

Remembering the 50th Anniversary of “Black Friday” and the Cancellation of the Arrow

By Matthew Wilkinson

February 20th, 2009 marks the 50th Anniversary of two entwined and significant moments in Canadian history: the 50th Anniversary of the cancellation of the CF-105 AVRO Arrow program and the subsequent loss of some 50,000 jobs in the weeks and months following the cancellation. Even looking back on the events of 1959 through the coloured glasses of history and 50 years of time (and stories), it is hard to fathom a single event which garnered so much national fervor that arguably led to the downfall of a government, as well as caused so much local and social upheaval and uncertainty.

Many written histories on the Arrow suggest that the cancellation of the program, and the subsequent demise of the A.V. Roe Canada and many of its subsidiaries, was a crippling blow to the Canadian Aviation industry, which was only then in its infancy. One historian writes, in cryptic terms alluding to a mafia-like conspiracy, that the cancellation of the program was in effect a “knee-capping hit” to Canadian engineering and National pride, and something which, 50 years later, the Canadian psyche has yet to truly recover from.

So the challenge with this article is how to sift through the many, many layers of evidence, the stories, the reports, the multitude of books on the subject, and myths, the conspiracy theories, and the many local and personal stories of the events leading up to and following the cancellation and “Black Friday”. In short, I am not sure that it is possible in this format to offer a comprehensive analysis of the evidence and events behind “Black Friday”, as there are entire books devoted to reviewing the legacy of the Arrow, and reviewing the many theories and the myriad of explanations behind its demise. The story is truly one which has seemingly gained strength over the past 50 years, something akin to a great Canadian love story, murder mystery and dark tragedy rolled into one. As one article indicates, the Arrow “might have become the fastest plane in the world, our best defence against Soviet bombers, (and) the catalyst to propel Canada to the forefront of the aviation industry. Instead, it became a \$400-million pile of scrap metal, and the stuff of legends.”

Less than a week after the Arrow’s first flight, on March 25th, 1958, the Conservative party under the leadership of John Diefenbaker won in a landslide election. Immediately the new government began to reassess all funding commitments and expenditures undertaken by the previous Liberal administration, including the AVRO Arrow program. The new Prime Minister publicly voiced concern over the apparent spiraling costs of the Arrow program, and in September of 1958 the government announced that it would only authorize the completion of planes which were currently under production and that the program, and all financial commitments, would be fully reviewed in six months time. These were not the first rumblings of government discontent, and this was coupled, at least in hindsight, with an underlying distrust and an apparent lack of transparency and communication between the new government and the executive at A.V. Roe. This, together with the emerging perceived threat of Nuclear weapons and the desire to employ the Bomarc missile defence system, led to doubts that Canada could fund both projects. In a very real sense, the Arrow was both ahead of its time and obsolete at the same time.

When placing blame, most point fingers particularly at Prime Minister Diefenbaker, A.V. Roe president Crawford Gordon, and Minister of Defence George Pearkes, amongst others. I will leave the “finger pointing game” to others, more qualified than myself, to analyze. Needless to

say, there appears to be plenty of blame to spread around, although hindsight is a wonderful historical tool.

February 20th, 1959 would become known as “Black Friday”. At 11:15 am, Prime Minister Diefenbaker rose before the House of Commons and announced that the AVRO Arrow and the Iroquois engine program were to be immediately terminated, and the Government’s intent to acquire Bomarc missiles. Cancellation brought the total development costs of the Arrow program to around \$470 million. Publicly, the Diefenbaker government, and the Prime Minister himself, were vilified for its handling of the cancellation. Off the record, many top military personnel, including George Pearkes and C.D. Howe, admitted that they supported the cancellation, although they would have cancelled the program earlier. A.V. Roe and Orenda, having done little to prepare for this contingency, were essentially decimated. Top management and engineering personnel resigned, and over 14,000 skilled employees found themselves out of work on “Black Friday”. Most of these employees left for manufacturing and engineering jobs with British and American companies, including NASA, and undoubtedly made considerable contributions in their fields.

The trickle down effect of the cancellation was enormous and far reaching. All the contracts affiliated with the Arrow program were also cancelled, with an estimated 16,000 jobs lost over the next several days and the estimated number of total jobs affected or lost amounting to some 50,000 workers and support staff. There is no clear number of the jobs affected in Toronto Township (modern Mississauga), and most certainly the harshest impact was on the community of Malton and its surrounding environs. The total estimated population of Toronto Township in 1959 was 52,682 people, and the estimated number of jobs affected by the cancellation in Toronto Township alone was between 7,000 and 9,000 jobs (these stats vary amongst several sources), but amount to some 12% to 17% of the total population of Toronto Township! Regardless of the accuracy of the stats, this amounts to a significant portion of the population directly affected by this cancellation. The resulting economic impact was devastating for families and communities within what is today the City of Mississauga (and the surrounding areas). These effects must have been far reaching and long lasting, especially when you couple that with the diminishing of a Canadian industry, dispersal and loss of skilled and technical employment and personnel, and the demoralizing blow to National pride. “Black Friday” indeed.