

A Return to Malta May 1962 - May 1982

At 34,000ft, between Glasgow and London, I was busy planning a return trip to Malta GC for the following month. I had been invited to lunch at the Palace of Westminster with Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, to finalise the arrangements.

My mind kept oscillating between my first experience twenty years ago in 1962 and the forthcoming trip. All attempts at comparison were utterly surreal.

Last time I was in Malta was as a naive 17 year old RAF Boy Entrant fresh out of training at RAF Cosford where I had spent 18 months learning to be an Air Wireless Mechanic. I had worked hard and gained accelerated promotion which should have meant jumping straight to the dizzy heights of Senior Aircraftsman. Sadly, this didn't apply if you weren't old enough (you had to be seventeen and a half). Consequently, I watched those who had done less well academically streak ahead of me in both the financial and the power stakes! So it was that I found myself in Malta still technically a 'Boy Entrail' attached to a Javelin Squadron for 3 weeks Night Flying before spending the rest of the summer in Cyprus (it wasn't all bad).

I had had no Squadron experience so when I was given *the* most terrifying induction into aircraft handling imaginable - marshalling fast moving jets - in the dark - attempting to slot them in to a very neat space between other aircraft - just a few feet clearance either side from other tightly parked Javelin Fighters - I started to worry as never before. I had ten minutes to study the poster on aircraft marshalling and try to remember all the signals (different game in the dark!) To say I was massively apprehensive would be a total underestimation of the sheer dread which rapidly turned to panic as my first jet approached at a ridiculous speed - I signalled for him to slow down - he didn't - there was no way I could safely guide him in to such a tight space at that speed although I had to try - I couldn't even make out the wing tips of the adjoining aircraft in the dark - I tried again to slow him - no joy! All I could do was wait for the inevitable crash and subsequent Court Martial for causing millions of pounds worth of damage to government property - my arms and legs were now jelly and my rectum varying spasmodically 'half-a-crown, sixpence' as I went through the motions of trying to guide him in - in a total, blind, helpless panic!

How that aircraft didn't crash but actually came to a safe stop only later became clear when my shift was over and I begged a more experienced colleague to go with me for a desperately needed drink to a local bar in nearby Luqa Village. I had very little money (still being a Boy Entrant) and ordered the cheapest drink available which was some sort of rough, warm, heavily perfumed, local red wine - I didn't care! Relax, my friend told me - the pilots don't take a blind bit of notice of the marshallers - they know their aircraft and have a much better view than you so don't worry - you're only there to take the blame if things go wrong and that doesn't happen too often!

I got very drunk, very quickly that night and I can still smell that bloody awful plonk as I urged it to leave my poor quaking body even more rapidly than I had earlier downed it!

Back then, as a Boy Entrant, I knew my place - I was the lowest of the low - eighteen months of constant brainwashing hadn't gone to waste! Officers were 'Gods' to be Saluted and addressed as 'Sir' - no other word in the dictionary was allowed to be uttered in their presence and even Corporals could only be spoken to if your body was painfully rigid and you had their permission to speak.

The intervening twenty years had, therefore, seen some changes.

I spent another eighteen months in training to become a Junior Technician, then Corporal and Sergeant by the time I was 26, which was considered quite premature by some (I had become a Senior Non Commissioned Officer to be pedantic).

I had fought for my country for two years in Aden (a medal arrived some time later, ignominiously, in the post, marked 'OHMS'), I got married, had children, got divorced, gained my 'Wings' learned my worth and left the RAF before I reached thirty.

The business world seemed to imagine that my experiences might be worthwhile and I trained as a Broker before entering the trendy world of 'Marketing'. I was subsequently asked by Scottish Television to set up their Marketing Department where I remained for three years whilst begging for the chance to train as a Producer/Director. Cynics who claim that going sailing off the west coast with the Controller of Programmes may have facilitated my appointment can't prove anything and my training duly began, starting as a Programme Researcher in the Documentaries Unit.

