

It was a great piece of news for me as a thirteen year old boy. Our family had been stationed at a Royal Air Force base in Cornwall, England for nearly eight years and now my father had received a new posting overseas. Dad was an air traffic controller and was now to perform his duties at RAF Luqa which at the time combined both military and civilian aircraft movements.

I was consumed with excitement at the prospect of finally going to another country outside the UK. Moving from my birth place in Wales to England didn't count.

Dad had been all over the world since he joined the RAF in 1937. Even my mother had flown over Germany in a RAF bomber a day or so after the war, but we really hadn't been anywhere.

In April 1964 myself, younger brother Andrew and parents, minus my older sister who had left home and was working in the East of England, boarded an RAF Transport Command DeHavilland Comet 2 at RAF Lyneham bound for Malta. This was an adventure in itself. I had never flown before and to fly on the military version of the world's first jet airliner was really something.

The flight was fairly short and uneventful touching down at Luqa in the late afternoon. We were soon whisked away to our first destination where we would spend our first night in Malta.

I can only assume that the Sliema Hotel that exists today was the same one we stayed in at that time. I thought it was great.

We woke up the next day to a beautiful spring morning with the blue glistening waters of the Mediterranean gently lapping up against the rocky shoreline of Sliema Bay on the other side of the boulevard. I was convinced I had come to paradise!

Of course we weren't going to stay in the hotel forever and after a couple of days we drove to our new home. At that time it was called Tarxien Rd in Luqa Village. Looking at the current map I would say it is what is now known as Hal Tarxien.

The house was modest two storey building similar to all the other houses in the street. It had a nice feel to it and I enjoyed living there. It was the first time we had the convenience of a refrigerator and a shower. A lot of houses in England were still without fridges or showers, just the benefit of a cold climate and baths.

So there we were, embedded right in the middle of a small local community. Being the only English family there, we sort of stood out a bit and I couldn't help feeling that everyone was looking at me! I should say this feeling didn't last long. Being of olive skin that darkened very quickly when exposed to the sun combined with black hair I was soon constantly mistaken for Maltese.

I was never too sure how we were viewed by the Maltese people in general. Were we welcome guests or unwanted intruders reminiscent of past Imperial British rule? The general demeanour and attitude of the people was nothing short of friendly and helpful but I was conscious of the fact that we had assumed some right to be there that they may not share.

The sights, sounds and smells were quite different to anything I had experienced before. There was this constant sweet smell of what I could only assume was cooking or baking of some sort. Everything seemed more exposed than in England. Produce from shops seemed to spill out on the narrow streets. People carried large loaves of unwrapped bread from the shops to their homes. Donkeys, goats and even horses were not an unusual sight.

Although Malta had become a modern and progressive society in many ways there were times I felt I had been transported back to biblical times.

Fortunately there was no real language barrier as everyone apart from some of the very old spoke English and the currency was still in pounds, shillings and pence. As I recall, buying things like fruit was measured in 'Rotolos' (spelling may be wrong) which seemed to be equivalent to a kilogram. I had my first taste of drinks like Canada Dry and 7up which didn't seem available in the south of England.

There was a small cinema right in the middle of the village, the name of which I cannot remember. It may have been called the 'Metro'. I saw movies like 'King of Kings' 'Summer Holiday' and 'The Longest Day' when they were relatively new films there.

My father initially was supplied with an RAF issue bicycle to pedal to work each day which he soon replaced with a brand new Morris Mini Minor bought from Mizzi Bros car dealers. He kept the mini all the time we were in Malta. I think he paid about £400 for it.

Reality soon had to set in and I was enrolled in Tal Handaq (now Liceo Vassalli) school in Qormi catering specifically for British service families and administered by the Royal Navy. The headmaster (Instructor Captain Broad) and some of the senior staff were naval officers, the rest being civilian employees of the Admiralty.

Tal Handaq was certainly a shock to the system. I had come from a brand new secondary school in the south of England with all new facilities and equipment to what essentially was a series of run down military barracks.

In the summer months we only used to go to school in the morning to avoid having to try and learn anything in the heat of the day. We did however have several hours of homework each evening to compensate for the break.

The initial feeling of displacement soon evaporated and I became very involved in a number of activities both within and outside the school system.

Enrolling in the 'Duke of Edinburghs Award Scheme' presented many opportunities to keep occupied. Camping and hiking all over the island and particularly at the top of the Dingli Cliffs overlooking the island of Filfla became a major pursuit. At that stage Filfla was used as target practice for the navy and air force.

We frequently went rock climbing in the Madliena Valley where in those days there were virtually no buildings around the area at all.

The final episode for me was trekking up the slopes of the still active volcano Mt. Etna in Sicily

Unfortunately there was very little integration on a social level between English and Maltese children or adults for that matter. Everyone basically just associated with their own kind. I guess mainly because of the specific environment of military life and the segregation of schools.

