

# CILIBERTI'S AVIATION TALES



October is the month where some of us remember the tragic crash of the Avro Vulcan XM645 of No IX Squadron over Zabbar. It was October 14, 1975. I happened to be there that afternoon, skiving school because a squadron of F-4 Phantoms from No 29 Squadron was due to arrive for a month-long detachment to Malta in the early afternoon from their base at RAF Coningsby, Lincolnshire.



**H**aving arrived at around lunchtime, I took position near the Mqabba quarries close to the end of Runway 24. After having photographed a couple of locally-based Canberras, 29 Sqn made land in Malta by way of the first cell of three Phantoms, together with their aerial refuelling aircraft, a Handley Page Victor. This was around 1250 and on the VHF radio I could hear the second cell of 3 more Phantoms and a Vulcan, which we used to refer to as 'the Tuesday Vulcan'. We did so because in those years RAF Luqa used to get a solitary Vulcan every Tuesday, which would fly a mission daily on Wednesday and Thursday and then return home on the Friday. The Vulcan was a strategic bomber and the RAF used to base the bomber at Luqa for a few days a week to act as a deterrent to the Soviet Union by having bombers dispersed to different geographical locations around the world. No IX Sqn was then based at RAF Waddington, Lincolnshire.

Although the Vulcan was always a plane to photograph, we (George Attard, RIP) and myself were more intent on the arrival of the next 3 Phantoms behind the Vulcan. Things turned out very differently that day. As we got up on the quarry wall (with a possible 30-storeys drop if we ever fell off that blessed wall) to photograph the Vulcan, which was landing from the Luqa end of the

runway, the first thing I saw was a massive plume of soil rising from behind the Vulcan. George yelled at me that something's wrong with the bomber and we saw one of its wheels bouncing towards the 3 Phantoms which had landed earlier. We got off the wall in a hurry and started running down the quarry. After a few steps I turned around as I wanted to take a picture of the stricken jet. George called me 'mad' but he turned too and we both photographed the Vulcan as it painfully climbed away streaming black smoke from one side and white smoke from the other. It was losing fuel heavily, after having punctured the fuel tanks on contact with the ground. It should be remembered that the reason for the plume of soil was because the jet landed 'short', that is, instead of landing on the runway it landed on the grass/soil just before the start of the runway.

As soon as I clicked the shutter to take my picture I quickly ran back to the quarry, with George following me, and only came back up when we saw the bomber turning left as it entered the runway circuit. The sound of that Vulcan was so different from usual and the few seconds it took from hitting the ground to passing in front of us were truly agonizing as we thought it could explode at any time. Having seen it all happening in front of our eyes and still in shock we followed the jet with our eyes as it made one more left turn for the downwind leg of the circuit. At one point I thought the sun reflected on the jet's window, however, at that same instant I heard the air traffic controller say 'you have just had a small explosion', and that was it. The Vulcan exploded over Zabbar allowing only the pilot and co-pilot to eject. The rest of the crew had no time to jump out of the plane, and them and a very unlucky lady on the ground all perished.

All the remaining 7 or 8 Phantoms on their way to Luqa that day were diverted to Sigonella but all came in much later in the afternoon that same day. In the next write-up I will share a few other things which happened after this tragic accident.

**Joe Ciliberti**

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