

MALTESE DEDICATION

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Malta Air Force covers a small area of airspace and however it is of strategic importance the small air arm does not contain strike elements. Situated at the southern border of NATO, the surrounding airspace will be watched closely by neighbouring countries and members of the alliance. The airfield at Luqa is popular as a stop over in transit routes for military aircraft from many different countries as is the harbour of Valetta for naval ships. A close watch of the Malta's air arm gives a view of dedication in tasks providing aid to the population in situation of emergencies or just guarding the safety of the islands interests. Aircraft of Malta's air arm are seldom seen outside the country. This article describes the Maltese approach.

Early days

The first 1000 hours in existence were easily run while the modest air branch of the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) consisted only of helicopters. Surveillance, patrol and SAR were carried out by one Bell-47G-2 and three Agusta-Bell-47G-2 helicopters, donated by the West German Army in 1972. One year later this four helicopters were joined by an Agusta Bell AB-206A jet Ranger donated by Libya. Those Bell's are retired now and one 47G-2 example was given to the Ta Qali aircraft museum on the island after 8000 flying hours accumulated in 36 years AFM service. The helicopter with tail number AS-7201 was flown to small inside open storage terrain where it landed between 200 spectators in May 2008, marking the type's last flight on Malta with in the cockpit the oldest pilot and also commander in the force; Brigadir Carmel Vassallo and the youngest pilot in the Maltese Air Arm; Marc Cassar.

Marc remembers the landing was a difficult one with all those public in the small area and he choose an approach just low over buildings to minimize risks and to perform well with his superior by his side. In 1992 the fixed wing element was introduced with the acquisition of the Cessna 0-1E Bird Dog.

In service for tourism

A small archipelago of three islands surrounded by large areas of sea with many movements around the islands consequently needs a system to ensure rescue from the water when necessary. With a population of around 400.000 but also treated with the visit of one million tourists a year one cannot look around and stay inactive. Malta is rocky with many caves under or just above the seashore and an awesome paradise for scuba-divers. A fine sport and not seldom without danger especially when divers are encouraged to go beyond their limits. Next to this Malta has the obligation to watch their fleet of fishing trawlers and movements around the islands of Malta, Gozo and smaller Comino consisting of cruise-ships, cargo-ships, naval elements and even illegal ships of smugglers or refugees in little boats. Search and Rescue is a humanitarian service provided by the AFM at no cost. The Air Wing operates a 24 hr. SAR service with a response time of 10 minutes during daylight and a maximum of a two hour period during night. In the same way the population on the island needs a medical evacuation service (medivac) capability. So in a secondary role this is provided and normally patients can be conveyed between the two major hospitals of Malta and Gozo on a 24-hr basis. When required police tasks can be supplied to the Malta Police Force and regular assistance is also provided to the Civil Protection Department, Malta Fisheries Department and to the Malta Tourism Authority. When the Commonwealth Head Of States Government Meeting was held in Valetta several aircraft of AFM were tasked for the

Police Force. All this work is covered by the military only, but this could not be done without help of neighbouring countries like it always was.

Foreign involvement

During many years (1973-1980) Malta relied on The Libyan Air Force (LARAF) who stationed a Super Frelon and three Alouettes for many years at Malta. Since 1980 technical help came from Italy and in 1988 a memorandum was signed resulting in the Missione Italiana di Assistenza Tecnico Militare with a permanent detachment of two Agusta Bell 212 helicopters of the Italian Air Force stationed at Luqa with the running costs for the Italian Ministry of Defence. The Maltese Air Arm itself operates a helicopter element of three SA-316B Alouette III which were acquired from the LARAF in 1991. Two Breda Nardi NH-500M's donated by the Italian Guardia di Finanzia and two Se-3160 Alouette III donated by the Dutch Air force are held in reserve. The concern of the Alouettes is short range Search and Rescue (SAR) while short and medium range is covered by the AB-212. There is no question about reach of international waters between Malta and Italy and this obviously shows the interest of Italy in the agreement. The Italian helicopters are manned by a mixed crew of Italians and Maltese pilots and rescuers and the Italians also organize the education and training course to deliver new Maltese pilots. The AB-212 replaced the AB-204 which was initially used by the Italians for this work and are fully equipped for IFR flights and have all-weather capability.

