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## Historical drama fuelled by myth, not reality

**The Avro Arrow was a success in the sky, but it was more of a financial burden than the Canada of the late 1950s could afford**

By David Bercuson  
The Financial Post







Canadian Broadcasting Corp.'s two-part mini-series The Arrow has come and gone. As drama, it was more than entertaining, particularly in its use of special effects. As history, it rated no more than a "D." But as an example of the way myth has come to dominate what was, in reality, a story of dollars and cents, the series gets top marks.

Boiled down, CBC's mini-series sent the following message.

By dint of the foresightedness of the Liberal government of Prime Minister Louis St.-Laurent in the early 1950s (not to mention a few hundred million dollars in development funds), a "Canadian" company -- A.V. Roe Canada Ltd. (Avro) was actually a subsidiary of a British company -- was given a contract to build an advanced jet interceptor with specifications nearly impossible to achieve.

Avro's dauntless little band of aircraft engineers then worked out the highly original design for the new fighter at a kitchen table. They even solved a complex aerodynamic problem when one of the engineers suddenly realized that if the fuselage of the new fighter was given the shape of a Coke bottle, it could easily break the sound barrier. But this hardy band of Canadians were bucking the odds. Senior American officials, including President Dwight Eisenhower, conspired to kill the project. Why? Because if they could not build so grand a fighter, Canada couldn't have one either!

These TV Americans -- who declare on screen that Canadians should stick to building canoes, not warplanes -- find a gullible ally when John Diefenbaker is elected prime minister of Canada in 1957. Dief and his ministers hate the Arrow because it is a Liberal-initiated project. So they find every excuse they

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can to kill it and to buy useless American unmanned anti-aircraft missiles instead. Not only do they cancel the Arrow project, but they order every completed Arrow cut up for scrap, and all plans and photographs of the fighter destroyed.

That, according to the mini-series, was the end of the dream of a significant Canadian presence in the aerospace industry. Why, the Arrow might even have helped put a man on the moon!

Dief's desire to wipe the Arrow from the memory of Canadians was, however, foiled. In the mini-series' last scene one intrepid Royal Canadian Air Force test pilot takes the last Arrow on an unauthorized test flight. He breaks all speed and altitude records, then flies off into the sunset. We are left to guess whether or not the legend that a "last Arrow" survived the cutting torches is true or not. The producers declare their belief in the legend; they do not say that the pilot was really Elvis Presley.

There is some truth to that version of events, but not much.

The Arrow was indeed a good airplane that more than met its design specifications, but it was expensive and built only to destroy high-flying Soviet bombers. Its massive development costs were eating a huge hole in the Canadian defence budget, and both the army and navy wanted it scrapped. The St.-Laurent Liberals realized that Canada couldn't afford the Arrow, but decided to wait until they were re-elected in the 1957 federal election before they cancelled it. (The Liberals thought they would always be re-elected.)

The Americans were not interested in buying the Arrow because they already had a high-altitude interceptor (the F-102) which, though not the equal to the Arrow, was being revamped into a better model (the F-106). They had cancelled a projected fighter similar to the Arrow in design specifications (the F-108), because they were beginning to look toward the development of multi-purpose fighters such as the F-111 and the F-4 Phantom.

After the Arrow was cancelled, the six flying Arrows were indeed cut up in a wanton act of vandalism and not a single one survives today. And, yes, many talented Canadians left Avro and went to the U.S. where they did more than their share of ensuring the success of the U.S.'s manned space program. But wait a minute. Was the death of the Arrow the end of the Canadian aerospace industry? Was it really the end of Canadian dreams about advanced aircraft, and even space exploration?

How do we explain the tens of thousands of passengers who fly on Canadian-designed and built Dash-8 and Canadair Regional Jets every day, all over the world? How do we explain those Canadian-designed and built CL-215 water bombers that take to the skies each year to fight forest fires in Europe, the U.S., Russia, South America and Canada? How do we explain Canada's astronaut program and Canada's participation alongside the U.S., Russia and other countries in the soon-to-be-launched Space Station? Can there be any doubt that when men and women first go to Mars some time in the next century,

Canada will play a part in that enterprise also?

The Avro Arrow was a success in the sky, but it was more of a financial burden than the Canada of the late 1950s could afford. The world of military aviation was on the cusp of major change back then. The days of the relatively cheap and unsophisticated fighters that had won the Second World War were over. The all-jet, high-altitude, nuclear-bomb-carrying bomber was ushering in an era of immensely complex and expensive interceptors built of space-age metals, carrying Buck Rogers weapons systems and guided by navigational devices that were the stuff of science fiction only a few years before.

Very few nations had the financial resources to stay in the game. One by one the heavily subsidized French, British and Italian aerospace industries got out of the warplane business entirely, or pooled their resources. Even the Israelis, loath to depend entirely on foreign warplane suppliers, could not go it alone and had to abandon their dream of an all-Israeli high-performance fighter.

The Avro Arrow might have been a wonderful symbol of Canada's new maturity, not to mention its scientific and engineering achievements. Many Canadians would have felt great pride had squadrons of Arrows done fly-pasts across Canada on the 100th anniversary of Confederation in 1967. Even to look upon an Arrow in an aerospace museum today would undoubtedly move many a Canadian heart.

To see the Arrow as a symbol of all that was right about Canada, a symbol destroyed by evil or short-sighted leaders, is wrong. In trying to build one of the most advanced fighters of its day, Canada was way out of its financial league. The decision to cancel the Arrow program was the right one, myths and legends aside, even though it was carried out by an unpopular government. Those Canadians who rely on TV dramatizations for their history will never get a chance to assess the evidence for themselves.

*(David Bercuson is director of the strategic studies program at the University of Calgary.)*

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