

SUNDAY
APRIL 23, 2017

The Arctic Journal

REGISTER TODAY
to receive updates
and information

CLICK HERE

REGIONAL JOURNALISM, GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE.

HOME | BUSINESS | POLITICS | CLIMATE | **CULTURE** | OPINION | OIL & MINERALS

History

The air base: The Americans arrive

The history of Thule Air Base, part I, in which a problem won't go away, but a people do



CULTURE A landmark in US-Denmark-Greenland relations (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

April 10, 2017 - 5:50am - By Iben Bjørnsson

Share this
article

Facebook
Google
Twitter
Mail

The Second World War had had significant consequences for Greenland. For the first time in several hundred years, Greenland was opened up to another country than Denmark: namely the US, for which the war had meant an increased strategic interest in Greenland. The Danish ambassador in Washington, Henrik Kauffmann, had **signed an agreement** in 1941 allowing the US to build bases and stations in Greenland.

However, the agreement was intentionally vague when it came to its

*This is the 10th article in a series published in collaboration with **Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute**, which seeks to inform the public about Danish-Greenlandic history.*

*The articles are based on the institute's **Arctic Stories** podcast series, which is produced by the author.*

The original version of this podcast (in Danish only) can be heard below. All of the episodes in the series

termination. In it, it says:

This agreement shall remain in force until it is agreed that the present dangers to the peace and security of the American continent has passed.

Bo Lidegaard, a Danish historian who has done extensive research into both Danish-American and Greenlandic security issues: “Obviously, it is inconvenient to have to agree on conditions for the termination of the agreement. Because it means that as long as one party disagrees, it cannot be terminated. And that was the whole point of this passage.”

are available on from most podcast platforms, including [iTunes](#) and [Soundcloud](#).

Follow Arktisk Institut on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).



Arktiske Hist...
10 Thuleba

[Cookie policy](#)



American base Bluie West 1, Narsarsuaq, 1945
(Photo: © Jette Bang Photo)

With the war over, one might have thought (and the Danish government certainly did) that American presence in Greenland was no longer necessary. But while the government had been openly enraged about the agreement in 1941, when it was signed by their rogue ambassador, the situation was different now. The American war effort had been crucial to Europe's liberation, and Denmark was trying to gain status as an ally, despite the Danish policy of acquiescence towards Nazi Germany. This was not the time to challenge the US. More subtle strategies were applied, but to no avail.

Mr Lidegaard: “After a couple of years, the Danes thought that the time for the Americans to leave Greenland had come. Denmark wanted to reinstate its policy of neutrality, not to mention military sovereignty over Greenland. However whenever Denmark started cautiously hinting that it might be time to agree that danger had passed, the Americans suddenly became hard of hearing. And as Denmark spoke louder, the US became even harder of hearing. In the end, the foreign minister travelled to Washington to tell the secretary of state directly that the time had come to renegotiate. The answer, in paraphrase, was one that Ambassador Kauffmann had already warned he would come: ‘If it is more convenient for you that we buy Greenland, that is no problem. You lack foreign currency, tell us how many dollars in gold you would like, and we can settle it

immediately.' With this, the secretary of state said two things: one, this agreement will not be terminated, and two, we are ready to buy Greenland if you find that too much of a nuisance. Either you accept US presence, or you lose Greenland. It was an offer you couldn't refuse: a demonstration of power."



American icebreaker at Grønnedal, 1949 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Faced with this, there was little Denmark could do. Of the two evils, it chose to keep Greenland, Americans and all. Because one of the reasons that Denmark did not want to anger the US was the same reason that the US took an ever-increasing interest in Greenland: the Soviet Union. Like the US, the Soviet Union had emerged from the Second World War not only as a victor, but as a superpower. And it wasn't long before the two of them fell into the relationship of competition and mutual mistrust that was the Cold War. This was cemented in 1949, when Nato was formed with the US as a leading force. Denmark also signed the treaty, broke with neutrality and became bound to the American defence strategy.

Mr Lidegaard: "One of the main Danish arguments for signing the North Atlantic Treaty was that it would solve the problem of Greenland. By becoming an ally of the US, Denmark could take over the bases there and make them available to the US if needed. By joining Nato, the Danish politicians thought they could reinstate Danish sovereignty over Greenland."

Cold War strategies

However, that was not how it played out. In a taped interview in the Danish Arctic Institute Archives, Robert, "Bob" Sykes, a US Weather Bureau official stationed in Greenland during and after the war, explains that the US wanted to hand over sovereignty over the weather stations to Denmark, but keep a military presence at bases like Bluie West 1 and 8, the airports in Narsarsuaq and Kangerlussuaq.

“These matters of continuance and expansion in the Arctic developed some support because of continuing wartime activities. In other words: Korea, for example. The Cold War, for example.”

The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 heightened the tension of the Cold War, thus also increasing US strategic interest in Greenland.

Mr Lidegaard: “In the winter of 1950-51, the Americans decided to build a new grand Arctic base, the likes of which had not been seen before.”

The reason for locating the base in Greenland was, as is most often the case, one of simple geography. The shortest route from Washington to Moscow is over Greenland.



