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The revolutionary Avro Arrow, in this 1957 photo, captured the imaginations of many Canadians, but its glory was short-lived.

The Déjà View

HISTORICA takes a look back

Avro Arrow never got off the ground

Revolutionary aircraft had lofty goals

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FOR CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

The aviation community recently remembered a day in their history known as Black Friday. It was Feb. 20, 1959, and, on that day, prime minister John Diefenbaker rose in the House of Commons and terminated the A.V. Roe Arrow, the world's most advanced military aircraft.

Only a year earlier, the atmosphere was quite different. At Malton, just outside Toronto, legendary test pilot Jan Zurokowski eased himself through the clamshell canopy of a brand new aircraft as sleek as its name. Even with borrowed engines, the aircraft was swiftly airborne. A sense of pride swept through the nation. Canadians clearly had "the right stuff."

The story of the Arrow had its

origins in the Cold War and the growing spectre of Soviet bombers invading our northern skies.

Flush from the success of the Canadian-built CF-100, the RCAF laid out a set of ambitious specs for a "supersonic all-weather interceptor aircraft." Demanding an aircraft that would fly faster, higher and farther and carry the most advanced missile system, the RCAF dreamed of a plane that was not even on the drawing boards of any nation in the world. With its CF-100 well into production, its Jetliner prototype turning heads as only the second jet airliner in the world, and even a "flying saucer" on its drawing boards, A.V. Roe felt up to the task.

The first Arrow took only 28 months from the first drawings until rollout on Oct. 4, 1957. It might have caused more of a stir if it had not been the very same day the Russians launched Sputnik.

While testing of the airframe was underway, A.V. Roe was also at work on the Iroquois engines that would drive the Arrow well beyond the speed of sound. Using titanium and high tempera-

ture alloys, the engineers skipped a whole generation of jet engine development. Powerful enough to drive the ocean liner *Queen Mary*, the engine was first tested June 24, 1956.

The weapons system proved the project's Achilles heel. The RCAF's insistence on weapons and guidance systems that didn't exist pushed the cost of the Arrow into an impossible range.

In 1957, A.V. Roe was still riding high, with some 50,000 employees, though the Jetliner had failed to find a buyer and had flown for the last time in November 1956. In June 1957, Diefenbaker turfed the Liberals out and became prime minister. He had long had a suspicious eye on A.V. Roe, the darling of the Liberal government. When the British military declared that interceptors were obsolete, he was jubilant.

"There is no purpose in manufacturing horse collars when horses no longer exist," he replied.

On Aug. 27, 1957, the prediction seemed confirmed as the Soviets launched the first intercontinental ballistic missile. That same month, defence minister George Pearkes met the U.S. secretary of defence, who trashed the Arrow and told him that the Americans would be glad to sell Canada "proven" aircraft at cheaper prices. Rumours spread that the Arrow was doomed.

On Sept. 17, 1958, after numerous evasions, Diefenbaker relented and granted a hearing to Crawford Gordon Jr., the president of A.V. Roe. Gordon stormed into the room "incoherent, like a person demented," an aide reported. He pounded the prime minister's desk and demanded his beloved Arrow not be scrapped. Diefenbaker threatened to have him thrown out. Gordon knew in his heart the Arrow would fly no more.

When Gordon heard Diefenbaker's announcement, he went straight to the loudspeaker at

A.V. Roe. "Notice of termination," he said. "There will be no work for you."

Some 14,000 lost their jobs overnight. The company was ordered to destroy the eight prototypes — only a nose section of No. 206 survives.

"We will now lose the cream of our skilled aircraft technicians to the United States," said Dennis McDermott of the UAW. "History will prove this to be one of the most colossal blunders made by a prime minister in the history of Canada."

The conventional, and no doubt sensible, historical view is that Diefenbaker made the right decision. The Arrow was getting too expensive, though the fault was as much with the RCAF as with the company. But historical events have more than simple economic or "policy" implications.

The death of the Arrow and A.V. Roe was a symbolic setback, not only for "arrowhead" enthusiasts in love with the technology, or for the thousands of highly skilled Canadians thrown out of work (many moved to the U.S., where they were eagerly picked up by NASA).

Diefenbaker's government rushed to buy American Bomarc missiles, which turned out to be useless without nuclear warheads, and then to purchase American Voodoo interceptors that the air staff had judged inferior years before.

For many Canadians, the cancellation of the Arrow was a mortal blow to part of the national dream and confirmation that our leaders did not have the courage or the vision to forge a coherent defence policy independent of the United States.

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