

PHILATELY and PIONEER AVIATION in MALTA.
ROYAL NAVAL AIR STATION
KALAFRANA – MARSAXLOKK BAY.

By Dr A Bonnici. KM. MD. MRPSL.

Malta's fortunes, or misfortunes, have always had, an intimate connection with wars, especially in the Mediterranean.

In 1904, the **Royal Engineers Balloon Unit**, after serving in the Boer war in South Africa, visited Malta, and an exhibition together with a demonstration, was carried out.

Unfortunately, as far as I know, there is no evidence, that this First Balloon show over Malta, was commemorated by a special issue, of a commemorative hand stamp, Card, or Aerogramme.

9th September 1911- The UK Coronation Aerial Post.
First Acceptance Mail from the UK to other destinations, one of which was MALTA.

NOTICE.

Aerial Post.

BY SANCTION OF HIS MAJESTY'S
POSTMASTER-GENERAL.

In Commemoration of the
Coronation of their Majesties
the King and Queen.

*The Net Profits derived
will be devoted to a Public
Charity to be approved by
the Postmaster-General.*

An Aerial Post between London and Windsor will be in operation daily for a limited period only, commencing Saturday, the 9th September, 1911, and it will be available for use by the public under the regulations of the General Post Office in connection with the ordinary Inland and Foreign Mail Services.

DONATIONS TO CHARITY.—Lloyds Bank, Limited, St. James' Street, London, S.W., has consented to receive, on behalf of the Honorary Organising Committee, donations in sums of One Shilling and upwards, which will be acknowledged by the Committee by Aerial Post Cards.

Persons resident in the country and abroad will thereby be enabled to secure an Aerial postal souvenir of unique interest and, at the same time, benefit the Charity to which the net profits will be devoted.

Remittances must be made by cheque or postal order made payable to the "Coronation Aerial Post," crossed "Lloyds Bank, Ltd." *Stamps cannot be accepted.*

Subscribers when sending their remittances should give the names and addresses to which the Post Card receipts are to be sent.

ORDERS BY POST.—Orders for small quantities of the Post Cards and Envelopes may be sent to the Secretary, Aerial Post, General Buildings, Aldwych, London, W.C. The cost of postage, at the rate of 1d. for each dozen or less ordered, must be included in remittance.

WHOLESALE ORDERS.—Messrs. P. C. BURTON & CO., General Buildings, Aldwych, London, W.C., have been appointed Sole Wholesale Agents for the sale of the Post Cards and Envelopes.

Only the special pictorial Post Cards and Envelopes issued by the Honorary Organising Committee, by sanction of the Postmaster-General, will be conveyed by the Aerial Service, and they must be posted only in the special boxes placed in the following establishments in London [where the Post Cards and Envelopes are on sale] on and from Friday, September 8th, 1911 :—

Arding & Hobbs, Ltd., Clapham Junction, S.W.
 John Barker & Co., Ltd., Kensington High Street, W.
 John Barnes & Co., Ltd., 191-217, Finchley Road, N.W.
 Benetink & Co., Ltd., 107, Cheapside, E.C.
 D. H. Evans & Co., Ltd., Oxford Street, W.
 A. W. Gamage & Co., Ltd., Holborn, E.C.
 Harrods, Ltd., Brompton Road, S.W.
 Selfridge & Co., Ltd., Oxford Street, W.
 William Whiteley, Ltd., Westbourne Grove, W.
 London Aerodrome, Hendon, N.W.
 Offices of the Aerial Post, General Buildings, Aldwych, W.C.

The Post Cards and Envelopes, which bear a copyright design of Windsor Castle, printed in brown, green or red, are issued stamped.

Postcards, stamped for Inland postage, price 6½d. each.
 Envelopes, do. do. do. 1/1 each.
 A sheet of Notepaper with special heading is supplied with each envelope.

Adhesive stamps must be affixed to make up the fee required for postage abroad.

Post Cards and Letters conveyed by Aerial Post will bear over the ordinary postage stamp a special post-mark "First United Kingdom Aerial Post," and the date. They will be collected from the special boxes referred to above, and conveyed to a central Post Office, and then be taken to the London Aerodrome for conveyance by aeroplane from London to Windsor, and thence will be despatched in the ordinary course to their destination in any part of the world to which they are addressed.

