The Jetliner provided Rogers with a number of other adventures, albeit less harrowing. He travelled extensively with the airplane all over the United States and Canada, giving demonstrations to drum up

customers for Avro. On one trip he and the crew met the mayor of New York and were given a police escort into the city. Then there was the time the Jetliner team flew to California to meet the mercurial multi-millionaire Howard Hughes.

Hughes was enthusiastic about the Jetliner and asked Rogers to remain in California for six months so he could fly it around the country with Rogers as his check pilot. Rogers remembers Hughes as a friendly guy and an excellent pilot who transitioned to the Jetliner after only a few circuits. But Rogers says Hughes could also be rather quirky: he never carried money and constantly borrowed from those around him, Rogers included. On another curious note, Hughes offered to bring Rogers' entire family out to Los Angeles and put them up for his extended visit, but when Rogers said he intended to call his wife with the news, Hughes replied, "That's fine Don, but call after 6:00 p.m. when the rates are lower." Quirky, indeed.

Hughes had hoped to manufacture the Jetliner under licence with Convair, but the U.S. government prevented the company from pursuing the deal due to the military demands of the Korean War. Ultimately, the Jetliner never went into production, and the design was abandoned largely because the Canadian government wanted Avro to concentrate on the CF-100. Rogers still shakes his head at this shortsightedness; he recalls being unable to go into the hangar while the sole Jetliner produced was unceremoniously cut up for scrap.

Rogers went through a similar disappointment with the Avro Arrow. The failure of the project obviously had a personal effect on him. Poring over his personal collection of Arrow photos his face shows lingering disappointment. Though he never flew the aircraft Rogers played a central role in directing the aircraft's testing. When the project was cancelled and a massive layoff ensued, Rogers was fortunate enough to be kept on with Avro; but the experience left a bad taste.

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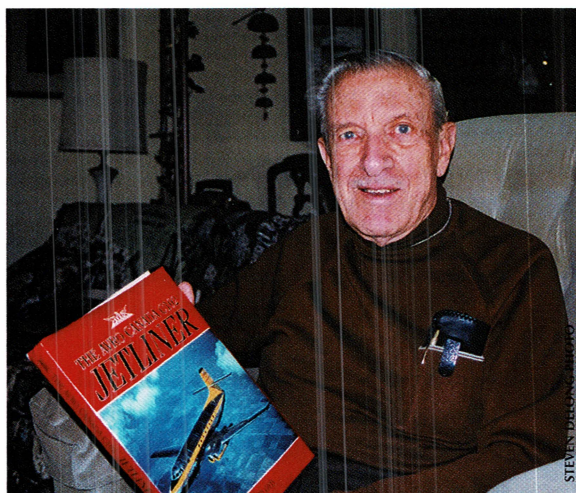
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Shortly after the Arrow cancellation, Rogers left Avro for de Havilland Canada. For the next 18 years Rogers helped to develop some of the industry's most enduring aircraft, including the DHC-2 Beaver, the DHC-5 Buffalo, the DHC-6 Twin Otter, and the Dash 7.

In addition to test flying, Rogers also worked as a demonstration and check pilot for de Havilland. The company was keen to take advantage of his facility with STOL techniques, as well as his easy way with people, and employed him to good effect.

This particular line of work took Rogers all over the world. "People said 'Join the Navy and see the world,'" chuckles Rogers, "Well you could also say 'Join de Havilland and see the world.'" Indeed, many times he was called on to deliver an airplane to some company in a remote part of the world and then check out the buyer's pilots.

Some of these locations put Rogers and his students to the test. On one occasion, in



Don Rogers reacquaints himself with a book on the Avro Jetliner, penned by former coworker, Jim Floyd.

Nepal, he had to take a DHC-6 Twin Otter into a 1,200-foot-long runway in the Himalayas that was perched at 9,000 feet above sea level (ASL). Making matters worse, Rogers had to land uphill, and then turn around to take off downhill. "Once you were on the takeoff roll you were committed," says Rogers.

Whatever the job, Rogers had to be quick of mind and adept at the controls. Whether training Chinese pilots through an interpreter, or flying a Buffalo into small airstrips in West Africa, his expertise proved invaluable.

Rogers retired from de Havilland for the first time at age 63, but that lasted only two days. He finished on Friday and was back on Monday as a ground instructor — a job he held for the next seven years.

At 70 he retired for good, settled down in Etobicoke and gave up his pilot's licence. But that wasn't the end of his flying days entirely. At age 80, accompanied by an instructor, Rogers took one final flight in a Zlin — a ride that fittingly included some aerobatic loops and rolls. "I felt very comfortable," says Rogers with a smile, "and I had never flown a Zlin before."

While not as actively involved in the aviation community today as he once was, Rogers remains a committed booster. He is a member of both the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum in Hamilton, Ontario, and is also a member of the Toronto Aerospace Museum. Rogers is also enthusiastic about the preservation of significant Canadian aircraft. Not surprising, given his experience with Avro.

Over the years the Canadian aviation community has taken proper notice of Rogers' accomplishments. In 1983 he was awarded the McKee Trophy, and in 1998 he was inducted into the Canadian Aviation Hall of Fame.

Today, many might regard Rogers' test flying career as quite glamorous, but Rogers does not see it that way. His attitude, still, is that a test pilot is a professional investigator, possessed of a willingness to give meticulous attention to the tasks assigned. Jim Floyd, who worked closely with Rogers at Avro, has a good appreciation for Rogers' abilities: "Don was unflappable. Everything he did was planned and precisely handled. He could follow the test program to the letter, but was willing to push the limits when required. He wouldn't suffer fools lightly, but was always easy to get along with. He was an aircraft designer's pilot." 人

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