

Arrow and Sputnik: Fifty years ago in October

By Eric Gibson

Just fifty years ago, on October 4th, 1957, three remarkable events made the headlines. One was local, a happy event and the birth of a dream. But within two years the dream was destined to turn into a nightmare which would have devastating social effects both locally and nationally. The second event was an international story. It led to a dramatic increase in the tensions of the “cold war” and was the catalyst which was to destroy the dreams and bring hardship to many in the Mississauga area and, to a lesser extent, throughout Canada. The third was purely an entertainment story which had no bearing what-so-ever on the events described by this article. The event - which happened in the United States - will be remembered fondly by many of our older readers, but they will probably have to explain the story to their children and will definitely have to explain it to their grandchildren.

Of course, our city was not known as Mississauga back then. It was called Toronto Township and the constituent parts were little more than villages, farmland and orchards. Mississauga was not formed until 1977, so to be accurate we have to say that the local part of our story took place in Malton.

The subject of the story is, of course, the Avro *Arrow*, the sophisticated fighter aircraft which was conceived and constructed at Malton. It also suffered a painful death at Malton, but that is a story for another day. The history of the *Arrow* was told in the Spring 2007 issue of this journal so it will not be repeated here. Instead, this article will concentrate on the events of that one bittersweet day, Wednesday, October 4th, 1957.

It was a cool but sunny day, typical of the fall, and that was very much appreciated because it was the day on which the Avro *Arrow* was to see the light of day for the first time. A platform had been erected outside the hanger from which the aircraft was to emerge and rows of chairs were in place ready for the hundreds of guests who were expected. By 2 o'clock in the afternoon the dignitaries had taken their places on the podium, the guests were settling into their seats and the company's employees had left their workstations to observe the ceremony which was about to begin. Among the honoured guests on the podium were company officials, high ranking officers of the Royal Canadian Air Force and the United States Air Force together with several government officials and Members of Parliament.

Also on the platform, but having no role to play in the ceremonies, was the Honourable J.A.D. McCurdy. He was Canada's first airman, having flown the *Silver Dart* at Baddeck in Nova Scotia in 1909. He was in fact the first man to fly an aeroplane anywhere in the British Commonwealth. He was paying a return visit to Toronto Township for he had spent some time in Lakeview during the First World War where he had been the first manager of the Long Branch Airfield. Most readers will know that although it was called Long Branch, the field was actually in Lakeview very close to the site of the now defunct Lakeview Generating Station.

The speeches that day were, except for a couple of prophetic items, pretty much what one would expect. There were expressions of pride in the achievements to date and acknowledgements of the skill and devotion of the plane's designers and builders. But there were also cautions that there was still much testing to do before the *Arrow* could begin to perform its role in the defence of North America.

The last person to speak, and the one who officially unveiled the Avro *Arrow*, was the federal Minister of National Defence, Major-General George Pearkes V.C. It was he who uttered the prophetic words: *Much has been said of late about the coming missile age, and there have been suggestions from well intentioned people that the era of the manned plane is over and*

we should not be wasting our time and energy producing an aircraft of the performance, complexity and cost of the Avro Arrow. Of course he went on to say that he did not agree with these sentiments and felt that manned aircraft would always have a part in air battles. However there are many who feel that his comments were triggered by the knowledge, or at least the belief, that the Conservative government of the day would, at the appropriate time, order cancellation of the *Arrow*.

However, it was Pearkes comment about the coming missile age which was to prove uncannily accurate. For on that very same day, half a world away, the Russians launched their *Sputnik* satellite into orbit. It was the world's first artificial satellite and its deployment indicated that our "cold war" opponents were well on the way to developing the capability of launching intercontinental ballistic missiles. Missile attack was no longer just a theoretical threat. It had suddenly become a distinct possibility, though no one expected the development to occur overnight.

This was exceedingly distressing news for the engineers at Malton because manned aircraft, no matter how fast and sophisticated, cannot be effective against incoming missiles. It meant that their beautiful aeroplane was obsolescent before it had made a single flight. However, no one expected that an attack by missiles, though now a proven threat, would become viable for several years to come. The Avro engineers retained their confidence that their new aeroplane would be capable of meeting not just the present threat, but any threats that Russia could make for the next decade or so.

However, there is no doubt that the late breaking news cast a shadow of gloom over what had started out as a glorious day for everyone at the Malton aircraft plant. Russia had certainly rained on Avro's parade!

Now, on the lighter side, what was the third event which occurred on that Wednesday fifty years ago? Well, south of the border in the United States, CBS television launched its new family programme called "Leave it to Beaver." This new TV series was to be relatively short lived, but its humour was much appreciated and the show soon became very popular with Canadians as well as with Americans.