Numerous articles, books and documentaries have appeared over the years about the aircraft. In fact, the Arrow’s legacy continues today with dedicated fans searching the bottom of Lake Ontario for abandoned test models and some even planning to build flying replicas.

Floyd is an aeronautical engineer of international stature, with numerous awards and citations, including the Wright Brothers Medal in 1950 for his work on jet transport technology. He is the first non-American to have this honour. He was a leading consultant to the British government on the SST Concorde project from 1965 to 1972, and his 1961 technical paper, Some Current Problems Facing the Aircraft Designer, is still referenced today.

But Floyd will always be famous for one particular bird: “Jim was the Arrow,” says Palmiro Campagna, P.Eng., author of Storms of Controversy, a bestselling book on the subject. Speaking to the press for the first time in many years, the engineer behind the legend talks to Engineering Dimensions close to the 45th anniversary of the Arrow’s first flight.

ED: There was a plaque that hung behind your desk at Avro’s plant that read: “If it’s worthwhile but obviously impossible, do it anyway.” Was there some event or reason that inspired you to become a professional engineer, especially in the aviation field?

Floyd: As a 14-year-old in England I was fascinated by the activities of aviation record-makers. Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic and the long flights of Amelia Earhart and Kingsford Smith, all in the same year, raised my adrenaline level and I was anxious to one day become “part of the action.”

Looking back, I’d have to say that Avro’s special training program was the best that anyone could possibly receive. The time spent in every department of the company and the special education arrangement resulted in a better understanding of the essential interface between design and production than what would be received by graduates coming directly out of university.
ED: Many to whom I spoke think the cancellation of the C102 Jetliner, the world’s first regional jet to fly, was a greater tragedy than scrapping the Arrow. Do you agree? Floyd: This is a subject on which I get very angry. I know of no military aircraft in service today that would fully meet the specifications laid down for the Arrow in 1953. But while the complexity, and therefore, the cost of the Arrow program, based on the almost unheard-of performance specified by the RCAF requirements team, was probably the cause of its demise, there was no such reason for the abandonment of the Jetliner. It was cancelled when we were negotiating a contract with National Airlines for an initial fleet; when Howard Hughes had offered to fund 30 of them for TWA; and when the American airforce had set aside funds for 20 to be used for pilot and navigator training for the crews of their proposed jet bombers. The cancellation was stupid, unconscionable and without merit of any kind.

ED: After the Jetliner, you took charge of the development of Avro’s CF-100 (the only Canadian-designed fighter aircraft to see service) and finally you fathered the Arrow. This era is often referred to as Canada’s “golden years” of aviation technology. What do you remember most?

Floyd: While that work amounted to not much more than a quarter of my professional life, it was certainly the most exciting, demanding, frustrating and formative time. There are two events that are indelibly etched on my mind. One is the first flight of the Jetliner on August 10, 1949, a hot, humid day when you could have fried an egg on the tarmac, and the other is the Arrow’s first flight on the morning of March 25, 1958, a raw and overcast day, with a wintery wind hanging over the scene. Since I had been in charge of these projects from inception to takeoff, the responsibility for the results and the safety of the crews was firmly planted at my feet. That is a feeling that is almost impossible to describe, and the copious correspondence between me and the writers for a considerable length of time, since I felt that some of their presentations come very close to libel. But I lost that battle and bailed out of any further discussion of the project.

ED: One of the things in the 1997 CBC miniseries that would concern P.Engs is that the control tower. Your character is asked by Avro’s president, Crawford Gordon, to falsify the Arrow’s test results in order to ultimately market the still-developing Iroquois engine to foreign countries. Can you set the record straight?

Floyd: The miniseries on the Arrow is widely acknowledged as a fantasy, and as the authors point out, based loosely on a true story. In the film, some characters are invented or changed beyond recognition, some mouthing innuendo that bears no relationship to the real facts of the story. All in the cause of producing a sensational film, which it certainly is, and brings into focus some remarkable things that were happening in our country so many years ago.

But engineers don’t design aircraft using Coke bottles, paper darts and home grinding machines as depicted by the whimsical characters in the film. The scriptwriters pointed out in a letter to me that the facts were “manipulated for dramatic purposes.” I objected strongly to real names being used for the characters, resulting in relief when the flights were over is equally difficult to put into words. While the Jetliner was a particularly docile aircraft, the Arrow was incredibly complex. Despite the fact that we had “hedged our bets” with an enormous amount of ground and wind-tunnel testing, I was thinking about the 38,000 parts that had to behave as we expected them to. Luckily, they did.

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