

AIR CORPS TRAINING



The stretcher reaches the deck of Maritime Squadron's P-61 in the sea north of Malta. The hi-line under the control of the ship's crew clearly provides stability for the stretcher. (Pic: Capt Nicholas Grech, Armed Forces Malta).

# FIRST TRAINING MISSION TO MALTA

The Irish Air Corps' first international deployment earlier this year provided aviation training to the Maltese military aviation unit. According to team leader Lt Col David Corcoran, each member brought individual skillsets to the mission, including hoist operations, fast roping, search and rescue, and external load operations.

**T**he team from No. 3 Operations Wing – Capt Declan Daly, Capt Finbar McArdle, Flight Quartermaster Sgt Tracey Walsh, Sgt David Hennessy, Sgt Damian Kelly and myself – touched down in Luqa International Airport. We were met by Capt Nicholas Grech (Squadron Commander, Air Wing) who welcomed us as guests of the Armed Forces of Malta.

At the Naval Base near Valletta we were honoured to be the first guests in brand new accommodation overlooking the harbour. A number of Malta's Maritime Squadron were in the harbour and alongside them was a familiar sight, LÉ Aoife.

Early the next morning we travelled to the Air Wing HQ in Luqa Airport for the start of a busy week. After an introduction to the Air Wing OC, Lt Col Clinton O'Neill (his grandfather was Irish), we received a number of briefings and were brought on a familiarisation flight around the islands of Malta, Comino and Gozo.



Troops from the Special Forces are despatched from the helicopter under the guidance of Sgt Damien Kelly (right of cabin door).



The maritime stretcher is manoeuvred from the cabin by winch operator Sgt David Hennessey in preparation for lowering to the ship below.

On the familiarisation flight we had an opportunity to see the full beauty of the islands, including those remote and isolated parts. During the flight we met Sgt Carmelo Psaila whose English cockney accent belied his maternal Waterford roots. It seemed that there were clear Irish links to Air Wing and we felt very much at home, except that the weather was so much better!

## FAST-ROPING TECHNIQUES

During the first couple of days the training focused on fast-roping techniques and hoist operations over land. For the fast-roping techniques members of the Armed Forces of Malta's (AFM) Special Forces units joined us; they were very interested in learning the techniques on the AW139 as their experience up to that was on Alouette and other helicopters.

They were extremely professional and, like the Air Wing personnel, impressed with excellent drills. The troops had no difficulty fast roping from the helicopter and were capable of emptying the cabin in only a few seconds.

Hoisting operations were initiated over the airfield. Within the Air Wing their senior aircraft technicians controlled the hoist while line aircrew went down the wire. Their aircrew, who provide SAR services in Malta, and their special forces were both very impressive – combining extreme fitness, with real operational experience and skills to perform to a very professional standard.

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Members of the Armed Forces of Malta practice fast-rope insertion techniques at Luqa Airfield, under flight instruction of Capt Finbar McArdle.

Each day ended with a meal in the Maritime Squadron mess, which was resplendent with many gifts and mementos from previous guests from all over the world. Our hosts had allocated a few chefs to look after our team for the week, which they did admirably, with excellent fare produced daily.

We learned during the week that it is an important element of Maltese culture to ensure guests are well looked after, and the 8,000 calories or so we received each day were a testament to that!

### SAR SCENARIOS

The next couple of days built on the hoist training and we left the comfort of the airfield for exercises on Comino, the smallest of the islands, with large cliffs that made for useful SAR exercises. The scenarios called for the simulated rescue of casualties trapped on the cliff face. Once completed successfully we turned our focus to the Mediterranean.

It was at this point the Maritime Squadron made their presence felt, providing P-61, a Diciotti-class, Italian-made ship for our training vessel. It came equipped with a helicopter deck, which was wide and clear.

The commander of the AFM, Brig Gen Jeffrey Curmi, visited the Air Wing during the week to check on our progress. He spoke warmly of the Defence Forces

and the considerable connections that have developed between the two countries over recent years.

He also spoke of his hope for continued development of our co-operation in the air domain for the future to mirror similar connections with the Army and Naval Service.

The training over the Mediterranean was an interesting experience as although generally fairly calm it has its moments of high seas. Sicily's coastline was clearly visible during our operations. Equally of note was the intense volume of maritime traffic plying its way east and west along the sea lanes in sedate procession.

During the winching operations the AW139 helicopter showed its full sophistication, with the ability to fly hands free into a hover beside P-61. All that is required is the push of a button along with what might be described as careful monitoring. This is the four-axis enhanced SAR mode, which is an impressive feature of modern helicopters and our AW139 in particular.

### HOIST OPERATIONS

The exercises saw us demonstrate our techniques for maritime hoist operations. Of note to the Maltese was our crew 'patter', which is the structured dialogue between aircraft commander and crew.

All manner of techniques were employed to hoist simulated casualties on board the aircraft, including the use of a stretcher. It was great to see how easily we integrated with our Maltese hosts when airborne and on the ground. It was clear to us how both aviation units shared an intense motivation to perform positively, share knowledge and learn from each other.

