

## **From fishing village to military center**

### **– The emergence of Bodø during the Cold War**

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Welcome to Norway's main center of defense and aviation! Bodø is the second largest town in Northern Norway. And the town is the headquarter of the Norwegian military forces, the aerial search and rescue services, the civil aviation authorities, the national aviation museum, several branches of commercial aviation, the headquarter of the airline Widerøe, one of the "Big 3" in Norwegian aviation and a range of other military- and aviation-related businesses and institutions. Bodø is THE aviation and military city of Norway.

Being the main military and aviation city in Norway, may not sound very much. Norway is a small country with a small population and not too significant in the larger scheme of things. And Bodø is also really only a smallish town of less than 50.000 people. But images may deceive. Norway is in fact one of the world's countries most dependent upon aviation. We have the densest system of civil air routes in the world, and nobody in the world flies more than the Norwegian. And the further north you get, the more important is the airplane and the more people fly. Already in 1995, half of all travels in Northern Norway of more than 100 Km, were done by airplane. The North Norwegians flew twice as often as people in the south of the country. And in 2007, more than 30 Million travels were made within Norway and to and from Norway and abroad. That's almost 7 trips in a year for every Norwegian man, woman and child.

And we fly on business and on vacation. The average Norwegian's holiday expectation is today closely linked to the airplane. As when 25 % of all Norwegians go on charter tour to the South every year. And more than 50 % has done that at least once in the last 2 years.

Bodø, as one of the main hubs of commercial aviation in Norway, has a network comparing favorably to international cities with ten times its population. Compared for example with Arkhangelsk in Russia, a city of almost ten times the population of Bodø, in a country – Russia - which also has relied heavily on the airplane as a very important mode of internal transportation, Bodø has significantly more air traffic. On any given day of the week, Bodø has 3 times the number of flights to twice the number of destinations, compared with Arkhangelsk.

The airport in Bodø is a combined military and civilian airport. A Main Air Station as well as an airport. But it is the military which run the airport and service it with everything from firemen to snowploughs. Bodø Main Air Station is the home of 2 of the 3 fighter squadrons in the Norwegian Air Force. These two squadrons, organized in the 132 Wing, compose our main aerial fighting force in the case of war, and are an important tool for securing national control of our air and sea space.

In addition to the Main Air Station, Bodø is also the home of the Operational Headquarters of the Norwegian Armed Forces. Strategic and tactical planning, and supervision of the day to

day affairs of the military in Norway and our contingents abroad, are done here. In the mountain facility at Reitan, some 30 Km outside of town.

The wider Bodø area is also the home of some Norway's and NATO's most important intelligence facilities and communication facilities. Northern Norway has since the 1950s been one of the most militarized regions in the world, just like the Kola peninsula and Northwestern Russia became, on the Russian side. And Bodø has for almost 60 years been the center of this military complex.

But why is it, that what originated as a sleepy fishing village of no more than 5 – 6.000 people during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, became a military center in the 20<sup>th</sup>?

The answer to that is, of course the Cold War, and the peculiar characteristics of the Cold War in this part of the world.

### **From outpost to strategic center, courtesy of the Cold War**

Before WWII, Bodø and the entire region of Northern Norway was almost totally demilitarized. The region was utterly unimportant in the big picture of national security. Only a couple of regiments was stationed in this northern half of the country. And those had mainly internal tasks, as a state tool in the nation building process. As Northern Norway for a long time had been viewed with a certain scepticism by the dominant south, as a wild frontier land populated by a strange mix of Norwegians and Lapps.

But the German occupation started to change this. Bodø was deemed an important link between the central parts of German-occupied Europe, and the arctic front against the Soviet Union in the far north. Nazi Germany was also terrified of a British counter-invasion. An attack on Bodø would effectively cut the country in half. Therefore as much as 6.000 German soldiers was stationed in the Bodø-region, and numerous fortifications was constructed to combat an eventual British invasion, including a temporary wooden airfield. Employing additional 6.000 POWs as workforce.

After the war came the Cold War. Norway joined as you know, the Western alliance. When NATO in the wake of the Korean War decided to transform the alliance from a mere political to a full-fledged military alliance, this was immediately followed by a massive expansion of the military forces and infrastructure in the member countries. Since the Soviet Union at the same time decided to establish what was to become the world's largest military bases on the Kola peninsula, Northern Norway suddenly found itself transformed from a military and economic backwater, into a region of prime strategic interest for the NATO-alliance as a hole, and for the US especially.

Northern Norway was the only direct NATO-border with strategically central parts of the Soviet Union and its concentration of long-range bombers, ships and submarines, some of them based only 45 Km from the Norwegian border.

Northern Norway was also guarding the only direct Soviet outlet to the Atlantic and thereby controlling the important convoy-routes between the two “legs” of NATO – North America and Western Europe.

