

The AVRO Arrow: Destroying the Dream

By Matthew Wilkinson

We continue our series of articles looking at perhaps the darkest chapter of the story: the destruction of the planes and associated materials. Arguably no other aspect of the story of this famed aircraft was and is met with as much anger, disillusionment and bitterness as was the order to scrap and subsequent destruction of the planes following the order to cancel the program on “Black Friday”, February 20th, 1959.

The background behind the formal cancellation of the program has been looked at in previous articles in this series and much more in depth in numerous publications. However, the story behind the formal destruction and scrapping of the planes and related materials is relatively obscure. My reason for looking at this side of the story is simple – it is rarely covered, and finding information on the actual scrapping process was difficult, at least in terms of what was covered in published materials held in our Resource Centre and the public library.

After the decision to scrap all materials connected with the program was reached by the end of April, 1959, the Department of National Defence relinquished control of the “associated materials” to the Crown Assets Disposal Corporation.

Within two months of the project cancellation, all airframes, engines, production and fabrication tooling and components, blueprints, plans, and technical information were ordered scrapped. Part of the reasoning was a fear that classified information, materials, schematics, engines, technical data, and other technological achievements connected with the CF-105 project and which made the Arrow such a superior aircraft out of fear of espionage. Also cited was the worry that the plane could potentially cause embarrassment if, for example, the airframe were to be used as a “road side stand”. This decision to destroy the plane and its components and tooling has without doubt fueled the mythology and conspiracy theories that abound today. For more information on the cancellation process, and the associated decisions which culminated in the decision to scrap the components and airplanes, I recommend reading “The Avro Arrow Scrapbook: Rebuilding a Dream and a Nation” by Peter Zuuring, “Shutting Down the National Dream” by Greig Stewart or “Storms of Controversy” by Palmiro Campagna, amongst many other publications.

In regards to the actual destruction of the “component parts”, on May 7th, 1959, the formal bid tenders were sent out requiring that scrapping and clean up were to be completed within 90 days. Bids were opened on May 11th. Samuel (Sam) Lax, of Samco Steel (Lax Iron and Steel) of Hamilton was awarded the contract by offering a \$300,000 performance bond and agreed to the 90-day stipulation. Samuel, together with his brother Sheridan, was well known to the Crown Assets Disposal Corporation and A.V. Roe Canada, having had previous dealings with them. It is possible, given the short time frame for the bids to be received and 90-day requirement, that there were not many bidders, and persistent rumours suggest that the Lax brothers may have tendered the only bid. Most of the actual disposal and scrapping of the planes and associated material was overseen by Morris Waxman, who at the time worked in conjunction with the Lax brothers.

According to records and photo evidence, the scrapping process of the five flying Arrows likely began on or about May 18th, 1959, beginning with RL-202. By June 24th, RL-202 had been completely dismantled, and the cutting up of RL-205 was almost completed – as evidenced by photographic evidence. By July 7th, only RL-201 and RL-203 remained in recognizable form. The last two flying Arrows were scrapped by July 10th and 17th, 1959, respectively, as reported to the Department of Defence Production (DDP).

According to an interview with Sam Lax, many years later, he recalled the site being under strict scrutiny, and that all scrapped parts were weighed prior to shipping and the melted down scrap was weighed afterwards to ensure that no parts or components remained intact and not smelted. It appears that, despite the scrutiny and the thoroughness of the work, that parts did escape the destruction, with some making their way to museums, while still others continue to turn up perhaps consciously being saved from destruction by protective former employees. As for the melting and scrapping process, the five flying Arrows were cut apart by torch and by hand, while those on the assembly line were unceremoniously scrapped, it is rumoured, by a bulldozer. Wreckage and remnants were taken, covered by tarps, on flatbed trucks to the Lax brothers' Hamilton scrap yard where the scrapping process was completed. There is also some suggestion that largely components were removed to an intermediate location (rumoured to be a farm north of Oakville) where further scrapping was completed prior to sending the remnants to the Hamilton scrap yard.

Final melting down of the component parts and remnant wreckage was reportedly completed by the end of August, 1959, although it appears that not everything met its end as engine components and other fragments were located many years later, some still at the Orenda plant, and some at the scrap yard.

One thing of the Avro Arrow story is that it is a story, a myth, a legend and a legacy that refuses to stay quiet. We have been able, over the past two years in *The Heritage News*, to capture and relate fragments of the overall story, individual moments if you will, but those interested in learning more about this remarkable Canadian chronicle, I would suggest heading to your local library, visiting our Resource Centre, or dropping in at the Peel Heritage Complex or the Canadian Air and Space Museum. We have only scratched the surface of the incredibly complex and compelling story of the Avro Arrow.