



The first Arrow is rolled out at Malton, Ont., in 1957: conspiracy theories still surround the cancellation of the interceptor

The Avro Arrow assumed mythic proportions

Canadians like to think of themselves as a peaceful people. This conceit, while neglecting the nation's role in the wars of this century, makes more puzzling the extraordinary continuing interest in the cancellation of the Avro Arrow in 1959. The CF-105 was a warplane, an interceptor designed to destroy attacking Soviet bombers over the Canadian North. In the minds of many Canadians, however, it has assumed mythic proportions over the years as a symbol of national pride and the struggle for independence from the United States.

The need for the Arrow sprang out of the Cold War. The Soviet Union tested its first nuclear weapon in 1949 and almost simultaneously developed long-range bombers capable of striking North American targets. What was Canada's contribution to the air defence of the continent to be? The Royal Canadian Air Force and the Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent in 1953 turned their attention to a new interceptor to be developed by A. V. Roe, a British-owned firm located in Malton, just outside Toronto. The plan, initially calling for 600 aircraft, looked to Canadian development only of the airframe, with the engines, weapons and electronics to be acquired elsewhere. When no suitable engine could be found, Ottawa reluctantly ordered its development. At the same time, as costs rose towards a billion dollars, Ottawa scaled back its orders. By the time John Diefenbaker won the 1957 election, the fate of the Arrow was in doubt.

The new Conservative government looked for other countries that might buy the aircraft, but found no takers. Its senior military advisers spent months worrying about the Arrow, concluding that if production went ahead, the

urgently needed re-equipment of the army and navy would be stalled for lack of funds. The United States was working on the Bomarc surface-to-air missile, which seemed capable of destroying attacking bombers and "cooking" their nuclear payloads. Then in 1957, the Soviet Union put a satellite into orbit, a clear indication that Moscow was on the verge of producing effective intercontinental ballistic missiles. What then was the utility of an interceptor designed to shoot down bombers?

The big difficulty was that Avro and its suppliers employed 25,000 workers, including a first-rate team of designers and engineers. If the government killed the aircraft, these skilled workers might be lost to the country. But the changing technology, the opposition of the armed forces chiefs and the ever-escalating costs forced the prime minister's hand. In February, 1959, Diefenbaker scrapped the Arrow, announcing Canada would acquire Bomarc that were effective only with nuclear warheads.

The public reaction was one of outrage. The Arrow, as *Maclean's* reader Hattie Dyck of Truro, N.S., notes, "had changed the way we thought about ourselves." Conspiracy theorists contended the Americans had forced Diefenbaker to kill the Arrow because it was too advanced. Soon, the CF-105—far from being a source of Canadian pride—became a symbol of Canada's takeover by the United States, commemorated in books and plays of conspiratorial bent.

In reality, the Arrow was cancelled because it cost too much. Diefenbaker made the right decision, but he paid a heavy price. Four years later, divisions within his administration over the Bomarc missiles and their nuclear warheads brought down the Tory government.

