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Depressing sense of deja vu haunts top Avro test pilot

OTTAWA (CP) — For Jan Zurakowski, this week's sale of Crown-owned de Havilland Aircraft of Canada to American-owned Boeing Corp. brought on a depressing sense of deja vu.

Opposition MPs are hammering the Tory government's decision to sell de Havilland to a foreign company. Remember the Avro Arrow, they warn, referring to former Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker's notorious 1959 decision to scrap production of the superbly advanced Canadian-designed jet fighter.

Zurakowski remembers the Avro Arrow. He knew that plane better than anyone. During the 1950s, Zurakowski was Avro Aircraft's chief test pilot. Already the first pilot to break the sound barrier in a Canadian plane — an earlier Avro craft — he was the first to lift an Arrow prototype into the sky, and proceeded to smash Canadian air-speed records.

"It was an exciting aircraft," Zurakowski remembers. "Its performance . . . well, it is still better than the F-18. The speed of the Arrow was Mach 2, which means twice the speed of sound. The F-18 hasn't got this speed yet."

The cancellation of the Arrow program is regarded as one of the great boo-boos of all time, a tragic example of Canada's inferiority complex and government short-sightedness.

The Arrow was an all-weather, supersonic jet interceptor powered by two Canadian-designed Iroquois engines. The plane's technology and performance was at least a decade ahead of its time. Military officials gushed over it.

But it was expensive. The cost per plane rose from an initial target of \$2 million to \$12 million. Government-funded development costs exceeded \$340 million. Efforts to drum up export sales failed. The United States was spending its money on the then new Bomarc missile.

The government currently is paying about \$25 million for each of the F-18s

Diefenbaker, who believed fighter planes would become extinct in the new missile age, decided the Arrow was too expensive. On Feb. 20, 1959, he cancelled the Arrow project.

The decision was irreversible. Diefenbaker ordered Arrow plans destroyed and the 10 prototypes blowtorched into tiny bits of scrap metal.

British-owned Avro Aircraft laid off 14,000 people, including its world-leading Canadian team of designers and engineers. A handful committed suicide. Most left Canada, and many ended up making major contributions to the U.S. space

program. It was a massive brain drain that crippled Canada's aerospace industry.

What was left of Avro Aircraft was sold to other foreign companies, who used the plants to churn out parts for planes designed and built elsewhere.

Zurakowski, who in 1958 was awarded the prestigious McKee Trophy for his contribution to Canadian aeronautics, also wanted to leave, but his wife preferred to stay in Canada.

Now 71 years old and a little hard of hearing, Zurakowski still follows events in aeronautics. And he didn't like this week's news. He fears the sale of de Havilland to an American company will have the same result as the Arrow cancellation — an end to Canadian aircraft design.



PILOT JAN ZURAKOWSKI
... in 1973 file photo