The conclusion of the training was a simulated maritime counter-terrorism exercise, which included the very difficult proposition of holding an inch-perfect hover over a vessel moving at 18kts while Special Forces troops slid down a rope to the deck. One wrong move could easily result in injury so the flying skills had to be right, first time.

Under our guidance the Air Wing pilots moved quickly over the ship and the assault was underway. The ropes were deployed and the troops were onboard in seconds, with the performance of the Air Wing pilots and soldiers again impressive to observe.

Capt McArdle got the opportunity to take fly a Super King Air 200 as the fixed-wing top cover for the exercise, and was delighted to renew his familiarity with the ubiquitous KingAir, putting it through its paces in formation flight and landing it back in Luqa.

### WATER RESCUES

The hoist training concluded with some wet work, hoisting 'casualties' directly from the water. This was conducted just along the northern coastline under the shadow of an ancient look-out tower at Mghatab, known as Saint Mark's Tower. Sgt Kelly ably controlled the training in collaboration with the AFM rescue personnel.

While the winching training was underway, our helicopter handing instructors, Capt Daly and FQMS Walsh, conducted an under-slung load-training course with some of



The Air Corps training team from No. 3 Operations Wing (l-r): Sgt David Hennessey, Flight Quartermaster Sgt Tracey Walsh, Capt Declan Daly, Lt Col David Corcoran, Sgt Damian Kelly and Capt Finbar McArdle on the deck of the P-61 harboured in Valetta.



Sgt David Hennessey and Sgt Carmello Psaila prepare the maritime stretcher for deployment. The view from the belly camera of the ship's wash is clearly visible from the cockpit.

the Air Wing technicians along with several Maritime Squadron personnel.

The course was based on a standard Landing Point Commanders course, modified to suit the specific needs of the AFM. The Air Wing identified the need for this course as they



Sgt Carmello Psaila deploys the stretcher to the deck of the P-61; with his left hand operating the hoist controller.

**NOTE OF THANKS FROM IRISH AIR CORPS CHIEF  
Brig Gen Paul Fry, GOC Air Corps**

*The Air Corps can trace its acquisition of the basic skills described in this article to the establishment of Helicopter Flight with the initial Alouette 3 helicopters in 1963. At that time experts from the neighbouring RAF imparted the correct patter, winching techniques and flying skills to the Air Corps to help us begin to safely operate in the demanding SAR role.*



*The wheel has turned full circle for the Air Corps as those skills have been built upon and added to. It is now a recognised expert operator of the AW139 type, possessed of the full range of military day and night flying and operating skills, matured over fifty-three years of helicopter operational experience.*

*No 3 Operations Wing can be proud of the intense nature of training completed in such a short space of time with our friends in the Armed Forces of Malta. The AFM has a long association with the Irish Defence Forces through the Cadet School training agreement, and also through its facilitating the Air Corps deployment to Luqa in support of the evacuation mission following the collapse of Libya in 2011.*

*More recently it has been with the Naval Service' ongoing operations as part of Operation Pontus in the Mediterranean. It was most appropriate that we could in this way continue this fruitful and cordial relationship.*

*The warmest thanks of GOC AFM reached my desk very soon after the training mission returned home, to which I now add my own job well done!*

were faced with a similar situation to us with the introduction of the AW139.

While the unit had some experience of cargo slinging with the ever-versatile Alouette III, the extra lifting capabilities offered by the more powerful, larger AW139 meant that extra training had to be undertaken for the supporting personnel.

**PRACTICAL EXERCISES**

Course lectures covered subjects such as landing-site selection and marking, troop drills, helicopter under-slung load equipment (HUSLE) identification and use, and landing-point management.

The students were also briefed on the specific techniques required for operating at sea — to and from Maritime Squadron vessels.

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The course concluded with two practical exercises, a landing-point recce and management exercise on the island of Gozo. The course deployed by air to a helipad at a nearby base before recceing, selecting and marking a landing point, which was then used to extract the course and return them to Luqa.

The second practical exercise was an external load-training day conducted on the airfield. This consisted of the course preparing a load, using a mix of Irish and Maltese HUSLE for flight, which was then moved to a pick-up point. The students briefed the flying crews on its expected characteristics and then managed the landing point during the flying phase of the exercise.

### NIGHT VISSON GOGGLE DEMO

While this training was being conducted the other aircrew of Air Wing were provided with a night-vision goggle demonstration flight by Captain McArdle and Sgt Hennessy, who took to the air on a dark, windy night.

The AFM personnel were amazed at the sight of their island through the goggles. The level of detail they could see over the cliffs, and sea in particular, made a remarkable impression on our hosts. Heretofore, the southern cliffs of Malta, which rise to almost 1,000ft from the sea, were a 'no-go' area at night –

but with goggles, flying in this area is now possible.

The personnel who undertook the course displayed a high degree of motivation and ability, along with a real desire to share knowledge and experience.

The Air Wing and Maritime Squadron can both be justifiably proud of their

professionalism and to have progressed so quickly with their new AW139 helicopters. It is our hope that we get to build on this success with further visits and exchanges into the future.

*The original article first appeared in the July/August issue of An Cosantóir - the Defence Forces magazine.*

