

GILBERTI'S AVIATION TALES

It was 1999. The aerial display was being held over Sliema front, with the show centre being the Sliema Aquatic Sports Club. In the flying display program there were quite a few interesting items amongst which was the Royal Air Force Harrier jump jet. Being so unique, the Harrier always attracted the attention of the airshow public and this was the case at any airshow where the Harrier displayed.



As most of us here would know, the Harrier could fly like any other aircraft but also had the unique capability to hover in flight, much like a helicopter.

As an aside, all ordinary aircraft had to remain a minimum of 230m from the public, while helicopters are allowed to stay no less than 150m from the public. The Harrier, being what it is, used to do the normal wing-borne display (displaying like a normal aircraft) keeping to the 230m gate but then used to switch to hover mode, thus allowing the pilot to come closer to the public during the whole hover routine of the display. This was much loved and most appreciated by the public as the jet would hover, bow, flying backwards etc. during hover mode.

Having the display over water offered its own peculiarities. To enable the change from normal flight to hover mode, the jet engine rotates to enable hover flight by sucking the air in the vertical rather than the forward/backward mode. So when a Harrier pilot in the hover mode starts climbing while keeping to the same spot the engine generates the power straight downwards and people used to love watching the water suddenly becoming very agitated with the power coming from the engine straight down to the surface. Nothing extraordinary for a Harrier pilot until... All was going perfectly well at the show. As is always the case, one needs to have Plan A, B and perhaps C at least. Every display pilot needs bright, orange markers to be clearly visible by the pilot during the routine where he/she will be performing high-end maneuvers pushing the pilot and the aircraft close to their limits repeatedly.

Not a big problem when shows are held over land but when displaying over the sea the markers need to be clearly-marked buoys, at least 5 or 6 of them. Buoys are expected to stay in place even under very severe weather. Well, maybe not always! So Plan A was to have the buoys used as reference by the display pilot. Plan B was for the pilots to use the Armed Forces of Malta patrol boat nearest (and further out) of the remaining buoys as display centre should the most important markers get carried away by the strong winds. It was quite a windy September day and we were already concerned and hoping the buoys would hold their position, but they behaved well and stayed in place until... until the Harrier display pilot opted to hover right on top of the marker buoys.

Oh boy, a few moments after the pilot started his hovering part of the show we saw the first marker separating from the rest, then the one closest to it too! As briefed, the good old AFM captain on the patrol boat moved closer to the point where the runaway markers were earlier to help the Harrier pilot stick to his display centre.

Fair enough, until the pilot decided to fly right overhead the patrol boat! That created a localized tsunami to the boat crew. Immediately, the boat crew came on the UHF radio asking us 'to get the Harrier off the top of us as we're going all over the place here'. Keep in mind that unless there is an emergency, or the pilot does anything wrong, the pilot is not to be disturbed at all during a display. So our Flying Display Director (FDD) hesitated in contacting the pilot as technically he was wasn't doing anything wrong.



Photo by Alessandro Bajada

He was British. The calls from the boat captain were getting more urgent and more in typical colourful Maltese language as the poor captain was having great difficulties controlling his boat. Finally, after a couple of what seemed very long minutes, we grabbed the radio off the FDD's hands and asked the Harrier display pilot to display a few good metres to the right of the patrol boat, which he thankfully did!

I still wonder to this day if the pilot was having a laugh during all this, as when we came over the radio to tell him to move slightly to the right he immediately acknowledged and continued with his display. It took some persuasion to tell the AFM captain that the worse (for him) was over and that he could safely go to the agreed spot (replacing the buoys) as the show had to go on with other aircraft and helicopter displays following the one of the Harrier.

Joe Ciliberti

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