

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-4  
Greenland and the Air Age

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Dear Dick,

One of the most interesting developments in the North this year is a new helicopter network which began operations in June along Greenland's west coast. How this whole scheme works out will be watched with avid interest by many people. Despite mild controversy which surrounds the whole project, using helicopters in Greenland is one more indication that the Danes are pointing the way in northern development.

Controversy over the helicopter program in Greenland stems from several viewpoints. There are those who think this is just one more indication of too much money being spent in Greenland. Others complain that because helicopters are not yet cleared for instrument flying, they cannot maintain enough regularity in servicing the towns of West Greenland. Still others complain that, since helicopters were introduced, fewer towns have been visited regularly than in "the good old" Catalina and Otter days.

The substance of this helicopter discussion is like music to my ears. Why? It indicates that something monumental is being done in Greenland. Although admittedly only a part of the Danish development plans in Greenland, introducing helicopters on regular route flying should make other northern planners take note (or gape!). Helicopter flying in Greenland is part of a calculated, planned program. It is the direct result of the physical nature of Greenland and the Danes' refusal to bend when confronted with the high costs of northern development.

Music to my ears also are the complaints of Greenlanders bemoaning reduced service or elimination of service to some towns in the air network which had been served by the amphibious Catalina or float/ski Otters. Two things are clearly shown here: the high level of living in Greenland today and the fact that once a service has been provided, pity the administration trying to reduce or eliminate it. I cannot for the life of me imagine an Eskimo in Arctic Canada today complaining that the helicopter had not arrived on Wednesday as usual!

Before getting too deep into this helicopter story, let me sketch in a bit of background on flying in Greenland to set the stage for this unique operation. (The helicopter story is WGM-5.)

The idea of flying is not new in Greenland. Already in 1930, Britain's young exploring ace "Gino" Watkins led an expedition to Greenland to seek

out a feasible air route to North America. With the same purpose in mind, a well-known name from America, Colonel Charles Lindbergh, made extensive flying trips around Greenland with his wife Anne Morrow in 1933. Among other stalwarts who pioneered flying in Greenland are von Gronau, John Grierson, and Lauge Koch. Danish flying in Greenland started in the summer of 1932 with one-engined Heinkel HMII planes on pontoons. Air photography and ice reconnaissance were the projects, hurried on a bit because of the question of Norwegian sovereignty claims in East Greenland. Expeditions of Knud Rasmussen and Lauge Koch, as well as governmental mapping and air photo parties, all were active in Greenland up until 1939 when the war put an end to all Danish flying. World War II, however, is the reason for the status of commercial flying in Greenland today.