NO RESPONSIBILITY in respect of loss, damage, or delay will be undertaken by the Postmaster-General nor by the Honorary Organising Committee.

CAUTION.—Letters by Aerial Post cannot be registered. They must not contain coins or other valuables.

If the special Post Cards or Envelopes be posted in any other than the *Special Boxes* referred to in this notice, they will not be carried by the Aerial Service.

(courtesy Edward Proud – British Air-Mails)

Here is the story.

Commander Sir Walter Windham in 1911 had organised the first Official Air Service in the world, which took place in Allahabad in India.

That same year "1911" on his return to England he petitioned the Postmaster-General to let him run the first British Air Mail.

After considerable legal difficulties, it was agreed that envelopes and post cards, were to be sold at a fixed price of 1/1d, and 6 1/2d respectively, with postage rates remaining in accordance with the rates stipulated at that time, which was 1d for a letter and 1/2d for post card.

Additional stamps had to be put on for mail going overseas, as was the case with mail to MALTA – extra 1/2d.

An agreement was drawn up, that gave him the sole authority to carry the scheme into effect.

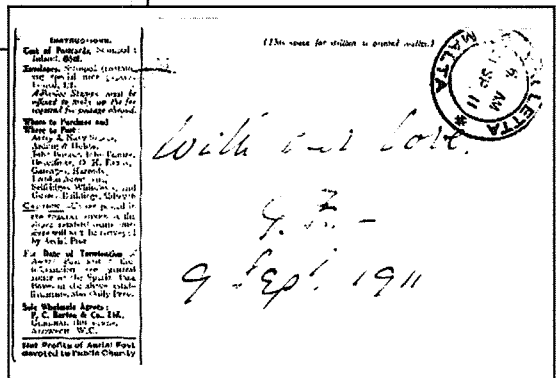
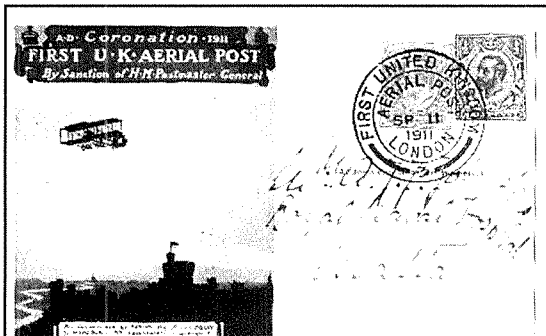
The purchaser could take these envelopes away, put on the accurate postage stamps, and post them in the special post boxes, which were constructed. The GPO could then collect the letters from these boxes and convey them, as they did to the Western Branch of the GPO, and there impress them with the double ring postmark

“**THE FIRST UNITED KINGDOM / AERIAL POST**”. From there, they could be taken from the GPO, to the flying ground at Hendon, and flown to Windsor Castle, where he had permission from His Majesty to land the mails.

The inaugural flight from London to Windsor, took place on **Saturday 9th September**, when Gustav Hamel, bravely took off, in a very high wind, carrying one bag of privileged mail weighing 23 1/2 lbs.

The first return flight from Windsor to London, was scheduled for Saturday 16th September, but a very strong wind prevented this, and the first flight took place the next day the 17th, Clement Greswell in a Bleriot monoplane, carrying bag No 1 containing 21lbs of mail.

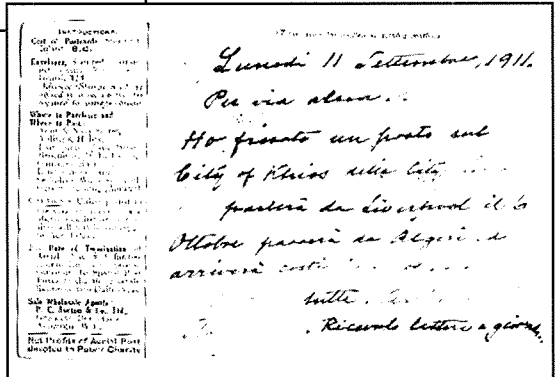
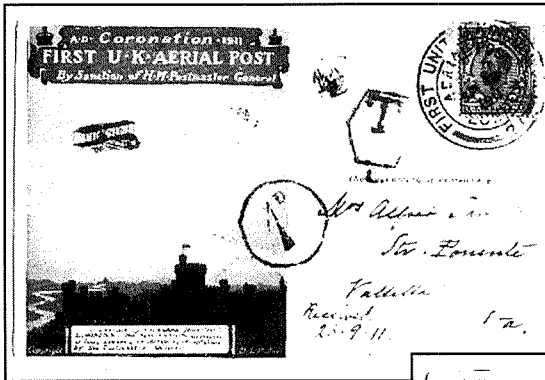
Sixteen flights from London to Windsor took place, in which 37 bags of mail were carried, and four flights, carrying a total of four bags from Windsor to London, the last flight from London to Windsor taking place on the 26th September 1911.