And the region was situated directly in the path of the intercontinental ballistic missiles of both the US and the Soviet Union, if the two superpowers should ever come to direct blows. The Northwestern parts of the Soviet Union was also the place where the first Soviet long range missiles were built and tested, making Norway the best spot in the Western Alliance in which to observe the Soviet development. Including the testing of nuclear weapons at Novaja Zemlja.

So, when the overall strategic focus started to change from Central Europe to the flanks, Northern Norway became one of NATO’s most important defensive shields. This was the place where the Soviet Union had to be observed, in order to give the Alliance early warning. And this was the place to stop a Soviet invasion.

Northern Norway also had an offensive role: In 1952, the US Strategic Air Command, the military wing being responsible for the US nuclear arsenal on board bomber planes and missiles, signed an agreement with Norwegian authorities about landing rights in case of war. Using airfields in Norway as starting point for offensive actions against the Soviet Union. Since Bodø got the largest airfield, and had prime harbor facilities for receiving allied reinforcements, this town became important both for defensive and offensive actions, as well as for intelligence gathering in time of peace. SACLANT also wanted to use Bodø as a base for operations in the North Atlantic. Bodø therefore received storage facilities for most types of weapons systems, including nuclear weapons.

Norway became a large receiver of US military aid, mainly transferred via the NATO Weapons Aid Program. BUT in order both to properly utilize the modern weapons systems; to be a credible defence against possible Soviet aggression, in order to maximize Northern Norways closeness to Soviet Union for intelligence purposes and to become a useful transit station for eventual US bombing missions against the Kola;

In order to be all this, Northern Norway needed enormous investments in airfields, harbours, roads, communications- and intelligence stations, etc., etc. Every year from 1951 onward, the region underwent massive construction works, paid by NATO. These construction works created jobs and modernization in previously pre-modern, unemployment-ridden fishing

communities. Where Northern Norway for generations had been both significantly poorer than the south of the country, and considered unimportant and mainly a burden on the Norwegian economy; it suddenly became a place of importance; of wealth, jobs, international contacts, etc. And americanization.

Due to its central location, Bodø was in the mid-1960s chosen as the headquarter and main base for all NATO and Norwegian forces in Northern Norway, with a joint Northern Command established formally in 1972, at Reitan outside Bodø. The Air Force in particular wanted an air base where planes could safely be stationed when flying out to contest Soviet planes in the event of a Soviet invasion. The airbase at Bardufoss further north was too close to the perceived frontline.

The military expansion in Bodø also made it ideally suited for British and US intelligence operations, in addition to our own. British Canberra's and American U-2 spyplanes used Bodø as a forward base for intelligence flights into the Barent Sea. Although the U-2 was only stationed here one time: From August to November 1958, it became perhaps the most famous symbol of Bodø's new role as a strategic hotspot. Mainly due to the infamous shutdown of one of the planes on its way from Pakistan to Bodø May 1., 1960. A sister of the downed plane may be seen on exhibition here at the museum.

In the very first year of the NATO infrastructural Programme in 1951, the NATO Supreme Meeting, after a proposal from the Norwegian Joint Chiefs, decided to build this huge air base, funded almost in full by NATO. And thereafter Bodø experienced a huge growth due to the demand for workers, housing, services, etc., both for the air base and all the other military facilities which during the years has been situated in the area. The Armed Forces became Bodø's main industrial locomotive. And it was instrumental in bringing about the economic development which in a few short decades ensured that the entire Northern Norway became equal in wealth with the southern parts of the country.

### **Other effects of the military expansion in Bodø**

The military activity created a demand for commercial air routes. There had been a previous seaplane route to Bodø from 1936. Bodø was then a stop on the North Norway route going to Tromsø. Other than that, there had only been a few single flights going back to 1919.

But when NATO paid for a huge airport, and Bodø grew to demand regular land routes, the Norwegian government was happy to make Bodø a centre also for commercial aviation. In the

end of the 1960s, due to dismal failures in the district policy, the state also decided to invest in many small airports for regional flights. Nearly half of these routes use Bodø as a hub for connecting to the longer, main air flights.

The frenzied building activity, the thousands of Norwegian and NATO-soldiers coming to the town for yearly exercises, and the large influx of money, contributed to make Bodø a very outward-looking and wealthy town. New cultural impulses, in particular American impulses arrived very early in Bodø. Like hamburger bars, rock music and teenage pop culture.

The everpresent danger of nuclear war also made itself felt. The economic activity came with a prize tag of being first in the line in case of war, as Soviet premier Kruchzev made very clear in 1960, when he threatened to bomb Bodø with nuclear weapons in case we allowed US spyflights over Soviet territory to continue.

### **Conclusion**

Although Bodø today has many economic legs to stand on, not any longer being totally dependent on the military, the development in military and aviation was instrumental in making Bodø what it is today: A military and aviation city.

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