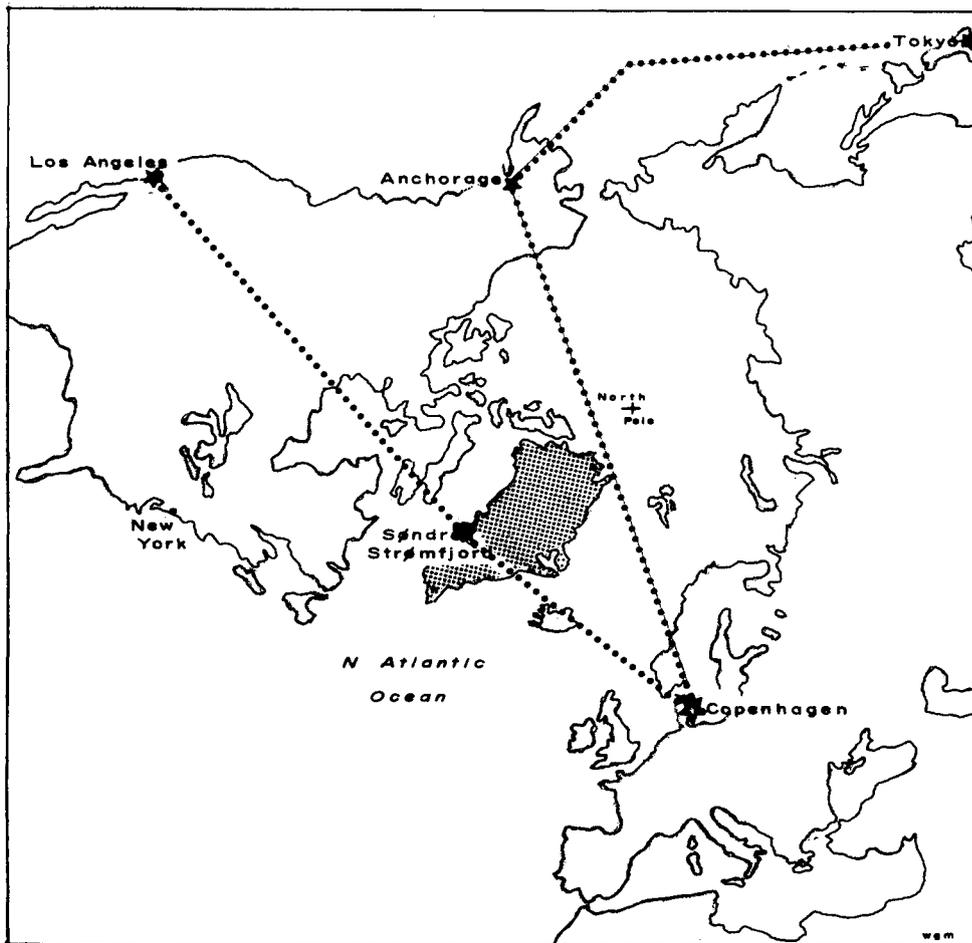
Early in the war, to establish an air ferry route to Britain, air bases were built by the United States in Greenland (resulting from the 9 April 1941 agreement between Denmark and the USA) at Narssarssuaq (so-called BW-1) and Søndre Strømfjord (BW-8) with emergency strips at Marraq (south of Godthaab) and at Ikateq on the east coast. Later, the immense Thule Air Base was built, also Station Nord, Mesters Vig and Kulusuk air strips. All of them except Søndre Strømfjord have only minor importance in the commercial aviation picture. They can be used in an emergency and have beacon and radio facilities. When I said that present commercial aviation in Greenland is the direct result of World War II, this is not meant to imply that air strips would not have been built in Greenland to take care of newly-developing flying routes. They surely would have been, only much later and at great burden to the Danish state treasury.

Following the war, Catalina flying boats and B-17 "Flying Fortresses" were busy in mapping and air photo work and in supporting field parties. Helicopters came into use for geological mapping. A Norseman or two operated in East Greenland. Despite increasing air activity, the first passenger run was not set up between Denmark and Greenland until 1948. There were, of course, military passenger flights from Denmark and the United States, but these activities had little influence on establishing civilian flying routes (except to prove the feasibility of Arctic air operations) and must be kept out of the present discussion.

Strangely enough, however, that first passenger run in 1948 was made by a Danish military Catalina to transport to Denmark the Greenlandic members of the Commission of 1948. The year's last ship was filled to capacity. The plane sent from Denmark to Narssarssuaq had three passengers. The ten commission members made the return flight.

In 1949, civilian passenger transport to Greenland (and return trips to Denmark) began to pick up momentum, while the State picked up the bill. A DC-4 was chartered from the Danish Aviation Company, 581 passengers were carried, and Greenland entered its air age. Ten years were to pass, however, before passengers would fly from place to place within Greenland.

Early flights to and from Greenland were spurred on by the necessity for rapid transport in the growing battle against tuberculosis in Greenland. More and more TB patients were being flown to Denmark for treatment. Travel time by ship had been up to 14 days; this was quickly reduced to hours by air.



### SAS "North Polar" routes to Greenland and beyond

Up until 1954, air passengers from Copenhagen were transported via Narssarssuaq (the old BW-1 from North Atlantic air ferry days) and further transported by ship to destinations along the coast. Since 1955, most air traffic has been to and from Søndre Strømfjord, with boats delivering passengers for Copenhagen and then dropping off along the coast those passengers having just arrived from Denmark. When ice difficulties closed Narssarssuaq and Søndre Strømfjord at times, Danish Air Force Catalinas helped with bringing passengers to and from the airfields.

