

Outlook on Halton Hills

The Arrow proudly remembered

25th anniversary of Canada's jetfighter

By BRIAN MacLEOD
Herald Staff

The morning of March 25, 1968 was bitterly cold.

Yet thousands of people gathered outside at Malton Airport to watch aviation history being made.

Many of the people present that day made their homes in a small community of about 6,000 people called Georgetown.

When the wheels of the Avro Arrow CF 105 supersonic delta winged plane left the ground, a loud cheer went up from the huge crowd.

When those wheels touched the ground again an hour later, test pilot Jan Zurakowski was hoisted up on the shoulders of the crowd.

The most advanced, sophisticated fighter-interceptor plane was off the ground - and it was Canadian made.

What those workers didn't know, was that in under a year they'd be out of work. All 14,000 of them.

It was payday the afternoon of Friday, Feb. 20, 1959. At 3 p.m. workers were lined up to pick up their paycheques when an announcement came over the loud speaker.

Prime Minister John Diefenbaker cancelled the Arrow project.

Thinking the era of the manned airplane was at an end, Mr. Diefenbaker decided to spend his billion dollar defence money on the Bomarc guided missile made by Boeing.

All those jobs were terminated instantly.

It was the most massive layoff in Canadian history. And it was done immediately - in one afternoon.

In Georgetown, one in ten residents worked on the Arrow jet plane or the Iroquois engine.

The 9,000 workers at the Malton plant and 5,000 at the Orenda plant were stunned.

To Georgetown the layoff was devastating.

Some compared it to a depression. Everywhere people were walking out on their homes, abandoning their mortgages and in some cases their furniture.

And, as Joan Hill, a file clerk who worked for Avro remembered, at least one person in town committed suicide after the layoffs.

Up until that day, the Arrow had been the talk of the town. Everywhere people were waiting excitedly for the first flight to take off.

Today anyone who talks about the Arrow recalls it with enthusiasm and pride.

The day of the first flight, workers had a "terrific feeling inside," recalled Mrs. Hill, whose husband Roy was an engineer on the Arrow.

"Everybody was just so wrapped up in it."

Gordon Hunt of Georgetown, who worked at Avro at the time, was one of the thousands of workers who dropped everything and went outside to watch that first flight.

"It was an exciting day. You don't see a first flight very often," he said.

Jerry McHale, a Georgetown resident who worked as a tool maker for Canadian Steel Improvements, the firm which made the turbine blades for the Arrow, also talked with pride about the plane.

"It was a Canadian achievement. Everybody was proud of it." But "Black Friday", as it came to be known, ended all that.

When the project was cancelled, the diagrams were burned and the five planes already produced and 32 others in production, were completely dismantled.

"The most distressing thing was when they sent a guy out on the tarmac and cut up the planes," recalled Mr. McHale.

The cancellation of the Arrow, contributed to the downfall of Mr. Diefenbaker, said Mr. McHale. "It was a national event."

A description by Georgetown resi-

dent Ian Cass, who was at the plant when the announcement came over the loud speakers, gives a graphic account of workers' disbelief.

In a Feb. 23 edition of the Herald, Mr. Cass wrote that workers were "sleepwalking in a nightmare."

People were walking around with "blank, stunned faces," he said.

Mrs. Hill, who was working on an illustration of the Arrow at the time returned to her drawing after the announcement to complete what was now a grim task when a fellow worker said: "What are you doing that for? There's no point."

If the effect on the aircraft industry was enormous, the effect on Georgetown was "devastating."

"The place was like a ghost town for a while," said Mr. Hunt.

"People walked out of their houses and left their furniture."

A newspaper report said the town lost \$51,000 a week buying power, at the time when a T-bone steak cost just 69 cents a pound.

"It was pretty grim," said Mrs. Hill.

In Georgetown a fund-raising drive to build a hospital was cancelled.

The government reconsidered building a new school on Weber Drive and the Ontario Municipal Board was thinking about cancelling an extension to the town's sewage plant.

Well over 400 people signed up for the newly created Georgetown Employment Service to help local workers find jobs.

For sale signs were on houses everywhere. Many left for the United States to find work, many others returned to their native Britain where they had come from two years before to work on the Arrow.

One former Arrow worker who described himself as a "refugee from Malton" asked council to help workers lobby the government for consideration of their mortgages.

Council did just that. But the Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation said no. It would set a dangerous precedent.

Mr. McHale, who bounced around doing cleaning and painting jobs to pay for his \$90 a month mortgage for six months, returned to his firm after it rebounded from the shock.

"It was a definite depression."

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Former Avro Arrow worker Jerry McHale holds a book written about the rise and fall of the Avro Arrow. Mr. McHale, who was a tool maker at the plant in Malton, recalled how devastating the layoff was to Georgetown on that fateful day of Friday, Feb. 20, 1959 - Black Friday. (Herald photo)

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