



The controversial Avro Arrow: would the fighter still be in service if Diefenbaker hadn't scrapped it?

## CBC probe calls Arrow's death an error

BY DONN DOWNEY

John Diefenbaker is dead and the Progressive Conservatives are no longer in power, so the CBC feels it is safe to disinter the Arrow story — something that came to its unhappy conclusion more than 20 years ago.

That was when then prime minister Diefenbaker cancelled the Arrow program after only five of the aircraft had flown, citing — among other things — the birth of the missile age and the spiralling costs of the Arrow program.

But the CBC, which exhumes the issue Sunday at 10 p.m., seems to have had no trouble in finding people who regard the scrapping as one of Diefenbaker's major mistakes. For this reason, the program, originally slated to be seen in January, was rescheduled lest it carry some weight in a federal election 21 years later.

The CBC, which usually manages to come down on both sides of an issue, seems in this hour-long documentary to be behind those who said the Arrow should have become part of the Canadian weapons systems, although there is almost unanimous agreement that it would have cost too much.

As early as 1955, C.D. Howe, minister of trade and commerce in the Liberal government that gave the go-ahead to the Arrow, said the program gave him

shudders and that it would cost the country dearly.

Yet there is still a feeling, particularly among many Avro employees who worked on the jet, that the aircraft would have been good for Canada. One goes so far as to suggest that it would be a part of the Canadian defence system even now, with its potential speed of more than Mach 2, or twice the speed of sound.

Besides providing jobs for 14,000 Canadians, the Arrow would have put Canada in the forefront of the aircraft industry. The program suggests that there were distinct possibilities of sales to foreign countries.

All this, however, went down the drain on Feb. 20, 1959, when Diefenbaker cancelled the program.

There was ample justification for his move, but what is more puzzling is the intrigue surrounding the cancellation. First of all, there was the letter from the U.S. Air Force stating that it was willing to fund the missile and its fire-control system and supply test facilities. No trace of that letter can be found in the National Archives, although the program says there is independent corroboration that it existed.

Then there was request from Britain for one or more of the aircraft for use in flight testing. The request was not refused. It was withdrawn, presumably on

the advice of the Canadian government. But what is more intriguing still are the instructions from Ottawa to destroy all five of the Arrows. Who initiated the order remains a mystery.

The company's general manager, Fred Smye, is quoted as saying that he "like an idiot followed (the order), and so I'm the person that issued the instructions to destroy the airplanes. And that's the worst mistake I've ever made in my life."

The narrator says cameramen were not allowed inside the plant to record the destruction, but documentary does show some presumably illegal shots taken from a rented airplane. Test pilot Peter Cope was to say later that eradicating traces of the fighter resembled the Soviets' de-Stalinization program. "We were ordered to destroy all the film on the Avro Arrow" on instructions from Ottawa.

The instructions, obviously, were not carried out to the letter. The CBC seems to have ample footage of the aircraft while it was being constructed and during its test flights.

The program makes sure the viewer knows where it stands. Near the end, the narrator says: "The scrapping of the Arrow still seems an act of either inspired malevolence or of criminal stupidity. A mocking epitaph to the work of the men and women who built her."