

# CILIBERTI'S AVIATION TALES

2003 was a very special year for aviation. It marked the 100th year of manned flight. The aviation world was celebrating the massive progress from that faithful flight by the Wright brothers on December 17th 1903, in North Carolina, USA. The aircraft was only in the air for 120ft, which is shorter than the length of a B-52, which is 159ft.



*The photo of the Buff in Malta on Park 3 shows the right outer wheel high up in the air while the one on the left is firmly on the ground. The tailcode 'MT' on the fin has nothing to do with Malta! It's the tail code for Minot AFB in North Dakota, USA.*

One of the world's icons of aviation is the only 8-engined aircraft flying today. It comes in the shape of the B-52 heavy bomber which performed its first flight in 1952. There are many cases of pilots presently flying this heavy bomber who had their grandfathers flying the jets in the 1950's and later, with the United States Air Force (USAF)! Thinking of offering something truly special for this grand anniversary, I was in touch with one of the two Wings flying the B-52s in 2001. There are only two bases flying the B-52, one in Minot, ND, and the other one at Barksdale, LA. A few months before the 2003 I was informed that USAF will support our show with a B-52 from Minot! Feeling elated by the news is a massive understatement. But this was only the beginning of intense preparations to ensure the safe arrival, parking and departure of this massive jet. Being the only 8-engined jet is only one of the B-52's (affectionately known as 'The Buff') special features. It also has a tandem undercarriage and a very thin, but long, wing. This necessitates that it carries what are called outriggers almost right at the tip of its long wings, because otherwise the wings will easily touch the ground. Normal airports serve aircraft with normal tricycle undercarriage, and the width of their taxiways ensure all wheels stay permanently on hard ground. But the B-52 is so different! Normal taxiways at international airports do not support B-52's and their weird wheels' setup. But more of that later.

The preceding months before the show, while tackling matters with all the other 60 aircraft or so attending the 2003 event, were quite busy but the B-52's planned arrival at Luqa was something out of this world. I kept receiving phone calls in the middle of the night and that's because North Dakota is 7 hours behind Malta time so any call from the Wing at Minot in the afternoon meant a middle-of-the night call for me.

Since the B-52 is a heavy bomber there are many processes which are different from other aircraft when it comes to security, landing weights etc. Above all, the B-52 belongs to the big-stick of the United States Air Force and thus comes under a different command by the name of 'Global Strike Command'. I kept receiving the same questions but from different offices within Minot and when I politely complained that I had already replied to the same set of questions the answer was always: 'I come from a different office and my office must ensure we have all the details before we can deploy a B-52 to a new country'.

The fact that Malta is not a NATO country further complicated matters. However, much to my surprise, most questions dealt with specifics other than how to support the heavy bomber on the ground and this was rather worrying me as I was not sure our airport could support this big and strange bomber. Important to note that while I kept getting many calls from the unit I was never contacted directly by the crew flying the jet to Malta! So a couple of weeks before the airshow I insisted on speaking to whoever is flying the bomber to Malta as I had specific questions for the crew. Back to the wheels configuration, just to cite an example, the wheel span of a B.747 is around 42ft, that of the B-52 – because of its outer wheels – is 148ft! So with this problem nagging me for months on end I finally got the opportunity to speak to the crew bringing the jet to Malta. After telling the crew the maximum width of our taxiways in Malta and my question if they still intend to participate with such 'narrow' taxiways, the major on the other end of the line went 'Don't let that worry you. We will transfer more fuel to the left wing so that the right wing will be high up in the air as we taxi to one side of the taxiway!' That sure solved it and it was actuated as soon as they landed and there were absolutely no problems with maneuvering the heavy jet from the runway to its parking spot on Park 3 and back to the runway on departure day. So much for my worrying!

**Joe Ciliberti**

MAY 2023