In East Greenland, some passengers have also been carried to Mesters Vig airfield (built in 1952) and also to Angmagssalik by Catalina or by wheel plane to Ikateq airfield, which was brought back to use for a short period in 1956.

Søndre Strømfjord came into the picture after Scandinavian Airlines System's test flights from Europe to North America. After Goose Bay, Frobisher and other places were tried, SAS decided that "Sonder Strom" was the best stopping place for fueling. In 1954 a hotel was built in Søndre Strømfjord by the Danish Government and leased to SAS to accommodate SAS passengers and crews of the newly begun Los Angeles - Copenhagen route and Canadian Pacific's Vancouver - Amsterdam route.

With SAS beginning the LA - Copenhagen route in November 1954, regular transport to and from Greenland by air became possible, but the number of people travelling by air to and from Greenland did not actually begin to increase until 1958.

Since the end of World War II, passengers travelling to Greenland or back to Denmark increased each year. In 1939, 500 people went to or from Greenland. In 1948 passengers totaled 1473 and in 1957 they totaled 6025. In 1957, 1054 or 17 per cent of these went by air. In 1958, when all passenger transport between Greenland and Denmark began to spurt, air travel accounted for 28 per cent (or 1862) of the total passengers (6600). By last year (1964) when 13,750 passengers were carried, 12,422 of them (90 per cent) went by air.

In "the good old days" in Greenland the 200 or 300 passengers arriving in or leaving Greenland all travelled by ship and there was no problem getting them to their final destination in Greenland. They just stayed on the ship until it reached the right town. As air travel picked up, the flying passengers had to be met at Søndre Strømfjord or Narssarssuaq by boat and dropped off at their destination along the coast. During the winter-spring season, ice at times hindered access to Narssarssuaq. Ice on Søndre Strømfjord was also a problem, but it was thick winter ice so that connection with the outer coast from arriving planes was by dog sled!

Between 1958 and 1959 air passengers doubled, so a need arose for quicker and more regular connection with the outer coast from Søndre Strømfjord.

Several factors have played their part in the phenomenal switch to almost complete air transport to/from Greenland. The most important is that it is cheaper to fly passengers across the North Atlantic than to sail them. Also, the traditional vessels in Greenland navigation were getting old. Some have been retired: "Julius Thomsen" (Jutho) and "Disko". The new replacement vessel "Hans Hedtoft" was lost in a tragic iceberg collision returning to Denmark after its maiden voyage to Greenland in January 1959. This stunning loss, I am sure, made most officials take a long second look at transport developments in Greenland.

At the same time, SAS was putting years of experience behind polar flying. The first plane used was a DC-6B carrying 60 passengers, flying time Copenhagen - Søndre Strømfjord nine hours. Then came the DC-7 (7-8 hours), finally the DC-8 (4 hours 40 minutes) and Greenland's jet age began. When the DC-8's entered service in 1958, Winnipeg was no longer needed as a stopping point (for fuel and crew changes) on the way to Los Angeles. When SAS receives the first of her new fleet of DC-8-62 jets in 1966, Greenland will also be dropped as a landing point, and the LA - Copenhagen run will be non-stop. To assure continued service, though, SAS will fly a local run to Greenland from Copenhagen on a demand basis as it now does each summer.

In February 1957, SAS pioneered an air route to Tokyo, Japan from Denmark (via Anchorage, Alaska) and now has two such flights a week leaving Copenhagen. SAS is now meeting increased competition on this "North Pole" route from a cooperative scheme by Air France, Lufthansa and Japan Air Lines. These three airlines are flying 8 weekly departures from Europe (four from Copenhagen) to Tokyo, all via Anchorage. A look at the map on page 3 will show easily what results from international politics vs. great circle routes. The dog-leg to avoid the Soviet Union makes the Tokyo run one-third longer than it would be if a direct route could be flown. Who will get the Tokyo run when air space over Russia is opened

Sincerely,

*Bill Mattox*  
W.G. Mattox