

Armed Forces of Malta

Forzi Armati ta' Malta



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The big game changer for the Armed Forces of Malta was the Beech 200 MPA. This is the newest Beech which was delivered in 2017. Photos in this article were taken at Malta-Luqa, unless otherwise noted. (31 August 2020, Bram Marijnissen)

With almost all air shows and exercises having been cancelled worldwide in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we managed to visit the Armed Forces of Malta in the period that it was safe and also allowed to travel.

History

Malta was one of Britain's most important colonies, especially in times of war, and was granted independence on 21 September 1964. After it became independent, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) wanted the Royal Air Force (RAF) to stay at Malta because of the threat from the Russians. The RAF was stationed with 13 Squadron and its Canberras at Luqa International Airport.

In 1972, West-Germany donated four Bell 47s. These Bells were flown into Luqa by two C-160D Transalls and transported by road to nearby St. Patrick's Barracks to become part of the Malta Land Forces. From that moment on, the forces were named Armed Forces of Malta (AFM), or Forzi Armati ta' Malta. Not a separate Air Force, Navy or Army but all in one. The AFM Helicopter Flight was born.

Independent

In 1979, the British left Malta and handed over the Search and Rescue (SAR) tasks but it was impossible to fulfill these with the donated Agusta-Bell 47s. At that moment, the Libyans entered Malta and they donated one AB206A and three Alouette 3 helicopters. In addition to this donation the Libyans also stationed two Super Frelons at Luqa to help

with the SAR tasks. Libya had loaned several million dollars to Malta to make up for the loss of rental income which followed the closure of British military bases in Malta. These closer ties with Libya meant a dramatic new (but short-lived) development in Maltese foreign politics. The problem with the Libyans was that they were not operating very professionally and after some accidents, Malta and Libya clashed with each other and the Libyans left Malta with their Super Frelons in 1981. The Alouettes and AB206A stayed behind but the Libyans took the log books so the helicopters were not allowed to fly!

Libyan Super Frelons

On 30 January 1975, the first two Libyan Air Force Aerospatiale SA321M Super Frelon helicopters, LC-155 (155) and LC-158 (158) arrived at Malta-Luqa. These were flown by a Libyan crew, while Maltese observers were carried on board, to assist in patrols around the Maltese Island. Next to the Super Frelons mentioned, two others were noted at Luqa during the Libyan deployment in the period of January 1975 to March 1980: LC-153 (153) and LC-157 (157).

Italian assistance

The expulsion of the Libyan mission made links with Italy grow stronger, resulting in Italy pledging to recognise Malta's neutrality and offering a greater level of assistance. In the beginning, the SAR tasks were flown by Aeronautica Militare (Italian Air Force) AB204Bs and later on by AB212s



Especially for our reporters, one of every operational type was pulled outside and placed on a "static line" in great Maltese weather conditions. (31 August 2020, Rene Sleepers)

with the establishment of the MICTM (Missione Italiana di Cooperazione Tecnica e Militare). The big difference between the Libyan mission and the Italian Military Mission was that the Libyans performed all flights with a completely Libyan crew and the flights during the Italian mission were flown by a mixed Italian – Maltese crew, on every flight! As a result of these mixed flights the Maltese crew obtained the same standards as the Italian crew. In addition to the SAR missions the Italians also provided training and courses.

The first fixed wings

It was in 1991 that the AFM took the first steps towards acquiring fixed-wing aircraft by accepting an offer to buy five Cessna O-1E Bird Dogs from the Italian Aviazione dell'Esercito. Following that, 1992 was the year in which a lot was changing for the AFM Helicopter Flight. With the arrival of the Bird Dogs, the Helicopter Flight was transformed to Air Squadron. Notwithstanding the change in name, the Italian Guardia di Finanza donated two NH500Ms, with floats, for training purposes. Those NH500s were the first to be painted in the Air Squadron livery of white, green and high-visibility orange Day-Glo. Finally, the Libyans brought back the log books of the Alouettes and the AFM decided to give them a major overhaul in France so they could be used for SAR tasks. The

being on a military mission while carrying civil registrations imposes limitations, as there is a need to observe certain diplomatic procedures. Thus, a new military serial system came into effect and on 1 May 2000, all registrations of all the AFM's types were cancelled from the Maltese civil register. The new system consists of the letters AS (for Air Squadron) and four digits. The first two digits indicate the year when the aircraft was purchased, the last two the order in which the aircraft joined the Air Squadron.