*From the 1953 American Defense Department film Operation Blue Jay
(Image: US National Archives)*

So if someone in Washington wanted to attack Moscow by air, or be warned that Moscow was about to launch an attack of its own, Greenland was indispensable. The new air base would then function both as a stepping stone and warning station. Mr Sykes participated in picking out the site in 1951.

“Over the previous couple of years, the US Air Force had been working toward a major facility, with Danish knowledge and participation, of course, at Thule, with other supporting facilities in the Thule area. This was the project. This had been going on in the late 1940s, it continued in 1950 and in the late winter of 1951, a major reconnaissance from the United States through to Thule was accomplished. At that time, the Thule facility was a Danish-US Weather Bureau station. In comes this group of some 20-odd specialists on a C-54 to make a siting for the facility. I don’t know exactly what happened on the Danish side, but on our side, the site finally chosen was the one that exists today.”

A new treaty

Now all that was left was the formalities. A new agreement between Denmark and the US was needed in order to grant rights for the extended base facilities. It was duly written up and signed on April 27, 1951. It states:

... that the Government of the United States of America as a party to the North Atlantic Treaty may assist the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark by establishing and/or

operating such defence areas as the two Governments, on the basis of NATO defence plans, may from time to time agree to be necessary for the development of the defence of Greenland and the rest of the North Atlantic Treaty area, and which the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark is unable to establish and operate singlehanded (...).

The operative wording was “unable to establish and operate singlehanded”. That was the carte blanche for the US to not only be present in Greenland, but to construct and run the base however they saw fit.



American bombers at Thule AirBase, early 1960s (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

All of this was very well and good. Except for one thing: the US was not moving into an empty area. People were living, and making a living, there.

Much ado about plankton

Thule was originally the name of the trading station established by Knud Rasmussen in 1910. Before that, it had been known to Westerners as the Cape York area, but gradually, Thule took over as the geographical designation. It was from here that Knud Rasmussen conducted his many Thule Expeditions, and it was here that Peter Freuchen **fell in love** with Navarana.

Rasmussen had chosen the location because of the small settlement there, Uummannaq. It was the home of a small tribe of hunters, the Inughuit, the northernmost settled people of the world. They had settled here because the place had the best conditions for hunting, both in the area and as a starting point for longer hunting journeys.

Christian Harlang, the lawyer for the Inughuit: “For centuries, humans have adapted to geographic and biological conditions: they went where the wild animals went. The Inughuit were in the Thule area because the northernmost current of the gulf stream reaches it, making the waters rich in plankton and, as a result, sea animals: seal, walrus, whales and fish. Combined with land animals such as birds, musk oxen, polar bears, foxes and hares, it was an area rich enough to sustain a small population of hunters.”

For that reason, the placement of Rasmussen’s trading station was no coincidence. He put it where there was someone to trade with. And in the decades to come, a small colony grew at Thule and Uummannaq. It was taken over by the Danish state in 1921.



Catch of the day. Inughuit hunters at Thule, 1920s (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Aqqaluk Lynge is a Greenlandic politician and author who has worked for indigenous rights his whole life. He has been a leading figure in the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) since 1980, from 1997 to 2002 and from 2010 to 2014 as its president. Between 2004 and 2007 he also represented Inuit and Saami at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. He says of the Thule area: “The whole area was used year-round in different ways, with Uummannaq as a more permanent station where they could also sell some of their products.”

The arrival of the Americans

In 1943, the US placed one of its weather stations at the Thule/Uummannaq colony and called it Blue West 6. In 1946, a small air strip was added. Mr Sykes: “Arrangements were made for an expansion into Thule of a joint Danish-US facility with US technical work and primarily US manpower to put in the air strip. From there, the US also started an intrusion into the Canadian Arctic.”

After the 1951 agreement was signed, the Americans went all in on building the new base at Thule. The establishment of the base was code named Operation: Blue Jay. A 1953 propaganda movie from the American Department of Defense shows the immense amount of work and heavy machinery that went into its construction. The footage shows the blasting and crushing of rock, the dumping and bulldozing of fill, the spreading of asphalt, all in an inferno of machinery noise. And then came the planes. In the film, it all symbolises American hard work and ingenuity, but the wild animals in the area were less impressed. In the following years, the population of animals declined. Another problem for the Inughuit were the limits on their freedom of movement. Suddenly the big hunting plain was a sealed-off, top-secret area.



Thule Air Base and the landmark Mount Dundas, early 1960s (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

The Danish authorities were concerned, too. Mainly because of the so-called protection policy of the colonial era, which meant Denmark barred contact between Inughuit and the Americans. The American vice-consul in Greenland wrote to Washington that the Americans at Thule didn't mind having Inughuit as its neighbours. They were considered to be a friendly people and their survival skills were unmatched. However, the Danish administration was alarmed, and reckoned the American presence would have a corrupting influence. They'd rather move the tribe, which they did. With incredible irony, the local population was forcibly removed for its own protection. Their new home was to be in Qaanaaq, 130km to the north.

