

GILBERTI'S AVIATION TALES



This month's tale doesn't make for a positive or funny outcome as has been the case in most of the write-ups so far. It is about a project that took years in preparation and which in the end was not delivered. At least not before it was more than made up for a few years later.



When in 1993 I went to Dr Francis Zammit Dimech, then minister for tourism, to forward my plans for Malta to have its very own first airshow I had promised the minister that it was my intention to bring a Supermarine Spitfire of WWII fame back to Malta. It was a clear sign of how little did I know on how challenging it is to bring warbirds to Malta to perform at our show. My first try to have the Spitfire in 1993 proved futile as the planning for that show really started less than 3 months before the show itself. For the 1994 event I formally requested a Battle of Britain Memorial Flight (BBMF) Spitfire to perform at our show. This got rejected a short while later but by then I had started to be involved with the British display community and Malta was the joint-first foreign country to join the 'Air Display Association' which was a group of airshow-hardened people who knew everybody in the circuit, and had excellent connections with all involved. So on a yearly basis it got to be a well-known fact that Malta was after a BBMF Spitfire display and all my newly-found colleagues and friends in the airshow circuit worked hard for me to get the Spit to Malta. Finally, after once again formally applying for a BBMF

Spitfire, in 2002 I received the official notification from the RAF that a Spitfire will be provided for our show, as part of the celebrations marking 60 years since the Air Battle over Malta. I thought I had it all sorted, but that was just the beginning of a difficult period in the months running up to the airshow in September. As I was now truly involved with the British and European airshow circuit I got to meet many people, including one of BBMF's Spitfire pilots. As we sat down for a beer he immediately told me 'Joe, I'm going to be frank with you. You are not getting our Spitfire'. When I told him that I have it confirmed by all the powers-that-be he asked, with a half-smile, 'are they flying her down'? He went on to explain that it would be a total waste of flying hours to fly a Spitfire all the way down to Malta and back just to perform at one airshow. A Spitfire requires just under 5 hours of transit time from the UK to Malta. A Spitfire display usually lasts about 8 mins so in the 10 hours total transit time a Spitfire could perform more than 70 displays. One very important thing with warbirds is the conservation of their flying hours as every aircraft can only fly for a number of hours before it has to retire for good. I understood the young pilot over the beer but deep down I had faith that if the RAF top brass order 'our Spitfire is going to Malta', it will have to be obeyed.

On the day previous to the Spitfire's departure from RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire, I was informed that the weather in the UK will probably delay the warbird's departure. The following day I received the same message, again citing the weather as the reason for not being able for the Spitfire to get airborne. I began to believe that the Spitfire was going to

be a 'no-show'. In that particular year, the Spit was advertised as the star participant since Malta had not seen a Spitfire for over 50 years. It even featured on the front page of the airshow's souvenir programme, as 2002 also marked the tenth edition of the Malta International Airshow. Armed with the knowledge that BBMF was not keen on sending the Spitfire to Malta, I informed the UK High Commission in Malta about the possibility that the Spitfire could well cancel, due to weather. They were very keen to see the Spitfire in Malta themselves and worked the ropes all the way to the Ministry of Defence (MOD) in London. Of course, I had not told the High Commission what I knew about BBMF's reluctance to fly one of their planes to Malta. I didn't want to put the pilot who was frank with me in bad light and bizarrely, deep down I sympathised with his objection. As it happened, we had a Queen's Flight BAe 146 in Malta and the High Commission's effort resulted in agreeing to send the Queen's Flight jet back to the UK to escort the Spitfire through the clouds and bad weather over the UK. I thought we had it made, but no! The BBMF pilot replied that the Queen's Flight pilot is not certified to fly in formation with a BBMF Spitfire. And that killed the whole BBMF Spitfire story once and for all.

Thankfully, the airshow attracted a civilian-owned Spitfire and a Hurricane for the 2005 edition of the Malta International Airshow as part of the Merlins Over Malta event. But that in itself, is another story.

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