Bulldogs and CASA

The O-1 Bird Dogs were withdrawn from use but the AFM was in need of a "new" training aircraft which resulted in the donation by the RAF of five Bulldogs. Four were delivered in 2000 and the last one in 2001. The Bell 47s which had been used for training were also withdrawn from use in 2001, after almost 30 years of service within the AFM.

From 2003 until 2007, while Moammar al-Qadhafi was the leader of Libya, illegal immigration was at a low level but after 2007, something changed and it grew explosively, becoming "big business". At that moment, the AFM needed a bigger airplane than the Islanders they had in use and a Spanish CASA 212 was leased. The CASA was flown by a Spanish pilot but with an otherwise Maltese crew.



Still going strong is this ex Libyan Police Alouette 3, AS9211, which was delivered to Malta on 24 December 1992. In total, Malta received three Alouette 3s donated by Libya. (31 August 2020, Rene Sleepers)

Alouettes were equipped with a rescue hoist, cargo hook, stretcher kit and emergency flotation gear for the over-water operations. For the first time in its twenty-year history, the Air Squadron was at last endowed with true SAR capability!

Fleet expansion

Due to illegal immigration, the AFM was feeling the need for a multi-engined aircraft for offshore patrols, as it was impossible to carry out this task by helicopter or the single engined Bird Dog. A few years later, in 1995, the much-heralded BN-2 Islander was delivered to the AFM.

At that moment, the economy in Malta was not brilliant and the AFM was unable to buy new helicopters so in 1996, the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf) donated two Alouette 3s. Those Alouettes stayed in operational use for just one year and were used for spare parts thereafter, to keep the upgraded ex-Libyan Alouette 3s airworthy for quite some time. In 1998, a second BN-2 Islander was delivered.

Military serials

Malta wanted to be a part of the EU since 2000, because of the increasing illegal immigration, and eventually entered the EU in 2004. At that moment, the Italian Military Mission still went on and the AB212s flew their missions from Luqa. When the Air Squadron wishes to fly an aircraft abroad,

New Beeches

A big game changer was the purchase of the first brand new aircraft for the AFM which had everything on board they needed: the Beech 200MPA. After the aircraft was built, it went to Aerodata AG in Germany to have all the necessary instruments for patrolling built in. The first aircraft was delivered in 2011, followed by a second one in 2012. Using these aircraft makes patrol against smuggling and illegal immigration a lot easier, although it remains an enormous task. Instead of funds, the EU required data from the AFM. The illegal immigration needs to be stopped because of the crimes in human trafficking. At this moment, the AFM is not yet where it wants to be, but progress is being made.

Introduction of the AW139

In 2013, the AFM signed a contract to purchase three brand new AW139s and the first pilots went to Italy for flight training. In 2014, the first two were delivered. The Italians assisted in transitioning SAR operations from the Alouette 3 to the AW139 and the third one arrived in 2016. That year was milestone for the AFM because during it, the first mission with a completely Maltese crew was flown in an AW139! By then, it was time for Italy to release Malta and the Italians left after a very long time of high quality co-operation!



This Islander with serial AS9819 will be getting a major overhaul to extend its lifetime. Unfortunately, its brother will not be flying anymore. (31 August 2020, Bram Marijnissen)

In 2019, the transition to night vision started for rotary pilots which is also a big game changer for the SAR tasks.

Present

At this moment, the AFM operates three Beech 200s, three AW139s, two Alouette 3s and one BN-2 Islander, which is enough for a small country like Malta. Line maintenance is done by the AFM itself. For higher level maintenance, the AW139s are brought Leonardo in Italy or Harrods Aviation Centre at Stansted in the United Kingdom. The Beech 200s receive it in Braunschweig, Germany. The stored BN-2 Islander will go back to the Britten-Norman factory in the UK and in return, the operational BN-2 Islander will be updated to extend its lifetime. It is unclear for how long the Alouettes will be flying with the AFM, due to the arrival of the new AW139s. The AFM is trying to get a Bulldog airworthy again for a Historical Flight.

Staffing has proven challenging, with airlines offering high salaries to trained personnel as one factor. Therefore, the AFM constantly offers its personnel specialised courses. The Armed Forces and Government just recently signed an agreement, increasing basic salary and overall wages for personnel

of the Force. These “New Salaries and Conditions of Service for the Armed Forces of Malta” will also encourage serving members to continue specialising and training, and pursue their service with the AFM.

