

The Inauguration of the Polar Air Route from Copenhagen to Los Angeles -- November 15, 1954

This week the attention of Norway -- and, indeed, of much of the rest of the world -- will be turned toward the Arctic. There, high above the glistening icecap of Greenland and the uninhabited tundra-islands of Canada, a new trail will be blazed -- a trail that has all the promise of becoming one of the world's most important highways of commerce. This is the Polar Air Route, which will be flown for the first time tomorrow, November 15th, by the Scandinavian Airlines System. In this instance, a link will be forged between Copenhagen, Denmark, the largest city of Scandinavia, and Los Angeles, California, the metropolis of the American West Coast. But, more than being a new air route that joins two large cities, the Polar Air Route will serve as a gateway between Europe and western North America,

If you try to trace out the Polar Route on an ordinary map of the world, you may be puzzled over why such a round about course has been chosen. You may wonder, too, why any air route from Europe should have its New World terminal on the American West Coast. Let me hasten to explain that there are good grounds for your bewilderment, but that neither your impressions nor the plans of the Scandinavian Airlines System are in error. The fault lies, simply enough, with the map. It so happens that the most common map of the world -- at least the one that we see most often -- is the Mercator map, which dates back to the early 16th century. Now, while Mercator's map has played a role of immense importance in sea-travel ever since, it gives an entirely inadequate view of the world in the modern age of air travel. Therefore, I suggest that we quietly push our Mercator maps to one side and look instead at a globe, which, after all, is the best representation of the Earth that we have.

If we next stretch a string between the two terminals of the Polar Route -- that is., between Copenhagen and Los Angeles, --you will see that it lies right over the middle of Greenland and diagonally across the vast expanse of Canada. Your string thus represents the shortest distance between Scandinavia and the Pacific Coast of the United States -- a route which, in technical language, is called a Great Circle. Naturally, this is the ideal route that an airplane would fly if it could cover the entire distance without stopping. But the something-more-than 5,600 miles that separate the Danish capital from Los Angeles are as yet too long for a non-stop commercial flight. Therefore, the route, or the string that you have laid across the globe, will have to be twisted a little so that it will lie over some suitable intermediate landing places. For the opening of the Polar Route, the Scandinavian Airlines System have chosen the airfield at Søndre Strømfjord, in western Greenland, and that at Winnipeg, in the Canadian Province of Manitoba, as their stopping points. Thus, despite the fact that the route their planes will fly will be 200 miles longer than the Great Circle -- that is, the ideal route between Scandinavia and California

-- it will still be more than 450 miles shorter than the present connecting routes by way of New York.

Now, the globe has given us the answer to our first question: Why an air route from Scandinavia to the west coast of North America will lie across the Arctic regions. But, there is yet another question to be answered. Why is it that an air route from Europe should have its terminal on America's Pacific Coast? In the United States and Canada,, when we think of people leaving for Europe, we invariably think of them going from the East Coast. And, when they arrive in Europe, we usually expect that the first land that they either see or set foot upon will be the British Isles, which lie on the seaward threshold of the continent. These ideas are neither strange nor incorrect, for the shortest distance across the Atlantic, does, in fact, lie between Newfoundland and Ireland. This fact has been well appreciated by sailors and airman alike, and it was this route, of course, that Lindbergh chose for his historic flight in 1927. But, while the British Isles lie closer to eastern North America than does any other part of Europe, they do not lie closest to the American West. If you will look once more at your globe, you will see that Scandinavia is that part of Europe which in nearest to the western parts of Canada and the United States. Thus, Scandinavia lies on the aerial threshold to the great American West, just as the British Isles lie athwart the main sea-lanes between Europe and the American East Coast. Geography, with the help of the airplane, has made next-door neighbors of Copenhagen and California, of Scandinavia and the Pacific Coast,

It is not, however, distance alone, which justifies such an air route. There must, of course, be a strong economic basis as well. In the view of the Scandinavian Airlines System, this basis not only exists but it is also steadily becoming stronger. Los Angeles, at the American end of the Polar Route, is today the third largest city in North America and it is continuing to grow at a rapid pace. Indeed, the Pacific Coast regions of both the United States and Canada have rates of population growth which are greater than those in any other sections of their respective countries, In addition to a rapidly increasing population, these regions have abundant and varied resources which promise to become important commodities in the commerce of the future. With the fast, regular, and dependable service that the Polar Route will afford, the growing markets of western America will for the first time become easily accessible to and from the heart of Europe.