Moving the population had been talked about for some time, but the deciding factor was an American plan to build an anti-aircraft battery at the settlement site. Washington communicated this to Danish government in the spring of 1951, and Copenhagen had to move fast. On May 25, a delegation of Danish officials came to Uummannaq and told the inhabitants that they had four days to get their things together and move. On May 31, Uummannaq was empty.



Inughuit boy K'ârqutsiaq Etah, 1909 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Obviously, the experience was traumatic for the Inughuit; they had been told to pile all their belongings on a sledge and head north, to a place with no housing or supplies. In 1996, Per Walsøe, a supreme court justice who represented the Inughuit, conducted interviews with some of the people who had experienced being forcibly removed. The interviews were published in his book *Thule Farvel (Goodbye, Thule)*. The following are excerpts from an interview with Sofie Eipe (*translation by author*):

We didn't know what was going on, which was what hurt the most. Later, we heard on the radio that we had wanted to move ourselves. But that is not how it happened. We moved with everything we owned on a dog sledge. There was no ship to help us, nothing. We were frightened, as they told us that we had four days to pack and that we all had to leave with no exceptions. If we wouldn't go, they would bulldoze our houses.

When they came in 1953 and told us we had to leave in four days, I felt as if we disappeared as human beings. Before, the Danes had talked to us and dealt with our problems. Now we got four days, threats and no possibility of getting everything in order. Why the rush? Why not wait a few months until the houses were built and we could transport everything by ship?

If Ms Eipe had known the answer then, in May 1953, she might not have liked it.

Tomorrow, we find out what was to be in store for the Inughuit in part II of The airbase.

*This is the 10th article in a series published in collaboration with **Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute**, which seeks to inform the public about Danish-Greenlandic history.*

*The articles are based on the institute's **Arctic Stories** podcast series, which is produced by the author.*

The original version of this podcast (in Danish only) can be heard below. All of the episodes in the series are available on from most podcast platforms, including [iTunes](#) and [Soundcloud](#).

Follow Arktisk Institut on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).



Sources

Grønland under den kolde krig. Vol. 1 & 2. DUPI 1997. Documents cited in this article are printed in vol. 2

Christian Harlang, Aqqaluk Lyngé & Henrik Karl Nielsen: *Retten til Thulelandet*. DIKE 1999

Jens Brøsted & Mads Fægteborg: *Thule – fangerfolk og militæranlæg*. Akademisk Forlag 1985

Per Walsøe: *Thule farvel. Tvangsflytningen i 1953*. Tiderne Skifter, 2003

Aqqaluk Lyngé: *The Right to Return. Fifty Years of Struggle by Relocated Inughuit in Greenland*. Atuagkat Publishers 2002

Excerpts from the verdicts in 1999 and 2003 (in Danish):

<http://www.harlanglaw.dk/ny/images/pdf/39DomU2004382H.pdf>

Press clippings about the 1999 verdict (in Danish):

<http://www.harlanglaw.dk/dokumenter/23-thule.pdf>

Further documents about the Thule case (in Danish):

<http://www.harlanglaw.dk/dokumenter/diverse-yderligere-materiale-vedr-thulesagen.pdf>

Environmental assessments in the Thule area (in Danish, not exhaustive):

<http://www.nutech.dtu.dk/publikationer/rapporter-om-undersogelse-af-radioaktiv-forurening-paa-landjorden-i-thule>,

http://www.dmu.dk/1_viden/2_publicationer/3_fagrapporter/rapporter/FR449.pdf

Operation Blue Jay film produced by the American Defence Department:

<https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.2569497>

Interview with Robert Sykes, Danish Arctic Institute:

<https://www.arktiskebilleder.dk/pages/search.php>

Related articles

- » [The Sledge Patrol](#)
- » [Losing base](#)
- » [They've got a friend in Washington](#)

LATEST NEWS



Week Ahead Shark angst

If you thought waiting a century for sex was bad for you personally, imagine the effect dying a virgin would have on your species



Week ahead Numerical selfie

Greenland releases its annual statistical self-portrait



Greenland Freedom isn't free

There is no such thing as a free independence, despite what a majority of Greenlandic voters hope



Greenland A helping hand

Denmark's annual state of the kingdom report paints a rotten picture of Greenland's economy

BUSINESS



Greenland A helping hand

Denmark's annual state of the kingdom report paints a rotten picture

of Greenland's

POLITICS

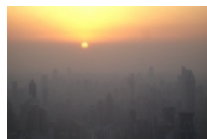


Greenland Neighbourhood diplomacy

Reykjavik is being eyed as the location for

Ihruek's next "embassy"

CLIMATE



Pollution in China The butterfly's effect

Analysis | Arctic change is having non-Arctic

consequences, which is

CULTURE



Week ahead Numerical selfie

Greenland releases its annual statistical self-portrait

OPINION



Greenland Freedom isn't free

There is no such thing as a free independence,

despite what a majority

OIL & MINERALS



Prudhoe leak Letting the genie out of the well

BP has an oil and gas leak in Alaska under

control. Other factors

Most read

Numerical selfie

Shark angst

Comment by the Information and Press Department on the planned meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly on Spitsbergen

Freedom isn't free