

# CILIBERTI'S AVIATION TALES



This being Malta's airshow month, I thought of sharing with our readers a few things I remember of that faithful event in 1993, when the first edition of the Malta Int'l Airshow took place. It all started with hearing through the grapevine that the Government of Malta had invited the French national aerobatic team, the Patrouille de France, to display over Marsamxett harbour.



I went to speak to the late Mr Joe Sultana, then deputy director at the Civil Aviation Department at Luqa, and we agreed on a plan on how to convince

his boss that I was ready to mount an airshow around the Patrouille de France's visit. We agreed that Malta has the cherry (the display team) but lacks the cake. In the meantime I went to speak to Dr Francis Zammit Dimech, then minister for tourism, and he readily agreed. So off I went frantically calling all my contacts in the RAF and the US Navy to tell them we are holding an airshow and if they would send some of their jets to Malta. It turned out to be a successful event with very good participation, something we can only dream of nowadays.

I was invited by the French Ambassador for a reception on the Friday before the show at H.E.'s residence. At the end of the party he invited me to stand next to him as the French team's pilots lined up to shake hands with us before departing to their hotel. Everything went fine until the team's leader, being the last in the queue, shook our hands and was about to continue onwards to the door. But no! The Ambassador grabbed him back from the shoulder and in perfect English told him 'when you fly tomorrow, make sure you don't crash because Valletta doesn't belong to Malta only but it's a jewel of Europe!' The poor pilot nodded and sheepishly continued on his way to the exit. Can't say I was expecting that! While I had pleaded with the authorities to hold the first airshow over the airport, I was told that 'we've always had such displays over Marsamxett harbour and this is where you'll do it', and that was that. Only that while it was hailed a massive success with thousands of people watching the display – who doesn't remember the German Phantom?–

that Phantom and all the other fast jets were coming at speed from the harbour's entry point, zoom down the harbour and turn over Pietà/Gwardamangia for the reverse run. That's where Malta's main hospital was and both patients and doctors were not amused with the sudden jet noise flying overhead the hospital at high speeds. Medical operations were postponed or had to stop suddenly because the whole place was shaking! Met a doctor later who told me that while a lot of nurses and staff went on the hospital's roof to watch the display, he had to cancel at short notice one of the operations he was about to perform because his patient was scared stiff of the sudden noise and they couldn't calm her down enough. When I next saw the minister I politely and firmly told him that I do not intend to do another airshow if I'm forced to do it over Marsamxett again. Common sense prevailed and airshows started being held over the aerodrome for a few good years.

Being the very first airshow, I also had the support of people I knew in the Malta aviation circuit. One of them was Mr George Borg Marks. I think he was 'operations' at the Dept of Civil Aviation at that time. He helped me out with the aircraft parking plan on Park 8 at the airport. Being the kind and helpful person that he is, he even ended up marshalling some of the jets on arrival! However, in my list of participating aircraft I had two US Navy jets, an F/A-18 Hornet and an S-3 Viking, both flying off the aircraft carrier to come to our show. Naval aircraft can fold their wings, or so I thought. Having too many aircraft participating we had to maximise the space available on that ramp so in our calculations, I told Mr Borg Marks that both US Navy jets will taxi in and park with their wings folded. However, the S-3 started approaching its parking spot and the pilot – notwithstanding our frantic gestures for him to fold the jet's wings – wouldn't oblige.

So he kept going round in circles until he came at the precise angle to fit into his slot. After exiting the jet I asked him why he didn't fold the wings to which he replied 'this jet is getting old and sometimes we are unable to unfold the wings and that will be a big problem for us on Monday when we depart as we didn't bring our mechanics with us'. The most vivid thing I remember from that episode was that there was less than 2 inches clearance between the Viking's wing and a light pole on Park 8!

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SEPTEMBER 2023