

CILIBERTI'S AVIATION TALES



Closing this year's chapter of the 'tales', I thought of sharing just two very short instances which I have seen or been part of during the over 50 years pursuing my aviation hobby. Here we go!



1989, and it was the year when in September it was announced that as the Cold War was coming to its end, the two leaders of the world's superpowers agreed to meet in Malta. When a US president is on the go, a massive airlift occurs to support the POTUS. In Malta's case, it was an even bigger undertaking as we here have no US military equipment so the aerial support for the summit was even larger than usual. Anyway, weeks before the actual summit, Luqa started seeing a number of US military aircraft coming directly from Andrews Air Force Base, where the Presidential Flight is mainly based. These flights brought all sorts of security personnel, some equipment and other staff. Closer to the meeting, one of the aircraft which brought 'the beast' and other bullet-proof vehicles happened to be a C-5A Galaxy, which is the largest cargo aircraft in the US military inventory. It's massive, has a roll-on-roll-off capability and on the ground it's supported by 28 wheels!

Luqa's runway was no issue as it's over 11,000ft, even though the excitement, perhaps by the pilot himself but also by the air traffic controller, forced the C-5 Galaxy to abandon its approach while already over Qormi and had to go around to shoot another approach. However, this was only the beginning!

Once the mammoth jet landed, it proceeded to Park 9 which at that time was hardly used. In fact, the ramp was completely empty when it landed but for some

reason this jet, which was being marshalled into its planned parking spot, kept going round and round on Park 9 until it finally came to a full stop and promptly opened its rear ramp. The crew did a real tour of Park 9 on that day.

As explained above, the C-5 was only one of a number of aircraft arriving in Malta in preparation for the summit. The planners at the airport may have been surprised by the sheer size of the C-5 Galaxy (hence the taxiing tour of Park 9!), so when three days later they were informed that the US military was sending a C-9 this time, they all hit the panic button, because they reasoned that if the C-5 was that large, just imagine what a C-9 would be! Of course, the C-9 was a short-medium version of the McDonnell Douglas DC-9, nowhere near the size of the C-5 Galaxy.

One last snippet for the year: It was 1996 and MIA had only just started taking care of operations at Malta's airport. It was agreed with MIA that we would need Park 4 from Thursday until the following Monday 13:00. Come Monday, all of the airshow participants were gone except for a P-3 Orion of the US Navy which had a minor issue and the crew were attending to it. From 12:00 onwards, I started getting phone calls and messages from Tower, MIA and DCA that Park 4 had to be vacated. I frantically tried to push the crew to relocate their aircraft to another park as I was being urged to vacate the ramp. Only that at around 13:30, I called MIA and asked them why are they harassing me to move the aircraft from the park, to which the reply came 'because we have promised the airshow organisers to ensure the ramp is empty until 13:00'. When I told them that the aircraft on Park 4 was actually an airshow participant, the guy on the other end of the line went quiet for a long time, until I told him that in that case, I will not hurry the crew any longer because in any case, MIA had no other aircraft requiring Park 4.

Merry Christmas and wishing you all a peaceful and healthy 2024!

Joe Ciliberti

DECEMBER 2023