

Crawford Gordon Jr.

I was very upset when I heard about the sad circumstances of Crawford Gordon's death in the mid 60s. While I had not been as close to Crawford as I was to my immediate boss Fred Smye, who was the man that really ran the aircraft side at Malton while Crawford was out gobbling up additional companies in his bid to build up the A.V.Roe Canada Ltd empire, I had a great respect and admiration for Crawford.

He was a man who could be both caring and ruthless, depending on his assessment of a particular situation. He liked to gather around him people who he felt were 'the best' in both competence and dedication to the job at hand. He would be extremely supportive of that kind of effort. At the same time he could be unforgiving if he thought that anyone was falling short of his standards, as he demonstrated by 'removing from office' a senior executive of the company who had given a less than convincing briefing to government and RCAF officials on a particular project in a meeting at which he was present. There was no nonsense with Crawford, you were either good or you were out ! I have to say that I personally enjoyed that challenge. It certainly kept you on your toes!

I experienced the compassionate side of his nature during the dark days of the Arrow project in 1955, when the National Aeronautical Establishment personnel, the Defence Research Board members and some members of the RCAF were continually sniping at Avro and particularly at Engineering, resulting in endless re-evaluations, agonizing re-appraisals and marathon time-consuming meetings just at the time that we were trying to carry out the nearly impossible task of designing an aircraft that would meet the beyond-the-state-of-the-art RCAF operational requirement, a task which even today, with all of the advanced technology now available, would cause some loss of sleep to even the best of the modern design teams.

Eventually, I became so 'browned-off' with all of that nonsense that I 'snapped' and after a long conversation with my wife Irene I sent Fred Smye a letter of resignation, effective immediately. At around midnight on the following day I got a phone call at our house in Port Credit from Crawford who was in England on business. Apparently Fred had informed him that I was about to quit. Crawford had already known how I was feeling about the relentless interference of the self-styled 'experts' but asked me to delay my decision until his return, since he considered that such a precipitous action would jeopardize the whole Arrow program and play right into the hands of the 'knockers'.

I finally agreed to do that although I thought that his worries about 'jeopardy' were overstated since I had organized the Engineering Division in a manner that there was always someone who could take my place without too much disruption of the programs under way. It was also obvious that some of the more persistent knockers would be glad to wave me goodbye!

Anyway, the next morning Fred Smye handed me an envelope containing tickets to Florida for Irene, our youngest son Michael and myself and I was asked to take an overdue two weeks vacation starting immediately and to try to get the bile out of my system. When I hesitated Fred said that Crawford had given him instructions that the rest was 'on the house' and might help to shake off the doldrums and that hopefully I would return in a better frame of mind and reconsider my decision. It was a generous gesture on Crawford's part and I finally wound down and got on with the job.

When a few weeks later Crawford was giving me a friendly lecture on how not to let things get one down, I reminded him of an episode in April 1952 when we were having discussions with Howard Hughes about his interest in the C 102 Jetliner project. We were in RKO boss Walter Kane's Hollywood penthouse and in the middle of a conversation Howard went off to the bathroom, presumably to obey the call of nature. When he had failed to reappear about ninety minutes later Crawford asked one of the staff to find out "if Howard has disappeared down the Goddamn hole". He was informed that "Mr Hughes is on the telephone in the bathroom". After a further wait Crawford finally became furious at these antics and stormed out of the penthouse. Apparently he was the only person ever to have walked out on Howard Hughes and here he was, telling me how not to 'snap' under duress !!

Some time after I left Malton after the Arrow cancellation to take a job with HSA in England I was appalled to learn that Crawford had been 'thrown to the wolves' by Sir Roy Dobson and had been blamed for all of the company's woes, and particularly for his aggressive encounter with Diefenbaker at the time of the cancellation. While his behaviour was certainly indiscreet to say the least and one does not embarrass the Prime Minister of Canada without some repercussions, Crawford's reaction was understandable in the circumstances. After all Crawford was a complex 'human' being, with all of the good and bad qualities of the species and some of those who criticize him should look in the mirror now and then. It should be remembered that Crawford made an impact in many areas of Canadian life including his dedicated campaign for and support of the Queensway Hospital project, acknowledged on a plaque in the lobby of that hospital.

He was certainly a great boss and friend to many people and did not deserve the sad and lonely end to his extraordinary and productive life. He was one of the last of Canada's great entrepreneurs.

Jim Flayd.
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