Illegal immigration is well organised these days and continues year-round, even during winter. At its beginning, weather conditions were playing a role and there were far fewer people per boat. It started with a maximum of 20 people on a single boat but these days, a minimum of 80 people on one boat is normal. In the week prior to our visit, there were 14 cases! One of the worst cases in history concerned a boat with 300 people on board that capsized. The Beech 200 dropped dinghy's saving a number of immigrants but unfortunately, many of them drowned.

In the past, AW139s picked up several people from boats with gun wounds, as well as pregnant women.

The AFM is patrolling a very large area around Malta: 60 kilometres to the north (to Sicily, Italy), 800 kilometres to the east (to Crete, Greece), 350 kilometres to the South (to Libya) and 300 kilometres to the West (to Tunisia). Italy and Greece are very helpful when the AFM reports an illegal immigrant



The year 2016 was a milestone for the Armed Forces of Malta because the very first mission with a completely Maltese crew was flown, with an AW139. This shiny ASI428 was framed by author Rene Slegers on 31 August 2020.



From the beginning of 1975, the Libyan Air Force flew patrol missions out of Luqa for a period of five years with their Super Frelons. In 1977, Joe Ciliberti made this take-off shot of LC-155.

boat and assist by sending a nearby ship to pick up the immigrants. Unfortunately, Libya and Tunisia do not offer any help!

Future

The Alouette 3s are being used for minor SAR tasks. However, the AW139 is perfectly suited for all SAR tasks, making the Alouette 3 redundant. The question therefore is: how long will they stay in operation with the AFM. On the other hand, the lighter SAR tasks can be performed with a smaller helicopter than the AW139, like the Airbus Helicopter H145.

In September 2019, the RNLAf donated another two Alouette 3s for spare parts. Those two are not at Luqa International Airport but were taken apart and stored in barracks near the airport.

The Beech 200MPAs are fine aircraft but, with the increase in illegal immigration, the AFM could use a larger type, like the CN235 the Irish Air Corps (IAC) is using or the newer version, the C295. The Beech 200 does not have much space inside and missions are very long, leading to high levels of crew fatigue after missions. A newer aircraft with more space will make the mission more sustainable.

On the other hand, a new type of helicopter or aircraft needs newly trained pilots, crew, engineers and hangar space, with inevitable high cost attached.

The AFM also has a project for UAVs going on, but COVID-19 stalls this a lot. The UAVs too, will need new crews, engineers and everything else costing lots of money.

At present, the AFM is using three hangars and those are completely full when all aircraft and helicopters are inside. With Malta's warm climate, most of the time all aircraft and helicopters are inside, to protect them from the sun. The systems of the Beech 200s can malfunction if they become too hot. One of the hangars will be torn down and built up again around 2021.

Exercises

The AFM still has a very good relationship with the Italian Air Force and there are crew exchanges throughout the year. There is a very good relationship with the IAC too, as a result of the similarity in helicopter operations and assets. The IAC is using the AW139 for border patrol and SAR tasks, like the AFM, that has provided multiple courses for the IAC.

Accidents

Luckily there have been just a few accidents in the AFM history with just some slight injuries and no casualties at all! On 24 November 1992, Cessna O-1E Bird Dog serial 9H-ACB

damaged its wing while taxiing, but could be repaired. The same Bird Dog was involved in another incident, on 5 May 1993, when it experienced a heavily landing which severely damaged to starboard wing, tail plane and undercarriage. This time, the aircraft could not be repaired and remained being used for spare parts.

On 16 March 1993, Bird Dog 9H-ACC also got damaged while taxiing but could be repaired. Also in March 1993, NH500M 9H-ABY damaged its tail boom in an accident but could be repaired.

Bulldog AS0022 was involved in a ground collision with a vehicle of Enemalta whilst taxiing for take-off for an early morning coastal patrol from Luqa on 16 July 2005. It sustained some damage, though the two crew were uninjured. The aircraft was repaired and is operational again.

The worst accident in the AFM's history happened on 5 August 2007, when Bulldog T1 AS0020 crash-landed near Dwejra in Gozo. An eye witness noticed the aircraft climbing close to the Azure Window at Dwejra when it suddenly seemed to stall and ended up in an uncultivated field at a location called Santu Pietru, between Dwejra and San Dimitri. The two crew members suffered slight injuries and were airlifted by an Alouette 3 to St. Luke's Hospital to be treated for shock.

