

CILIBERTI'S AVIATION TALES

It was a cold November evening in 1983 when my wife and I hosted two couples at our place for some Saturday night drinks. All was going well and as planned when I realised my VHF radio, monitoring air traffic in Malta's vicinities, was very quiet. My radio was always on 24/7, much to the dislike of my other half, but that's how things were at that time. All changed when I heard this strange callsign of an Egyptair flight descending into Luqa.



If I remember correctly, Egyptair did not operate flights to Malta in those years, so I figured that maybe this flight was diverting to Malta perhaps due to weather in Tunisia or further west of us. A call from a fellow aviation buff informed me there's a hijacked plane 'forcing' its way to Malta and the pilot has asked for permission to land. In no time, and much to the chagrin of my wife, it was decided that the two male companions (Joe & Tony) join me to go and have a look while the three ladies remained at home to continue with their food and drinks for the evening. 'We'll soon be back'. Or so we thought.

Racing towards the airport I knew where the plane would be parked so I parked my car on the main road which led to an alley leading to one of Mqabba's numerous quarries, situated on the other side of the runway but with a clear view of Park 4. It was an alley I was very familiar with as we used to drive our cars through it to catch planes landing on Runway 06 during the day in those years. However, I also knew that the alley served as a meeting point for some people with a dodgy reputation so I thought I'd better leave my car out on the road. So all three of us hurried into the alley while I was fiddling with my vhf radio to set it on the correct frequency. Radios in those days were a pretty big, cumbersome piece of kit. As we were making our way in, we heard a shot. One of my friends - Tony - told me 'they're shooting' but I replied that where we were, it was an area where there were still wild rabbits and hunters would come out at night for them. At the back of my mind, however, I thought the people who frequented that alley may be shooting at us, seeing three men hurrying in to the alley at night. Tony was right. A few moments after hearing the shot we saw the Egyptair's jet

door open and closing again in a hurry, by which time I sorted out my radio to hear the captain pleading with ATC: 'Please do something, as they're preparing to shoot another passenger'.

In 1983 I was driving a beige Ford Sierra which was also the type of car used by the Police CID. Having 'settled' in this alley and feeling safe to bring my car in from the main road and into the alley, I walked out to the car and drove it to the spot from where we could see the proceedings in the luxury of sitting in my car, especially since it was quite cold. We almost settled down, watching the drama unfold by listening to my radio and observing most of what was going around the hijacked plane with the occasional gun shot, plane's door opening and closing immediately, and medics taking the victim away from under or near the jet. Half hour into all this, we could hear and see a car coming into the alley. I quickly turned off my radio and tried to hide it under my seat, in case it was the police who were approaching us. Sure enough, it was the CID, and guess what? Yes, they were in a beige Ford Sierra just like mine! So they parked right next to us - there's never much space in an alley, which widened at one point to allow for two cars to pass each other should they meet in this little space - and we looked at each other. For a while, until they parked right next to my car they thought we were fellow CID guys. Remember, this was at night in some Mqabba alley leading to a quarry. Once they turned the engine off and had a better look at us, they realised we were not their colleagues. The conversation went something like this:

Police: 'So you guys have been here even before the Police?' to which I replied in the affirmative and that we had our wives back at home but left in a hurry to get to the airport to see what was going on and we were pretty hungry as we hadn't eaten anything by then.



Police: 'And how did you know we have a hijack?' 'Meekly, I told him a friend told me about it, but he didn't (rightly) believe me. He then asked 'and how long have you been here?' and I replied we had been there about half an hour by then. The officer then muttered to his colleagues 'these guys must have known before us what was going on!' That broke the ice because one of the officers asked me if I had a VHF radio with me. I hesitated but he encouraged me by stating 'Listen, if you have a radio pull it out now because nobody is informing us from the Depot and it will help us in our work', to which I gladly pulled my radio from under the seat and we all listened in to the tragedy unfolding in front of our eyes. Not only that, but one of the officers remembered what we told them about being hungry and they shared some of their food with us!

As the night went on, more Police officers joined in to hear the conversation between ATC and the Egyptair captain. It was surreal, but we struck a very cordial understanding which was for the benefit of all. Oh, and the wives? No mobile phones in those years, so they all slept at our home while we boys spent the whole night overlooking the hijacked plane. It was already dawn by the time we exited the alley to return home after an eventful night.

Joe Ciliberti

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