

PHARMACISTS SERVING UNDER WAR CONDITIONS IN NORTHERN NORWAY

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This is a tale of a few pharmacists in three small towns in the northernmost part of Europe during World War Two. The towns were partly destroyed by air raids. This is of course only a small part of the long tale of sufferings during the war. A map of the Northern part of Scandinavia will show the position of the area (Fig. 1). On the map the counties of Norway are marked with different colours, *Finnmark*, the northernmost in light blue.



Fig. 1

Like the rest of Norway Finnmark was occupied by German forces in 1940. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, it became part of an important war zone. The next

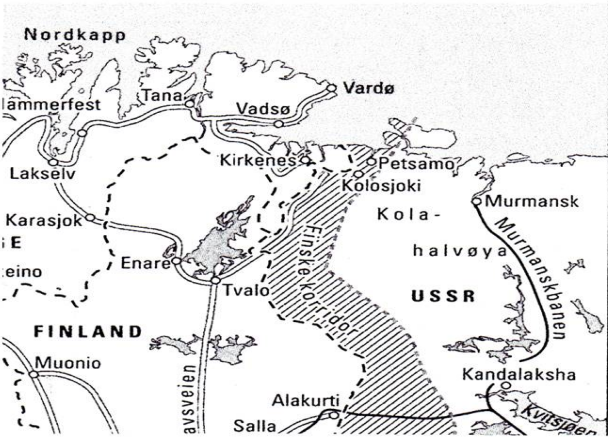
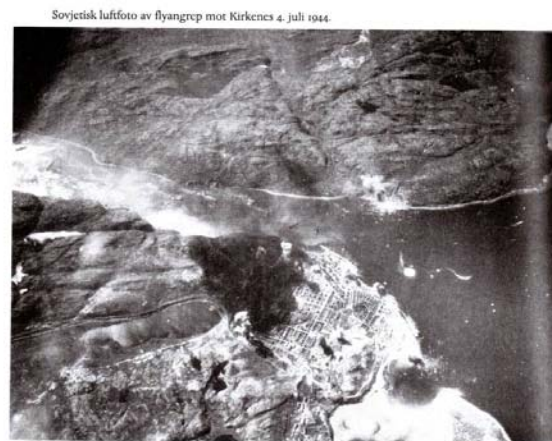


Fig 2

map (Fig. 2) shows the short distances from the towns *Vardø*, *Vadsø*, and *Kirkenes* to Russia. There were German garrisons in each of them, the largest one in *Kirkenes* which at times had ten times as many soldiers as the local population. "*Festung Kirkenes*" was an important supply centre for the forces at the front in northern Russia. This made it an important target for Russian bombers. The town had not less than 328 air raids during the war.

Each of the towns had one pharmacy, but there was a shortage of trained pharmacists. In 1940 the government issued a decree concerning the duty to serve for medical personnel. In accordance with this, two recently graduated male pharmacists were ordered to work in the pharmacies of *Kirkenes* and *Vadsø* from the beginning of 1944. I will call them by their first names, *Arnljot* and *Kjell*.

The two newcomers experienced the worst year for the inhabitants of Finnmark. During the spring the Russians escalated the raids on *Kirkenes*, with the most fatal on July 4, when a large part of the town was incinerated (Fig. 3).



Russian attack on Kirkenes July 4th 1944

Fig. 3

The pharmacy owner telegraphed to the pharmacy authorities in Oslo that the pharmacy had received a direct hit and that two thirds of the town had burnt down, including his home. All remedies such as balances had been destroyed. In an article, published in 1997, *Arnljot* recalls that he crossed the fjord to *Vadsø* and returned with the most necessary remedies from the pharmacy there. However, they lacked a pill machine. They solved the problem with a ruler, a piece of wrapping paper on a table top, and a pocket knife.

Within two weeks later the pharmacy was moved to *Bjørnevatn*, a mining village south of *Kirkenes*. In October 1944 Russian forces pressed the front westwards. In the last days of October *Kirkenes* was attacked. The inhabitants moved into a pit gallery where about 3000 persons lived for a fortnight. In a delivery room there ten babies were born. The pharmacists also moved in and opened a sort of pharmacy there.

The inhabitants of Vadsø and Vardø had their worst day on August 23, 1944, when both towns were attacked by a large number of Russian bombers (Fig. 4).



Vardø in flames August 23rd 1944

Fig. 4

Large parts of the towns were incinerated, including the pharmacies. From the pharmacy at Vadsø some diphtheria serum, a balance, and a mortar were saved. The pharmacy had a store of the most necessary medicines in a village about 20 kilometres to the west, and a provisional pharmacy was opened there. They were given a room in a school house, unfortunately without electricity and water, but they were able to serve the hospital and the public with the most necessary medicines. The picture (Fig. 5) shows Kjell operating by the light of carbide lamps.



Making medicine under war conditions

Fig. 5

After the fire in Vardø the female pharmacy owner moved with some packing boxes by sea to *Berlevåg*, a fishing village west of Vardø, where she had a (sleeping) branch. She served the public there alone for a couple of months, until the premises were burnt down, like the

rest of the village, by German soldiers. The Germans had decided to evacuate troops and civilians from Finnmark and used the scorched-earth policy. However, many Norwegians escaped the forced evacuation. They stayed in small cabins or even caves through the last winter of the war. The pharmacy owner, *Christiane Dietrichson* (Fig. 6), has told in a report that on November 3 she went camping with some friends.



Christiane Dietrichson.

Fig. 6

Camping in November in Northern Norway does not normally make sense, but the weather this autumn was unusually mild, with no snow in November.

In the middle of November two Norwegian officers made an expedition by a fishing smack along the coast. They reported that at Berlevåg the light-house and the keeper's house had been destroyed, but the cowshed had not. There, the keeper and his family, a doctor with his wife and miss Dietrichson lived. At the end of November the pharmacy owner returned to Vardø, where she opened the pharmacy in two rooms in a former bank.

In the summer of 1945 the author had studied pharmacy for three years, of this, one and a half years in a compulsory pharmacy practice. Then he received an order from the pharmaceutical authorities to work in the pharmacy at Vardø for one year from August 15, 1945. When he appeared in the provisional pharmacy, the pharmacy owner met him with obvious relief. During most of the war she had run the pharmacy with only technical personnel, and now she could have a holiday. She never talked of the difficult time she had been through. The author has obtained a clear picture of this tough woman many years after her death, through studies in the National Archives in Oslo. In his opinion she had deserved a medal of some sort, like the other pharmacists in Eastern Finnmark during the war.