Inventory of the Malta Air Wing

Operational:

| | |
|------------------------|--------------|
| AS1126, AS1227, AS1731 | Beech 200MPA |
| AS1428, AS1429, AS1630 | AW139 |
| AS9211, AS9212 | SA316B |
| AS9819 | BN-2T |

Stored:

| | |
|--------|------------|
| AS0021 | Bulldog T1 |
| AS9516 | BN-2B |

Stripped:

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| AS9617, AS9618 | SE3160 |
|----------------|--------|

Overview of the AFM inventory over time

Agusta-Bell 47G-2

C/n 225 registered 9H-AAE 14jul72, cancelled 01may00, reregistered AS7201, to Malta Aviation museum at Ta'Qali 30may08. C/n 260 registered 9H-AAF 14jul72, cancelled 05dec97 and sold as F-GLNY 05dec97.

C/n 262 registered 9H-AAG 14jul72, cancelled 20nov97 and shipped off to the Dubai Aviation Academy feb98.

All three AB47s were former Luftwaffe helicopters, serials respectively 74+02, 74+18 and 74+20, and transported to Malta by Transalls during May 1972.

Agusta-Bell 206A Jet Ranger

C/n **8185** registered 9H-AAJ apr76, cancelled 22aug97, sold as G-DNCN to J.J. Woodhouse of Flying Services 21nov97. This helicopter is ex Libyan Arab Air Force, serial 8185, and arrived at Luqa on board Libyan Air Force Lockheed C-130E Hercules serial 117 on 4 June 1973.

AgustaWestland AW139

C/n **31560** registered AS1428, delivered as I-EASZ 14jun14, still in use.

C/n **31595** registered AS1429, delivered as I-EASI 18dec14, still in use.

C/n **31625** registered AS1630, delivered as I-PTFT 22sep16, still in use.

All three AW139s were manufactured by Agusta Westland, Venegono (Italy).

Beech B200 MPA Super King Air

C/n **BB-2016** registered AS1126, delivered as D-IMPA 25feb11, still in use.

C/n **BB-2018** registered AS1227, delivered as D-IMPB 05mar12, still in use.

C/n **BY-249** registered AS1731, delivered as D-IMPD 27apr17, still in use.

All three Beech B200s were manufactured by Hawker Beechcraft Corporation (USA) and upgraded with the Telephonics Corporation's RDR-1700B maritime surveillance and imaging radar, besides other mission related electronics by Aerodata AG of Braunschweig (Germany).

Bell 47

C/n **1991** registered 9H-AAH 24may72, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS7204, dismantled in hangar dec16, fate unknown.

This Bell 47 was a former Luftwaffe helicopter, serial 74+35, and transported to Malta by Transall in May 1972.

Britten Norman BN-2B-26 Islander

C/n **2159** registered 9H-ACU 04dec95, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9516, stored in hangar.

C/n **2156** registered 9H-ADF 24sep98, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9819, still in use.

AS9516 is supposed to go the Britten-Norman factory (UK) for spare parts, in exchange for major overhaul of AS9819 by Britten-Norman.

CASA 212-200 Aviocar

C/n **CC10-P2-1-139** registered AS0925 28jul09, lease ended 01jun12, reregistered as T7-JCR.

The Luxembourg government was supporting the Air Wing operations by providing a leased CASA 212 Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) for patrol during the ongoing FRONTEX joint Operation 'Nautilus'. The C212 belonged to CAE Aviation of Luxemburg, and was operated from Luqa by an AFM aircrew, under the supervision of a company instructor. The European external borders' co-ordination agency FRONTEX was carrying out Operation 'Nautilus' in the central Mediterranean against illegal immigrant activities. The leased aircraft was the largest and first turbine powered, fixed-wing aircraft to be operated by the AFM's Air Wing. It could be flown by day and night in almost any weather, equipped with a powerful nose-mounted search radar, thermal imaging and homing equipment. A ramp at the rear makes it possible to drop survival equipment from the air. With the end of Operation 'Nautilus', AS0925 returned to Luxembourg.

