

CILIBERTI'S AVIATION TALES

My memory of the 3rd edition of the Malta International Airshow quickly bring two events to mind. The first is that it rained heavily on the Saturday afternoon, which thankfully, was the only time it rained at the show until another airshow about 20 years later.



Today's tale is about the second matter that comes to mind. It was 1995 and the airshow was truly becoming a yearly event gaining in popularity not only in Malta but also all across Europe. This kind of interest was also mirrored by the official acceptance by three Maltese very distinguished guests, namely, the President of Malta, the Maltese Prime Minister and the Archbishop of Malta, to attend the airshow. This in itself was a massive headache because our VIPs had to be met and escorted on the airfield since they entered the airport from a different location to that of the general public.

While the PM and the Archbishop chose to take their seats in the VIP area, the President asked to have a tour around the static park to be able to speak and thank the pilots at Malta's airshow. This necessitated me leading the President to the respective crews to make them aware who is about to come and have a chat with them. At the same time I was informing HE The President about some of the aircraft present in the long line of aircraft on Park 4. All foreign pilots were truly honoured to be able to speak to the highest authority on the island and took it in their stride offering Dr Ugo Mifsud Bonnici the chance to go on board the aircraft if it was a helicopter, a maritime patrol or transport aircraft. When His Excellency was being shown around an Altantique maritime patrol aircraft, I took the liberty to move on to the next two or three aircraft to give the heads-up to the crew that the President of Malta may be coming to share a few words with

them. However, at the end of one of the lines of aircraft, we had an Italian Air Force P-180 Avanti, configured in the VIP role. So, as I was making my way to the Avanti, I saw the commander of aircraft about to go and grab something to eat. I stopped him to tell him that behind me is 'the president'. At first he hardly realised but then all of a sudden he asked 'quale presidente?' to which I replied 'The President of the Republic of Malta'. 'Oh Dio mio!' he exclaimed and hurried back to his crew to tell them to get everyone (the public) out of the Avanti so His Excellency may get a good, personalised tour of their aircraft.

The Avanti's commander made his crew stand in line and salute as our President made his way up the three or four steps to the aircraft. The tour started by the commander showing the President how comfortable the aircraft was as this was used by VIPs both in the Italian Air Force as well as high ranking government officials. The Avanti could be utilised in various roles, including maritime patrol, coast guard etc. They showed H.E. the cockpit and explained all the instruments which made the Avanti very easy and safe to fly. Of course, the Avanti commander was pitching the plane to entice our President for Malta to buy one or more Avantis for our Armed Forces or even for the Malta government to have an Avanti configured in VIP mode for our political leaders' travels. All went fine until it was time to get off the plane. As The President shook hands with the whole crew on the plane and turned to get off the aircraft, he hit his head quite violently with the top of the door opening. H.E. made absolutely no fuss about the bang to his head and spiritedly walked on to the next aircraft. I looked back to see the commander of the Avanti, and he was about to faint! He told me 'After our Avanti managed to almost throw your president into a coma, I don't think Malta will be buying the Avanti'!

In case you're asking yourself if Malta ever bought the Italian Avanti plane, the answer is 'no', but surely not because of the above tale.

Joe Ciliberti

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