(courtesy T. Camilleri)

Card addressed to Malta, with additional 1/2d postage being extra rate for Malta, both stamps being tied with the commemorative hand stamp, the **First United Kingdom Aerial Post 11Sep 1911** arriving in Malta on the 21st September 1911.

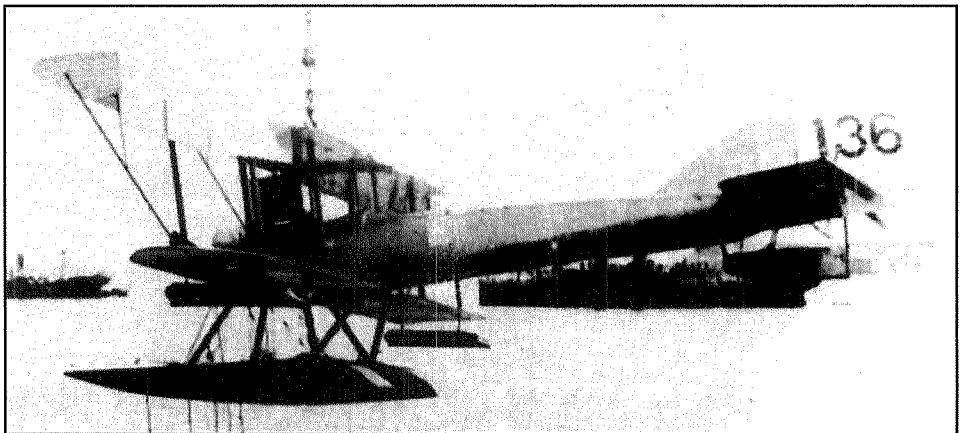
The 1/2d stamps are from different UK Reigns, one is that of King Edward, and the other the recently issued Harrison printing of KGV, which became quite rare.



(courtesy T. Camilleri)

This Card addressed to Malta should have had an extra 1/2d stamp, so 1d tax was applied. Posted in the UK on the 12th September, arrived in Malta on the 23rd September.

First recorded aeroplane take off from Malta, 13th February 1915.



First take off from Malta, Short Folder Type 135 sea plane with No. 136. (photo R. Caruana)

During the 1914-18 war, the Ark Royal, which had been quickly converted from a cargo ship to one carrying seaplanes, called at Malta, mooring in Bighi Creek, on the 12th February 1915, so that, before she continued her voyage to the Dardanelles, the seaplanes on board, could carry out sea trials in Malta.

So the first recorded aeroplane taking off from Malta, was a **Short Folder Type sea plane, Type 135, that bore No. 136 on its tail**, in the afternoon, of the 13th February 1915, piloted by **Capt C.F. Kilner**, taking off from Grand Harbour, flying for thirty five minutes. On returning back to the Ark Royal, while being hoisted on board, the aeroplane slipped back into the sea. The Pilot was not injured and the plane eventually lifted.

The next day a **Sopwith Folder Type 607, (No. 808)**, at 8.45 in the morning, took off for ten min, and on returning back to the Ark Royal, was hit by a heavy wave tilting the aeroplane to one side.

The Pilot and the plane were saved, the operation lasting over an hour.

The Ark Royal left Malta with its precious aeroplane cargo, that evening, arriving at its destination, the Dardanelles on the 16th February

This was the period, when the heroic New Zealand regiment, the ANZACS, suffered heavy casualties at Gallipoli, the wounded being transferred to Malta; Malta becoming the nurse of the Mediterranean.

The wounded were hospitalised all over the Island, but the main Hospitals for the Army were, Bruce Military Hospital at Mtarfa, and St Georges Hospital at Pembroke; and for the Navy - Bighi Hospital.