Cessna O-1E Bird Dog

C/n **305M-0018** registered 9H-ACA 04feb92, cancelled 01may00, reregistered AS9206, sold as N619SB to A.F. Bush of Albuquerque, NM (USA).

C/n **305M-0029** registered 9H-ACB 04feb92, damaged during landing 05may93, used for spare parts, to Malta Aviation museum as AS9207 at Ta'Qali apr01 although serial AS9207 has not been worn.

C/n **305M-0032** registered 9H-ACC 04feb92, cancelled 01may00, reregistered AS9208, sold as N320DA to A.F. Bush of Albuquerque, NM (USA).

C/n **305M-0038** registered 9H-ACD 04feb92, cancelled 01may00, reregistered AS9209, sold as N119AJ to Allan E. Johnson in Stillwater, MN (USA).

C/n **305M-0035** registered 9H-ACE 04feb92, cancelled 01may00, reregistered AS9210, sold as N119LH to A.F. Bush in Albuquerque, NM (USA).

All five Bird Dogs were former Aviazione dell'Esercito Bird Dogs, serials respectively MM61-2972/E.I.34, MM61-2983/E.I.2, MM61-2986/E.I.25, MM2990/E.I.26 and MM62-12281/E.I.12.

Nardi Hughes NH500M

C/n **62-0220M** registered 9H-ABY 06jun92, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9213, to Guardia di Finanza museum, Pratica di Mare (Italy) 19dec18.

C/n **122-0227M** registered 9H-ABZ 09jun92, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9214, dismantled in hangar dec16, fate unknown.

Both Hughes 500s were former Guardia di Finanza Hughes, serials respectively MM80848/GdiF-49 and MM80854/GdiF-55.



In 1972, with the delivery of four Bell 47s, the name Malta Land Forces changed to Armed Forces of Malta and the AFM Helicopter Flight was born. Joe Ciliberti captured the newly arrived 9H-AAF that same year at Pembroke Grounds, from where the Air Wing operated in its first years.



This former Libyan Air Force Agusta-Bell 206A Jet Ranger was delivered in April 1976 and registered as 9H-AAJ. The helicopter was sold on the civilian market in 1997. (1989, Joe Ciliberti)

Scottish Aviation Bulldog T1

C/n 337 registered 9H-ADQ 19feb00, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS0020, crash landed 05aug07, fate unknown. C/n 345 registered 9H-ADR 19feb00, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS0021, stored in hangar.

C/n 358 registered 9H-ADS 19feb00, cancelled 01 may00, reregistered as AS0022, sold as G-CLJC to Excelis Limited, Whitney (UK) 06sep19.

C/n 363 registered 9H-ADT 19feb00, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS0023, sold as G-CLJD to Excelis Limited, Whitney (UK) 06sep19.

C/n 240 registered AS0124 30jul01, dismantled and used for spare parts.

All five Bulldog T1s were former Royal Air Force Bulldogs, serials respectively XX691, XX696, XX709, 714 and XX547.

Sud Aviation SA316B Alouette 3

C/n 2288 registered 9H-AAV 19jul93, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9315, withdrawn from use, fate unknown.

C/n 2295 registered 9H-AAW 24dec92, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9211, still in use.

C/n 2315 registered 9H-AAX 24dec92, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9212, still in use.

C/n 1247 A-247 Royal Netherlands Air Force, arrived by container vessel in Malta 20sep19, used for spare parts.

C/n 1292 A-292 Royal Netherlands Air Force, arrived by container vessel in Malta 20sep19, used for spare parts.

The three SA316Bs that flew with the AFM were former Libyan Arab Air Force (serial LC2288) and Libyan Police (serials respectively LC2295 and LC2315) helicopters.

Sud Aviation SE3160 Alouette 3

C/n 1209 registered 9H-ADA 05oct96, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9617, dismantled in hangar.

C/n 1399 registered 9H-ADB 05oct96, cancelled 01may00, reregistered as AS9618, dismantled in hangar.

These two SE3160s were former Royal Netherlands Air Force Alouettes, serials respectively A-209 and A399.

The authors like to thank everyone who made this fantastic visit possible within the Maltese Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Malta.



Before it was donated to Malta as 9H-ABY, this NH500M flew for the Italian Guardia di Finanza, as can be seen from its colour scheme. Nowadays, this NH500M can be admired in the museum of the Guardia di Finanza at Pratica di Mare in Italy. Joe Ciliberti took its picture in 1992.