I never did learn the Maltese language.

After a couple of months we moved to a block of flats in Depiro St (now Triq Mons. G. Depiro) in Sliema. It was short walk from the Balluta Bay passing the 'Nappa Bar' on the way.

A very nice, polite gentleman who was the editor of the 'Times of Malta' Mr Charles Grech Orr lived in the flat below us and possibly either him or his family actually owned the building. The block was called 'Maxim Flats'. I wonder if it is still there.

I remember he used to drive a Hillman Super Minx which was a fairly 'flashy' car in those days. The flat itself was very nice, although the laundry was on the roof several flights of stairs up. My mother used to insist that every time we returned from a swim we had to go up to the laundry and rinse out the towels.

It was fairly handy location with a small group of shops on the next corner and a newsagent on the other owned by another very nice man who we used to call 'Mr Mark' who served with the merchant navy during the war years.

Swimming, snorkelling and canoeing were all major pastimes for myself, and others with many visits to Ghan Tuffeħa, Golden Bay, along with the established military lidos at Kalafrana and Manoel Island. I remember my brother who was about nine years old at the time used to complain bitterly at the prospect of climbing up all the steps from the beach at Ghan Tuffeħa up to the car park especially if he was asked to carry anything.

I used to regularly swim from the rocks at Sliema over to the other side near the entry to Spinola Bay. Each weekend or during summer holidays, a young boy would walk from one end of Balutta Bay to the other selling roasted peanuts wrapped in a newspaper 'cone'

I guess my favourite of all was Delimara Point where you could dive from the rocky ledges of various heights into beautifully clear calm water.

Most of the swimming points were at rocky points as opposed to sand and it wasn't long before the soles of our feet toughened up like leather!

Once a week I used to walk to St Andrews army base to learn Judo from one of the members of the Commando Group Royal Marines stationed there at the time.

As we had no television during our stay, going to the cinema played a major part in our recreational activities in the evening. The Alhambra Theatre in St. Lawrence St, Sliema was particularly ahead of its time in seating design with a high sloping balcony floor so you could see over the heads of even the tallest person sitting in front of you. I think the last film I saw there was 'Fail Safe'. The 'Majestic' at The Strand was another popular cinema.

In those days there were fairly strict censorship measures imposed on cinema and newspapers. I was led to believe the church had some influence in this area. We often used to receive the English tabloids like the 'Daily Mirror' with what I could only assume had articles or pictures considered inappropriate for the morals of the time and were actually physically cut out of the page. Naturally whatever was on the other side of the page disappeared too!

Movies were also victim to the censors, quite often having significant sections of a film's story line deleted if it contained anything deemed as too sexually explicate or suggestive. Bear in mind bikinis were not allowed to be worn on public beaches at the time, so it didn't have to be very much by today's standards. Either way it made it a bit hard to follow the plot sometimes!

My father used to occasionally allow me to accompany him to work and spend time in the control tower watching the many and varied aircraft visiting Malta. RAF Luqa was home mainly to English Electric Canberra bombers but routinely hosted scheduled civilian airlines, and military aircraft from many other countries. Airfields like Hal Far and Ta-Qali were basically non operational at that stage.

Airlines such as British European Airways (BEA) with their Comets, Kingdom of Libya French designed Sud Aviation Caravelles and British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC now British Airways) Vickers VC-10's were regular visitors to Malta.

I spent many hours wondering through the streets of Valetta for no other reason than to look at the shops or take photographs which was becoming a bit of a hobby.

Being so young and having a fairly short attention span I don't think I fully appreciated the extent of the history of Malta although I had a fair idea.

1964 of course was a time of change for Malta becoming an independent state, changing the flag by removing the blue canton behind the George Cross. There was the occasional sign of anti British activity during that period in the form of graffiti but for most people both Maltese and British, it was a '*fait accompli*' and did not require any further comment other than how the future political structure would evolve.

I had mixed feelings about leaving Malta. I was now sixteen contemplating what the future held. Most of my early friendships were now gone with families returning to the UK or other overseas postings. I did look forward to going back home again but my stay in Malta was one of the most enjoyable of my life and the memories still stay with me today.

We took off from Luqa in October 1966 heading back to RAF Lyneham in England. Unlike normal civilian jet airliners, the seats in the Comet all faced backwards and I could see the cliffs at Dingli towering high over a calm Mediterranean Sea slowly disappear in the distance.

All my family members who were there in Malta with me have sadly passed away leaving a bit of a void in having no one left who shared those memorable experiences with me.

The final impact that Malta had on me was the inability to accept the status quo of living in England and the desire to travel again, preferably to a similar climate. I remained in England for just over three years after my return before emigrating to Australia where I have lived for the last forty years.

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