

Document Citation

Title	Television: Challenger jet saga airs tonight
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Source	<i>Winnipeg Free Press</i>
Date	1980 Jul 09
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Challenger: an industrial romance, Low, Stephen, 1980



Television

Randal McIlroy

Challenger jet saga airs tonight

We lost the Avro Arrow but we still have the Canadair Challenger.

The Challenger, a Canadian-built business jet that takes off where Bill Lear's jets stop, is the subject of a provocative National Film Board documentary airing tonight, *The Challenger: An Industrial Romance* (at 8 on Channel 6—Cable 2).

The film spans four years. It starts in 1976, when Canadair, a Montreal aircraft company on the skids, gambled on the development of a private jet, one that would be faster and more fuel-efficient than the popular American models. The romance continues, literally from the ground up.

We see the Challenger from the initial blueprints to paper miniatures, from blueprint to plywood mock-up, to the first flight of the real thing. That's the first theme in the production.

Selling the big bird is the second; if the first theme is a fascinating cutaway of aircraft construction, not only the building technology but also the logic applied within, then the second reveals the tactics used to sell the product.

The friction between the designers and sellers — the third and least theme — heats up when construction of the first jet falls far behind schedule.

'Humble arrogance' sales pitch

Canadair went to an American marketing team headed by Bill Smith, the kind of salesman who could sell ornamental ice to the Inuit, given the right pitch. Smith sells his clients on a mock-the-competition plan. His self-styled "humble arrogance" approach predicts that the Challenger will blow the doors off the competition, metaphorically and otherwise. Watch for a classic pitch, when Smith describes the Challenger as machismo incarnate: "Lean and mean, new to the scene," etc.

It's also a human story. If there is a hero in the show, it's Harry Halton, near death and confined to a wheelchair. Halton left a hospital bed to design the Challenger. Film director-producer Stephen Low checks in on him at every stage in the jet's development. There's a poignant scene where Halton, in his wheelchair, is looking up as mechanics work on the fuselage; you sense he'd be up there in a second if it were possible.

Other notable characters include Bill Lear himself who left the project because he didn't agree with Halton's design, a canny 80-year-old mechanic who was retired against his will and was rehired 10 years later because he's one of the best in the business, and the hypesters who flog the Challenger at a sales convention in St. Louis.

And then there is the first flight, high over the Mojave Desert. The company's claim that the Challenger enjoys flying doesn't sound like hyperbole when the jet does its stuff, darting and gliding above the distant earth.

Director of photography Andreas Poulsson prepared some brilliant, evocative footage. He captures the maiden flight in all its heart-stopping splendor. Elsewhere he makes his own wry comments. Canadair Central comes off like a tomb, with long, empty corridors and vast, silent chambers. By contrast, the sales convention is a hive: dripping honey smooth talk, plenty of salesmen/drones.