

# JANUSZ "ZURA" ZURAKOWSKI

Bill Zuk

## *The Remarkable Life of a Test pilot in Remarkable Times*

*(Extracted by the author from his book, Janusz Zurakowski: Legend in the Skies, Vanwell Publishing, 2003)*

Born in Ryzawka, Russia, 12 September 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, Janusz Zurakowski and his family emigrated to a newly emerged Poland in the turbulent years before World War Two. As youths, Janusz and his older Bronislaw, were interested in aviation and yearned for the adventure of flying. The reward for Janusz winning a first prize in a model aircraft competition had been a flight in an elderly biplane at the Lublin Flying club. From his first exhilarating moments in air, Janusz's life course had been set.

By the 1930s, after learning to fly on gliders, he became a fighter pilot at a time when Poland faced its greatest adversity. After his posting as a Sublieutenant to 161 Squadron, an operational unit flying the PZL P-11c on the frontier, he became an instructor at the Central Flying School in Deblin. In September 1939, Zurakowski was at the controls of a PZL P-7 training aircraft pitted against Luftwaffe bombers. Although damaging one of the raiders, his first combat with a Dornier Do17 was inconclusive his trainer could barely keep up with the faster bombers. The brave but desperate missions flown by the Polish Air Force ended dramatically on 17 September when the Soviet Union attacked Poland on its southern flank. Zurakowski and other instructors had been preparing to receive British fighters and bombers in Rumania but now they sought refuge in neighbouring countries,

With the fall of Poland, like many other surviving military personnel, Zurakowski began an odyssey to Rumania where he was briefly

interned before fleeing to France and finally England to continue his fight. As a part of an advance unit sent to the

RAF, Janusz joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve as a Pilot Officer. Flying a Spitfire in the Battle Britain with 234 and 609 Squadrons, "Zura" as he was known by his British compatriots became a skilled and deadly fighter pilot with numerous victories (one Me110, two Bf109s, one Me110 damaged, one Bf109 probable). Transferring to a succession of Polish Squadrons, including 315 where he was their commanding officer, Zurakowski continued to fly as a Squadron Leader in Polish Air Force squadrons until 1944.

Submitting his name to the Empire Test Pilots School in March 1944, S/L Zurakowski graduated from Course No 2 in 1945, subsequently being appointed to the A&AEE (Aircraft & Armament Experimental Establishment) at Boscombe Down. During the Boscombe Down period, Zurakowski emerged as highly proficient test pilot. His posting, first to C Squadron flying naval aircraft and later to A Squadron led to Zura accumulating flight time on contemporary British and Allied aircraft. One of the aircraft he tested was the superlative de Havilland Hornet. In carrying out its trials, he discovered that the nimble aircraft could almost tumble in the sky in a cartwheel manoeuvre. Along with another A&AEE pilot, Neville Duke, Zurakowski began to make a name as an aerobatic pilot. Flying the Martin-Baker M.B.5 fighter at Farnborough, his performance was so outstanding that it was regarded as the most impressive piston-engined routine ever performed.

In 1947, he joined the Gloster Aircraft Company as a development test pilot flying the Meteor, the RAF's first jet. During his Gloster years, he set world speed records, flew the first high-speed aerobatic photography flights and his dazzling aerial demonstrations at Farnborough



**Top:** "Zura" boards Arrow RL201 for taxiing trials. Above: Zura accepts Arrow 202 for its maiden flight. AVRO PHOTOS.





**Left:** jubilant ground crew celebrate the first flight of 201 with Zura, centre. **Below:** Zura is carried on the shoulders of elated Avro workers. AVRO PHOTOS.

were on all of the world's headlines. Zura is one of the few pilots to have invented an aerobatic manoeuvre. At home with slide rules and graphs as much as he in the cockpit, he utilized the unique jet engine placement of the Gloster Meteor to create a *cartwheel*, a manoeuvre that he had originated in the Hornet. By throttling one engine back and pouring power into the other, he gyrated the aircraft above the startled crowd at the 1951 Farnborough Air Show.