Gordon Brown (later the Rt. Hon. Prime Minister Gordon) joined at the same time as a News Researcher (he didn't last too long - other plans obviously!)

I did, however, beat him to the Houses of Parliament - if only for lunch. James met me in the lobby and guided me to one of the twenty three dining rooms in the building and over a refreshing gin and tonic passed me the menu. There was an excellent choice and the prices were very well subsidised I thought. 'GGGeorge', he stammered, 'cccould I recommend the soup of the day, it's usually very good... of course you could have the smoked salmon if you prefer!' Considering that I was about to hand him a very substantial cheque and put him up in the top hotel in Malta for two weeks I felt his recommendation for a starter was just a little parsimonious. It turned out to be Jock Broth - how apt, I thought!

James had written the book 'Air Battle of Malta', upon which we were to base our filming, around the diaries of his uncle Lord David Douglas-Hamilton who had been in charge of 603 Spitfire Squadron in Malta after arriving in 1942. We'll gloss over the fact that it was illegal to keep diaries relating to operations during this period (one rule for them etc). I briefed James on what I had lined up for filming. We'd managed to get hold of the one and only surviving airworthy Gloster Gladiator for some aerial sequences (these were the Faith, Hope and Charity aircraft). I would be relying on captured Italian Airforce footage for most of the archive shots (they had no film in Malta during the war in addition to having no food or anything else so there was no allied footage available).

For the past month I had been scouring the country for any surviving war heroes from that dark period in Malta's history, interviewing them at their homes and inviting them to join us for location filming in Malta. I struck it very lucky by discovering that one of the Faith, Hope and Charity Pilots was still alive - Group Captain George Burgess D.S.O, D.F.C. He told me how there was a fourth Gladiator which wasn't remotely airworthy and this one was called 'Desperation'. Times were indeed desperate during those first two years of the war. They were on their own, a very small island up against the might of the Italians with no food or supplies able to get through until 1942. They resorted to eating rats cooked in axle grease

I also found Flt. Lt, Tony Holland D.F.C. the only survivor from Lord David's 603 Squadron - a nicer and more modest man you couldn't hope to meet. He agreed to come with us to Malta.

Douglas Bader's brother in law, Wing Commander Laddie Lucas C.B.E., D.S.O., D.F.C., who commanded 249 Spitfire Squadron also came on board - a much more pleasant man than his brother in law who I had the dubious honour of welcoming to RAF Leuchars whilst in charge of Duty Flight one weekend. Upon opening his cockpit, I asked how I might best help him (he was legless as usual) 'Get me some decent fucking steps for starters!' he snarled.

I was desperate to get Air Vice Marshall Sandy Johnstone to come with us but on visiting him at his London home in (appropriately) Hangar Lane, found him in poor health. Sandy had been Station Commander at RAF Luqa and went on to write prolifically with titles such as; 'One Man's War', 'Where no Angels Dwell', 'Enemy in the Sky', 'Spitfire into War', and 'Diary of an Aviator').

Our final hero was Group Captain Jack Satchell D.S.O., D.F.C. who had been Station Commander at Ta'Qali. I found Jack at home confined to a wheelchair and not in the best of health but his spirit was indomitable and there was no holding him back. His stories were endless although perhaps not often 'P.C.' He told me that there were no resources available at Ta'Qali when he took command. Desperately needing some form of transport, he promptly commandeered the only vehicle he could find - a huge, black, Rolls Royce Hearse which was not only commodious but enormously versatile and was swiftly christened 'The Fornicatorium'.

Over dinner one evening at the Phoenicia, I asked him where he had been before arriving in Malta - 'Abyssinia, old boy!' he replied. What on earth were you doing there I asked - 'Oh, just taking a pop at the Natives' he said without any concession to diplomacy.

We arrived in Malta at what used to be RAF Luqa - now Luqa International Airport. Since we Brits had been kicked out relations had thawed a little but we considered it politic to invite the top movers and shakers to a grand dinner at the Phoenicia Hotel the next evening in order to facilitate our filming. That old firebrand, and then Prime Minister, Dom Mintoff sat on my right and the Duke of Scicluna (the Maltese Royal Family), who hated Mintoff with a passion because he had nationalised the Scicluna Bank when he came to power, sat at the other end of a very long table.