For the countries of Scandinavia, the opening of the Polar Route likewise holds promise of economic expansion. For the first time in history, their strategic location will be rightfully appreciated. No longer will they lie offside, so to speak. The Air Age has firmly placed Norway, Sweden, and Denmark on the main through-routes between the Old World and the New. In the air commerce of the future, there is every reason to expect that they shall occupy as enviable and important a position as the British Isles have in the sea-commerce of the past.

The development of large-scale air-borne trade across the Arctic is, of course, more potential than actual. Today the primary function of the airplane is not the long-distance transport of goods, but of passengers. Thus, we may expect that the Polar Route, at least in its early years of operation, will find its greatest patronage among the traveling

public of businessmen and tourists. By providing a through service, unbroken by delayed connections or bothersome stops for customs, the Polar Route will mean a saving of anywhere from one to five hours of the businessman's precious time. It is not only the time element that bears emphasis, however. There is also the element of comfort, for on the Polar Route the flying weather is much more stable than, for example, on the present North Atlantic routes.

For the tourist, the Polar Route will hold a special appeal. From the moment he or she steps on board the "Royal Viking", they will be met with the traditional hospitality for which the Scandinavians are justly famous. The tour itself will take him over regions of great and varied beauty -- into areas that until the last few decades, none but a handful of polar explorers had even seen. From the rolling green fields of Denmark, he will soar past the rock-bound coast of Southern Norway and over the island outposts of the Shetlands and Faeroes. About six hours after his take-off, he may glimpse the glaciers and volcanic peaks of Iceland and, not long afterward, the glistening ice-cap of Greenland will stretch out beneath him in all its radiant magnificence. His first stop in the New World will be Søndre Strømfjord, in the west of Greenland. There, where ten centuries ago Norwegian Vikings planted their ill-fated colonies, the modern air-borne tourist may find accommodations in a spanking new luxury hotel. Should he wish to stop over, such diversions as a polar bear hunt or a visit to an Eskimo settlement are well within the range of possibility. From Søndre Strømfjord, his SAS plane whisks him next over the islands of Canada's northern frontier, and, skirting the edge of Hudson Bay, it brings him out of the zone of the tundra and over the region of the taiga -- that vast belt of virgin timber which girdles all of Canada from Atlantic to Pacific. Just 8 1/2 hours after leaving Greenland, the tourist finds himself at Winnipeg, on the very edge of the great Canadian prairies. And, seven short hours later, after having vaulted both the Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin, his plane lets down at Los Angeles -- a total flight time of just over 27 hours. For the tourist who takes the Polar Route in the summer, as most of them undoubtedly will, there is the added thrill of flying the entire distance in continuous sunshine!

As the Scandinavian Airlines System tomorrow initiates its Polar Route and a new highway of world commerce is thus opened, Norway may feel justly proud of the part which she has played in making this "Northwest Passage" a reality. Far back in history, it was her sea-roving sons -- the Vikings -- who first reached and explored many of the polar regions over which the sleek, silver planes of SAS will now fly. At a much more recent date, it was Norway's Nansen who first crossed the ice cap of Greenland. It was Roald Amundsen who first brought a ship through the "Northwest Passage". It was Otto Sverdrup who mapped much of the Canadian Archipelago. And, in our own day, the name of another Norwegian -- Bernt Balchen -- has become synonymous with aviation in the Arctic. If, as Balchen maintains, the opening of the Polar Route belongs to the same category of events as the completion of the Suez and Panama Canals, then Norway, and indeed all of Scandinavia, has cause to herald the creation of this new bond between the Old and New Worlds.

(During the fall and winter of 1954-1955, while conducting research for a series of texts on Norway, Sweden, and the British Isles, I also broadcast a number of programs for the English language service of Radio Norway International. The above script was one of these and was aired on Sunday, November 14th, 1954.)

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