

CILIBERTI'S AVIATION TALES

For this month's write-up I'll be sharing some instances along the years where Germany – a staunch supporter of Malta's airshow – provided for some unforgettable experiences, certainly for me! We start off with the very first edition of the Malta Int'l Airshow, where most of us will remember the daring display by their Phantom over Marsamxett Harbour.



Germany was the very first country to confirm its participation at this new event. I vividly remember the fax slowly making its way out of the machine while I was trying to read what was written. This happened at Tito Aquilina's (nowadays a veteran B.777 captain with Emirates) dad's office in Qormi. To say we were over the moon would be a massive understatement. But things started really well even before that very first facsimile. The German Ambassador for Malta was a pilot himself and he actually built a home-made aircraft in his garage and flew it in Malta while he was accredited to our country. This meant we were on the same frequency and went on to help us massively as we were learning our ropes in organizing an aerial international event for the very first time. Come Saturday morning, the 25th of September, 1993, and our payment for his help was by making him pay to enter the airfield! I gave my gate-ticketing team strict instructions that anyone not having the MAS membership card must pay at the gate. And so they did! So H.E. XXX showed up to congratulate me on the interesting line-up of aircraft

we managed to have at our very first attempt, and I noticed he was holding an airshow entrance ticket. My frantic attempts to reimburse him were futile and typical of a seasoned diplomat and friend, his reply was 'I want to keep this ticket as a souvenir of Malta's first airshow'. The pair of German F-4 Phantoms were also the very first aircraft to touch down in Malta for the 1993's airshow. Their arrival time was expected on Friday like the rest but they had a tail-wind on their way to Malta so the crew skipped their planned overnight fuel-stop in Sardegna and came straight to us, much to our surprise! Of course, I had a marshaller lined up to park the aircraft as they came in but he was still at home at the time of the Phantoms' arrival. A very kind heart by the name of Mr Debattista, who worked for Enemalta and who was also the father of one of our members, took hold of the situation and marshalled the Phantoms in to their parking spot himself.

I remember taking the 4 aircrew to this Qawra hotel myself in my own car and the surprised expression of the hotel guests when they saw these 4 Luftwaffe pilots, still in flying gear, making their way to reception. The four aircrew were truly nice guys and we sat by a drinking table getting to know each other, exchanging ideas and answering each others' questions. One of the questions was 'how will your old folk react when they see the Luftwaffe insignia on our jets'? I coolly replied it's been too long now since WW2 and they shouldn't let that worry them. We agreed for me to pick them up again the following morning.

Come Saturday morning, I went to pick the Luftwaffe aircrew up and they were much less talkative and engaging. I thought they were perhaps focused on their display in the afternoon. In the evening, after their spectacular display over the harbour, I went to their hotel to join them for a drink. By the time I got there they had already had a couple of drinks and I could tell they were now at ease and in good spirits after a morning showing their jets to the general public and the unforgettable display they gave in the afternoon. After we got going with our conversation, I asked why they were so quiet in the morning, and if there's anything I could help them with. The answer, from the very same pilot who flew that daring display only hours earlier, was 'I get scared each time I'm riding in your car and you go round the many roundabouts the 'wrong' way round!' Of course, we drive on the other side of the road of Continental Europe and for some reason he was praying each time we approached a Maltese roundabout. That same evening, one of the two navigators referred to a question the previous day, about how will the Maltese react when they see the Luftwaffe insignia. He informed me there was a very old guy in the public who actually spat on the table that had giveaway leaflets they were freely giving to the public and uttered 'something in Maltese which didn't sound like a compliment' Another Maltese apologized and things quickly calmed down when the aircrew gave the boy accompanying the old guy a metal badge of the squadron.

A couple of years later, and with the Malta airshow becoming very popular with all NATO pilots, the event increased in number of aircraft but also in number of crews who didn't want to miss coming to Malta. This time, - I think it was 1995 - we thought of accommodating our crews in St Julian's because it was the place for them to enjoy the evenings. The hotel manager wasn't very keen dealing with us because she was used to book groups staying for a week and we were messing up her plans by having a group staying only three nights. So it was a first for both parties and she always gave us this kind of

suspicious look each time we discussed prices, rooms etc. Come Friday evening - arrivals day - and we sent the first arriving aircrews from the airfield to the hotel. A couple of hours later I received this frantic call from the manager herself, screaming over the phone 'come and get your guests from our hotel, I don't want them here!' When I asked what was the issue she said two German 'pilots' (they were not pilots but for hotel people all our crews, including ground crew, are 'pilots') were jumping straight from their rooms on the 5th floor, into the swimming pool! After calming her down and a quick word with the officer in charge of the German delegation, things went well after that, so much so that we used that hotel for many of the following years.

And one last one! On arrivals day we were busy receiving all the jets coming to our show, including the three Luftwaffe F-4s, with one them slated to perform in the flying display. During the course of the afternoon we learned of a crash of a German Phantom which exploded midair during a routine training mission. The crew survived but about an hour later I got a call from the chief engineer of the German Phantom squadron which had its three jets in Malta. He implored me to inform the crew planned for the flying display the next day to cancel their flight until further notice. The following day we received another call informing us that a group of ground engineers were on their way on a Lufthansa flight and after inspecting all three jets, they will inform me if the Phantom will be able to display on the Sunday. The chief engineer showed up and asked me for a roll of electrical tape. We gave him one but as he was making his way on foot to the jet I realized the roll had 'Made in China' on it, so I looked for another roll made somewhere else and with a half smile the engineer replied 'any tape will do, don't worry'. And thus the Phantom flew on the Sunday.

It was always a pleasure working with numerous German Air Force crews and staff at the German Embassy in Malta. Very professional and fun to work with. My parents, bless their souls, will probably not agree!

Joe Ciliberti

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