After copious quantities of (thankfully, imported) wine a feeling of bonhomie began to spread and it looked like we might have a fair wind blowing during the next couple of weeks. Ominously, Mintoff asked me to come to his office first thing the next day before filming started. I mentioned this to JJ Scicluna over a nightcap and he promptly said 'He wants a bung!' I had nowhere near enough in the budget to satisfy the amount hinted at and said so. Our pet Duke told me that, after the Brits were kicked out, various nations tried to exploit the vacancy for new best friend of Malta including the Israelis who were to build a massive holiday complex which would bring in much needed tourism bucks (as well as line the Israelis pockets). A personal financial consideration was sought before the deal was signed (allegedly). Golda Meir, the Iron Lady of Israel, set Mossad to work and they quickly discovered private bank accounts in Switzerland with embarrassingly large amounts of money contained therein (particularly for a poor socialist fighting for the good of his people). There were no further holdups.

With some trepidation, I arrived at Government House the following morning not quite knowing how to play the situation but somewhat strengthened by my 'inside information'. 'We haven't discussed the filming fees yet' said the Prime Minister. 'Actually, I said, this has all been cleared and signed by your Minister of Travel and Tourism'.

'That is as maybe but you still need my signature otherwise filming cannot proceed!' I explained very carefully that Scottish TV was a relatively poor company and were here to honour the people of Malta by highlighting their sacrifices and bravery during the war but if we had to fly home before filming had even started there would, inevitably, be questions

asked in the media about why permissions had not been forthcoming for such a worthwhile project when other projects such as the Israeli one had been approved forthwith. I felt that saying any more might have been injurious to my well-being.

An uncomfortably long and silent stare came at me from across the vast expanse of antique mahogany. 'It is not a problem' he conceded 'We just have to ensure that everything is done properly - and now it is!' he said with a flourish of his pen followed by a very colonial blotting of his mark of approval rather than his reputation.

It was fortunate indeed that permissions had been granted as our Director and crew had decided to 'wing it' and started filming at the first location. The prison scenes in the film *Midnight Express* were shot at the old jail in Valetta and I didn't like the look of it one little bit!

Our interviewer and presenter was Hugo de Burgh (a cousin of Chris 'Lady in Red' de Burgh). The de Burghs are from a very old family that came over with 'The Conqueror' in 1066. I had worked with Hugo previously and most memorably on a rather less glamorous documentary about Tinker Families in Scotland. We had arranged to do some filming with a particular family in Bathgate but found that they don't 'Do' arrangements as they consider it unlucky.

We chased across the country to Girvan on the South West coast and upon coming over the top of the hill overlooking the town spotted the family's encampment on the North foreshore. We halted our convoy of film cars and I offered to go down and talk to them rather than arrive en masse and frighten them off again. Hugo said 'No, I'll go - I know how to talk to these people!' From a distance, we watched him stride confidently into the encampment only to observe his immediate retreat with considerably less dignity closely followed by a pack of hounds. He was far more suited to this style of documentary.

Our lavish dinner at the Phonecia paid off handsomely as doors opened all over the island after our rather uncertain start. There followed lunch at the Villa Parisio with that legend of Publishing, the Hon. Mabel Strickland, owner of the *Malta Times*.

Most memorably, Lord James almost lost his finger to a bird he mistook for 'Pretty Polly' - Miss Strickland's vicious African Grey.

Joe, the Duke of Scicluna may have lost his family bank but retained the 'Cisk' Brewery and the Palace, both of which we subsequently enjoyed!

Whenever I think about Malta these days, my first memory is still of a speeding, uncontrollable Javelin hurtling towards me in the dark, it's lights blinding me and the inevitability of a Court Martial.

It's hard to shake off your lowly-born start!

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