Pilot as teacher

With only the means for a relatively small input one must see the importance of prevention. The commander of the flight operations Anthony Zammit sits in front of me and tells about his years of college at the US Coast Guard, National SAR School in Yorktown, Virginia where he learned the skills of the rescue act and where he and some colleagues were qualified as SAR Mission Coordinator (SMC). He is a man with humour and when not on duty he wears gladly his shirt which was a gift of the US Coast Guard with a picture of Elvis Presley and the words under it 'if you out there, we are going to find you'. He tells me about his workshop and presentation on powerpoint for the local fishery community in Birzebbuga on how instructive this had been. This even resulted in a lecture titled 'Helicopter Assistance to Fisherman'. Knowledge about the capability of the helicopters and its crew is important but also one must ask himself. What can you do yourself in the prevention field? The more prepared, the easier a rescue can be. The fishers were step by step coached through the rescue procedure.

Tuning in

Especially during the night but also in bad weather operations danger can occur easily, and flying the Alouette demands manual actions without the help of night vision systems. When three or four trawlers are very near to each other on the sea the trawler which requested for help will be asked to flash for identification but only on considerable distance and not near the helicopter to avoid the danger of blinding the pilot. Even a flare is permitted but of course not to aim at the helicopter. When there is a wounded casualty the boat will be asked to direct to Malta as fast as possible in the meanwhile but depending on the weather conditions this will change after engagement with the helicopter. The helicopter is manned by a pilot, a winch operator, a rescuer and sometimes joined by a doctor when the situation asks for this. In the meanwhile there has been reported by radio or mobile phone when the radio is disabled, where the location is, the identification of the ship, how many people are on the ship and how many are wounded or need extraction from the ship. Commander Zammit tells us he instructed the local fisherman to invest in first aid equipment and to use it in the best

possible way and within their best knowledge about this matters. Hoisting will clearly preferred on the aft of the ship. This means that obstacles must be removed and when needed even cut. When the helicopter is very near, the ship will be asked to choose the direction with the head on the wind even when the direction is away from Malta unless the wind is below 5 knots. The helicopter will approach sideward's on the aft while the speed of the boat will be set between 4 and 8 knots. The angle of approaching will be 20-30 degrees to enable the pilot who is sitting in the right position a good view on the situation. The winch operator is on the left side and will finally position above deck. People on the ship may not touch the hook to avoid the danger of static electricity. First a rescuer will go down and invest the situation and choose the appropriate action. A casualty can be taken up while secured and when the helicopter is leaving the airspace above the ship, the crew of the ship will have to watch the helicopter closely in case something is falling off. Since 1991 the Air Squadron has successfully carried out 600 rescues.

Fixed wing aircraft for training and surveillance

In early 1992 the United States Government sold five Cessna 0-1E Bird Dog aircraft to AFM previously operated by the Italian Army Light Division, and in 1995 the first BN-2B-26 Islander was purchased followed by a second one in 1998. In 2000 four ex- Royal Air Force BAe Bulldog T.Mk1's came into service to replace the Bird Dogs which were sold on the private market. Later a fifth one was purchased and one of the first serie Bulldogs crashed on the Island by sudden wind shear, luckily only minor injured the pilot. The structure of the Air Wing is separated in Flight Sections, Engineering Section and Rescue Section. All the aircraft, fixed-wing and helicopters were assigned to the 2nd regiment-Air Squadron as a composite element and in 2000 when new Military Aviation Regulations were introduced the air squadron saw itself detached from the local Civil Aviation Directorate and adopted new registration markings with two letters 'AS' defining the operator as