After testing the new Gloster Javelin, he came to Canada in 1952 as a test pilot on the CF-100, the first Canadian-designed jet fighter. He was a member of the team that developed the operational capabilities of the CF-100, even flying the aircraft to supersonic speeds. As part of Zura's extraordinary legacy, he was also the Chief Development Test Pilot on the legendary but doomed Avro Arrow. On 25 March 1958, the Avro Arrow streaked into the sky for the first time with Janusz Zurakowski at the controls. Despite its promise, just 18 months later, the Avro Arrow was dead and Zurakowski began a new life in Ontario's northland.

After the Arrow's cancellation, Zurakowski and his family moved to the northern lake country of Ontario where he built a unique tourist resort. His family has also left an impressive legacy; his wife, Anna, is a renowned author and both sons have emulated their father's interests. Marek has become a successful entrepreneur and building contractor, while older son, George is one of Canada's most eminent engineers. George's daughter, Kryisia, has even taken to the skies like



her famous grandfather

Janusz Zurakowski, in his storied career, was an aeronautical engineer, combat pilot, squadron leader, aerobatic performer and has been described as one of the world's greatest test pilots by leading British test pilot, Neville Duke. He flew over 60 types of aircraft throughout his life but his involvement with the Avro Arrow gained him worldwide attention and everlasting fame.

#### **HONOURS AWARDED JANUSZ ZURAKOWSKI**

- Polish Cross Virtuti Militari 1943 (for action in the Battle of Britain and Poland).
- Cross of Valor with two bars 1944 (for his leadership in the Polish Air Force in wartime as a Squadron Leader and Deputy Wing Commander).
- McKee Trophy for outstanding achievements in supersonic test flying, 1958,
- Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame inductee, 1973.
- \$20 Canadian Aviation series Commemorative Coin in honour of Canada's first supersonic flight, 1996.

- "Pioneer of Flight" Award 1997, Western Canada Aviation Museum for recognition of his contributions to aviation.

- Canadian Flight Test Centre in Cold Lake, Alberta dedicated to his name, 2000.

- Honorary Fellow of International Society of Experimental Test Pilots 2001 (Jan is the first Canadian or Polish pilot to receive this honour. This Society includes Charles Lindbergh, Igor Sikorski and Neil Armstrong.

Today, this famous test pilot resides in the Madawaska Valley, Ontario, in a tourist lodge that he built with his own hands. For over 40 years, he and his wife have operated the Kartusy Lodge at Barry's Bay as a refuge for Polish-Canadians. His time is now spent on a series of nautical inventions including high-speed catamarans and sailboats. While the idyllic life of a northern community is a far departure from the romantic life of a test pilot, he has found peace in his new home.

Recently, the Township of Madawaska Valley proudly announced the inauguration of the new Zurakowski Park Project built to honour a local resident and world-renowned test pilot Janusz Zurakowski. The new park, at the crossroads of major arteries in Barry's Bay, features an impressive Avro Arrow sculpture in 1/4 scale streaking into the sky alongside a life-size granite statue of Janusz Zurakowski in his flight suit. Future plans for the site include a museum and orientation centre for visitors. On 26 July 2003, the Zurakowski Park will be dedicated by the Hon. Sheila Copps, Canadian Minister of Culture and Heritage. The Polish Consulate in Ottawa has asked to be a part of the celebration of one of their nation's greatest heroes. Guests from all over the world have been invited.

Janusz Zurakowski's story has been the subject of a recent film documentary, *Straight Arrow* (History Channel, 1999), his own memoirs, *Nie Tielko o Latiniu* (Polish Canadian Publishing Fund, 2002) and an upcoming biography Janusz Zurakowski, Legend in the skies by this writer. (Bill Zuk, Vanwell Publishing, 2003).

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