



Major General Ole Køppen talks about his contribution to the recently published book on the engineers in Denmark.

Anna Galyga: Sir, you have contributed to the book recently published in Denmark. What is this book about?

Major General Ole Køppen: It is about the Danish engineers. The engineers and the signals were in one regiment until 1951 when it was decided that the signal troops should become separate from the engineers. As a matter of fact, two engineer regiments were created at that time – one of them called the Zealand Engineer Regiment was situated in Copenhagen, and the other one – the Jutland Engineer Regiment was placed in Randers, in Jutland.

In 2003, the engineers became one regiment again. In fact, it is a bit of a lie because already in

1997 the Jutland Engineer Regiment was disbanded and brought down to a battalion size. At that time I was the Chief of Staff of the Jutland Engineer Regiment and also the acting Commander. So we moved to Skive, some 75 km further to the west, and we were there until 2003 when the barracks in Copenhagen were disbanded and the Engineer Regiment was moved to Skive. As you can see, the history has been very complex. We wanted to write a book showing this evolution from the time when the engineers became independent and there were two regiments until 2003 when we became one regiment again, stationed in Skive. So it is "50 years with the engineers", and that is actually the title of the book.

Why engineers? What are your relations with the engineers, Sir?

Before I came here I was the Senior Engineer Officer in Denmark; I was the Commander of the Engineer Regiment, the Commandant of the Army Engineer and Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) School and the Garrison Commandant of the barracks in Skive where the engineers are stationed in Denmark. Having been with the engineers right from the start when I finished the Military Academy in 1981, I would always have my heart with them.

Are you the author of the whole book?

No, the book was written by a group of people. The main contributor to the book was a Danish journalist Aage Krogsdam who in fact has had nothing in common with the engineers. The Minister of Defence, the Chief of Defence, the former Chief of the Army and many others have also made their contributions to the book. I contributed with the descriptions of our detachments in Afghanistan and Iraq. I also wrote a summary for the book depicting the future for the engineers.

It was simply a group of people involved in the engineer matters like me, my predecessor as the Regimental Commander and some of our officers. We were discussing the content of this book and agreed upon this final version. The involvement of the journalist was in fact a coincidence – he was an acquaintance of one of the non-commissioned officers.

It took 5 years to write this book, why has it taken so long?

In the beginning we thought that one of our reserve officers would raise the money for the publishing, but eventually it did not work. When we moved to Skive in 2003, my wife quit her job and went with me. She was sitting in the office and writing letters to 127 civilian companies and banks asking for funds to support the publication of this book. We got some resources and managed to write the first draft of the book but then we ran out of money. The book was "resting" for almost 4 years. Last year, quite unexpectedly, we got a large contribution and we managed to finish the book and publish it.

Are you involved in the promotion of the book?

No, my successor as the acting Commander of the Engineer and CBRN School is the one who is responsible for that. I was just back home in Denmark when the book was published.

We do realize that target group for this book is very narrow. I think the primary buyers will mostly be pensioned off officers and NCOs, someone who has had some relations to the engineers. The book has been printed out in 2,900 copies now and what we actually want to see is if our primary target group is buying it. Then, I think, we will go to selected bookshops in Denmark.

Sir, let us focus on your contribution to this book, what specifically did you write about?

The main part of the book is about international missions the engineers took part in. My contribution refers to the engineer participation in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 1963 we went to Macedonia when they had the earthquake. We were also in Eritrea and Cyprus, and I mentioned Iraq and Kosovo quite a few times. This is just a small history from which you can get an impression of how it was to be an engineer during these 50 years.

In the book among many other things you can find some photos I took and a few photos of me. It is because the Regimental Commanders usually visited their soldiers every 6 months in the mission areas. Therefore, in the spring we went to Kosovo and Iraq, but it was too dangerous to go to Afghanistan. During the last year of my service as the Regimental Commander, we went to Afghanistan in the wintertime. We got the first opportunity to visit our soldiers at one of the Forward Operational Bases. It was situated very close to a small village. We were allowed to have a patrol down this village with a platoon from the Royal Life Guards. We entered a totally deserted village, but after two minutes all children came out to see us, then other villagers joined them and we even went into their shop. It was a great experience.

Sir, you have also written the summary of the book. What do you think will be the future of the engineers in Denmark, then?

In the old days you would actually need quite a lot of engineer soldiers to build the bridges, lay the mines and so on. They were as in the German expression "dumm und stark" – tough but not necessarily bright. Now the technology has been developed very much and the engineers have become "corps de genie" again – this French expression means that they are very smart. The engineers have been performing the same or similar tasks for the last 50 years but now we have a mechanized minelayer and bridges are actually built with a crane. As a result, you need fewer engineers on the ground. For example, at the beginning the engineers had to deal with explosives ordinance disposal in Afghanistan and Iraq. Shells and grenades were lying on the ground and they had just to collect them and blow them up. Now there are homemade Improvised Explosive Devices and you really have to be an expert to find them and be able to get rid of them. My conclusion in this book is that we, the engineers, are able to perform almost the same tasks but in a much more professional way using the advanced technology.