Air Squadron and the numbers signifying the year and delivery number of the respective aircraft. Pilots of Flight Sections air using the aircraft of the Air Squadron or the Italian helicopters. The 10 seat Islander equipped with a full navigational suite and SAR radar to operate offshore is mainly used for surveillance and searches. Its endurance is between 6 to 8 hours of flight depending on the mission profile and is an asset in the offshore operational capabilities of the squadron. Pilot and Co-pilot have the ability to use FLIR to search on the sea-surface. The aircraft can carry out searches at night but pilots are normally not allowed to do that, Over sea night ops can be very dangerous One of the more important duties is besides tracking ships on cargo-routes or fishing areas also the search for tiny boats on the sea with illegal immigrants. Those people are often in great danger with very poor quality boats on the sea in all circumstances. Frontex initiated aircraft assistance for this purpose is provided by European countries on rotation. Flying training courses are possible with the Beagle Bulldog, an easy aircraft to handle and a proven concept at the English University Air Squadrons (UAS)

Prospective

Of course the Maltese Authorities are looking for a replacement of the aging Alouettes. There have been negotiations for the acquisition of the UH-72 Lakota, the U.S. version of the Eurocopter EC-145 in a shared deal, but this has been put on hold now. Introduction of such a helicopter will open a new dimension for the pilots when advanced digital searching equipment including night vision goggles ability will support the pilots search for survivors on the sea. Also the range will be extended, which is now limited by 60 nautical miles for the Alouette and 100 nm for the AB-212 in one direction. The Italian detachment under command of Major Bandini will have provided enough experience by the Maltese pilots by

then to accept the challenge for such an advanced helicopter. Malta has to look forwards and must set today's requirements. This will not only concerning the helicopter element but also the fixed wing element. Today flying the Islander in the maritime survey role above coastal waters, Malta's air arm may have set interest on the Beechcraft King Air which was present on the annual Malta Air show.

Annual Air Show

The Malta Air show has been a good occasion for Malta's Air Arm to present itself to the public for years. This popular show passed the last decades in different settings. Depending on the situation at Luqa airfield the show was alternately held above the airfield or near coastlines at Malta's popular tourist sites. Also the static element shows differences every year. At the static part the organisation has splendid cooperation with Malta's spotting group which is very alive and focussed on the many interesting visitors. This year the Air show was concentrated around a dominating position of the RAF and showed less Italian contenders than maybe some years ago. Due to constructing work on Lufthansa's new hangar facility utilised to house the A-380 for maintenance work but consuming a lot of area, the static show was relatively modest and flying activities for the show were limited to start and landing. For the people on the Islands, the appearance of the Red Arrows fills their hearts with joy, while having a tight and warm relationship with the United Kingdom. This time they were accompanied by a Swedisch Tp.84 Hercules. For this year the most attractive appearance were the two RAF Typhoons flying in from Cyprus while other aircraft such as four Harriers, two Hawks and two Tucano's were flown straight from the UK. Other aircraft, like two Royal Navy Jetstreams and two RAF Beechcraft 350 King Airs were related to Malta's interest on focussing on a successor for the Islander. Very interesting was the show above St. Pauls Bay and above the villages Bugibba and Qawra. Not just only watching the aerial movements above the fantastic sights of the bay is special, but actually were can you find during a show a live demonstration of a CL-415 Super Scooper water bomber scooping water for six or seven times, entertaining the public and giving them a good time? The appearance of the CL-415 aircraft of Protezione Civile Nazionale was thankfully accepted. The show might be modest, like the Malta's Air Arm but for one thing is sure professionalism on this part of Europe is as good as on any other area part on Europe's mainland. While enjoying a tourist site near St. Julian's the author watch the manoeuvres of an AB-212 playing cat- and- mice with a little boat near the shore. The sharp observers would have noticed that it was not a ship asking for help in emergency situation but more or less the rescuers were in routine practice to train their skills and keep them on the level which is required to safe lives from the sea

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