

I know several people who've moved to Malta for the sun. I hope the weather has changed somewhat in the last fifty years, because Dad always said that the worst storms in the world were over the Eastern Mediterranean, and he was in a position to know, having flown straight through the middle of most of them.

Under storm conditions, he would clip his maps to the windscreen and fly on instruments, preferring not to have to look at what he was flying through – and in those days, they went through the weather and not over it, as modern jets do. Furthermore, military aircraft went on flying (and probably still do) long after conditions had deteriorated enough to shut down all civilian flying.

On one occasion, Dad had to take his squadron out to Aden, and planned a stopover in Malta, which meant a landing at RAF Luqa. I think this was 233 Squadron, flying Vickers Valettas; however, RAF Luqa was also often called Valletta, so I may be a tad confused...

Anyway: it was, in the best horror-story tradition, a dark and stormy night. Conditions were awful; high winds, cumulus up to about 15 000 feet, severe updrafts, driving rain, thunder, lightning, the works. Flying was extremely difficult with the turbulence, ice was a constant threat, and all Dad wanted was to get his little flock of chickens safely on the ground for the night.

He radioed in to Luqa and they told him that ground conditions were appalling and that the airfield was on the verge of being closed, but that he could attempt a ground-controlled approach and landing if he wanted. As I understand it, his job as the Squadron Leader was to make the first approach and see if landing was viable. If it was, he would land, pull over onto the apron and then help the tower talk the rest of the Squadron in (a ground-controlled approach was the only option in conditions like these).

So he got the Squadron into a holding pattern and made the approach. Visibility was almost non-existent and the cloud cover eventually broke at about 100 feet off the runway. There was torrential rain on the ground, making the surface difficult and aquaplaning all too likely. And driving crosswinds made the actual landing extremely hazardous.

However, compared to the prospect of a few more hours in the maelstrom above, this all looked as welcoming as a comfortable feather bed, so Dad got his wheels down, pulled over, and started nursing his chickens , one at a time, through the approach and landing. It was time-consuming, the weather was worsening, each approach seemed to be more difficult than the previous one, and both Dad and the Air Traffic Controller were getting increasingly nervous.

But one by one, they got them down, and eventually there was only one more to go. The last plane had almost completed its approach and was at about 300ft, about to break through the cloud and go onto visual, when suddenly it disappeared from the radar, and the radio went ominously silent.

“Shit!” said Dad and the ATC simultaneously, “we’ve lost him”, and the ambulances and fire trucks hurtled out onto the airfield to look for the wreckage.

But a few minutes later, the rescue services radioed in to say that they could find no trace of a crash.

Dad and the ATC were baffled and extremely distressed. The only thing they could think of was that he must have plunged into the sea, but it was extremely unlikely given his position just before losing contact.

They were still shaking their heads when the radio crackled into life, and they heard a trembling little voice requesting permission to let down from 15 000ft.

The aircraft, a big, heavy military transport, had been picked up by an updraft at 300ft and blown right out of the top of the storm 15 000ft above. That it didn’t break up was a miracle.

No, I don’t think I’ll be moving to Malta for the sun!

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