

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CIVIL AVIATION FOR NORWAY by Vincent H. Malmström (1950)

Modern Norwegian culture is the product of a long and continuing struggle between Man and Nature. With over ten centuries of recorded history behind it, and many more that have gone unrecorded, Norway is still a pioneer country. Today this small nation represents civilized man's most lasting and successful advance into the sub-Arctic.

But this advance has not come easily. It has meant meeting the challenge of a limited growing season, of steep and rugged slopes, and of shallow soils. It has meant felling vast forests and clearing countless boulders from the fields. And though Norway's mountainous, sub-Arctic land has not treated her peoples gently, it has evoked from them a deep feeling of reverence and respect for nature. This same exacting environment has likewise fashioned the basic fibers of Norwegian character, for in her mountain fastnesses were born that courageous self-reliance and love of freedom that are the heritage of Norway's sons and daughters today. And yet the struggle goes on -- with new ideas, new forces, and new tools.

One of the most significant contributions of the twentieth century to Norway's age-old struggle for existence is the airplane. In civil aviation Norway has at long last found the nemesis for two of her most persistent natural foes -- topography and distance. The same mountain spines of the Kjølén that nurtured Norwegian independence have remained to keep the country broken, disunited and isolated. If this is true in the older, more settled south of Norway, it is equally true of the Far North. But in the north this isolation is even more forcefully emphasized by sheer distance--Norway's other great obstacle to unity.

For proof of the isolative quality of the mountains, one need look no farther than the folk customs, habits of dress, and singularities of dialect found in the various valley regions of the country. In Norway, as in all mountainous countries, what may have been an essentially homogeneous culture at the outset has been diffused into a spectrum of colorful variations, just as a single beam of sunlight loses its unity on striking a prism. Norway's mountain-girth isolation has produced a range of local color seldom found in countries many times her size. This differentiation of customs, dress, and speech has become part of Norway's personality, part of her attraction to tourists from a world that is fast losing its individuality. This local color is something Norway must strive to preserve, but at the same time she must not allow the eternal mountains to remain an obstacle to her economic, social, and political development. It is in these spheres that civil aviation can make its greatest contribution to Norwegian cultural life.

Divided on their landward sides, Norwegians have in times past looked to the sea for their bond of unity. Movement of persons and goods by water, however, has always been slow and only the peripheries of the country can be served. Then, in the early years of the present century, the first over-land communication links were forged, but not without the mountains exacting a frightful price. The steep, rocky slopes still forced Man

to grovel in the valleys, to build great bridges and blast long tunnels. And though in the end the mountains could not stop the advance of the rail and roadways, they dictate to this day the speed of movement along their tortuous routes.

Unlike either sea or land transport, however, the airplane knows few if any obstacles to, or restrictions on, its movement. There are no "coast-lines" beyond which it cannot penetrate. There are no mountains above which it cannot freely soar. Its course can be as straight as an arrow and its speed as fast as its power plant can drive it. Only the airplane can free itself from the shackles of a confining Nature. Only to the airplane do the land and sea, the mountain and the valley, become as one. Cities take on a new significance, for no longer need one think of a coastal town as opposed to an inland town. They become as points scattered over a uniform surface, separated from one another by distance alone. Only in the air above her can Norway find the unity denied her by the land and sea. Civil aviation can unite Norway culturally for the first time in its long and arduous struggle against Nature.

Not only have the lofty mountains shrunk humbly beneath the wings of Man, but distance likewise has contracted immensely. Today, thanks to civil aviation, the fishermen of Tromsø is hardly more than six hours away from Oslo, or scarcely farther from the capital than the businessman of Kristiansand S. would be by rail. Distances in southern Norway have diminished proportionately, but it is in north Norway especially that the fullest appreciation of this fact has been realized. Here, in a region that contains no more than twelve per cent of the total population of the country, almost one-third of all flight activities of domestic Norwegian airlines is carried on. This indicates very pointedly the growing significance of air transport for northern Norway. The broad psychological gap of isolation between the peoples of the north and south has finally been bridged and a new sense of Norwegian unity is being born.

Civil aviation contributes to Norwegian unity not merely by making possible the rapid and easy movement of persons between the different areas, but also by facilitating the distribution of correspondence, newspapers, and merchandise. With the expansion of air freight, civil aviation can play an increasingly important role in the economic development of the north, just as it has done and is doing in the taiga lands of northern Canada. Although the problems confronting Norway are not completely analogous to those with which the Canadians are faced, only the most unimaginative person can minimize the potential contributions of civil aviation to the economic and social integration of Norway. Domestically, civil aviation can be the solvent of topography and distance, the unifying bond for all of Norway.

Internationally, the horizons opened by civil aviation are even broader. The implications of Norway's strategic location near the European threshold of the North Atlantic route are only now being explored. Few persons realize, for example, that almost all of North America west of the 100th meridian is closer to Oslo by air than to London. What such elementary geographic truths as these may mean to the future of civil aviation and its influence on Norwegian life, time alone will reveal.

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