Kalafrana - Royal Navy (RN)

– SEA PLANE STATION

During this period the German U Boats, were gaining supremacy in the Mediterranean, laying mines, and sinking allied naval ships.

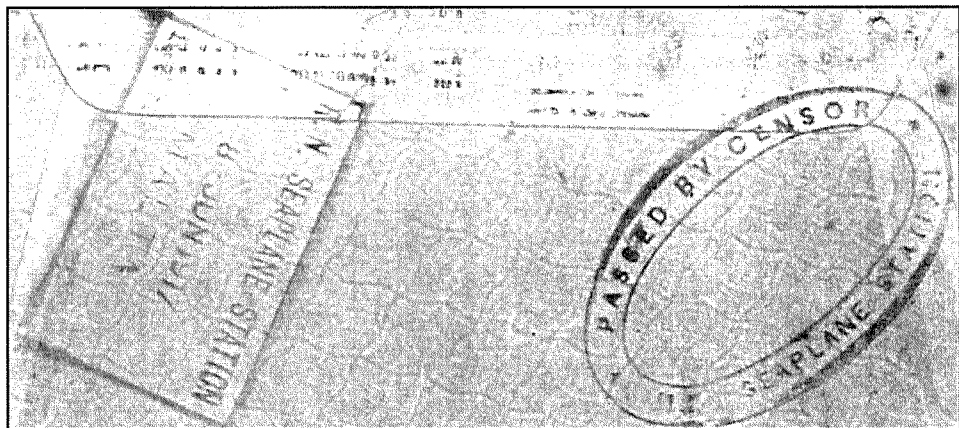
HMS Inflexible hit a mine, and HMS Majestic, Triumph, and Russell sunk

The Admiralty faced with such heavy loses in such a short time, authorised Squadron Commander Bowhill, to identify a place in Malta for the setting up of a reconnaissance anti submarine flying boat locality, and Kalafrana in Marsaxlokk Bay, being already used as a torpedo depot by the Admiralty, started operating as a **Royal Navy Sea Plane Base** in May 1916.

During July, five **Curtiss H-4** planes, arrived from Felixstowe, U.K., for the much needed reconnaissance, and anti submarine patrols, accompanied with nine Officers, two Warrant Officers, a considerable number of Engineers, all under the command of Flight Commander J.D. Maude.

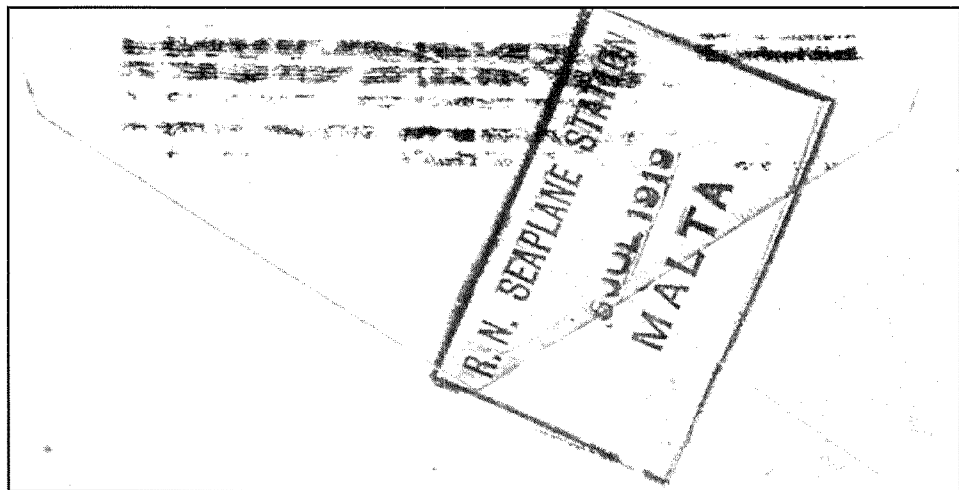
By now from the original five Curtiss, only three remained, and these were in March 1917, replaced by *float planes* **Short 164** which were transferred to Malta

from the Naval Air Station Dundee, and on the 27th June 1917, two *flying boats* FBAA arrived in Malta on board the “SS Isonzo” from Italy.



R.N. sea plane station 8th June 1917, and passed by censor sea plane station hand stamps.

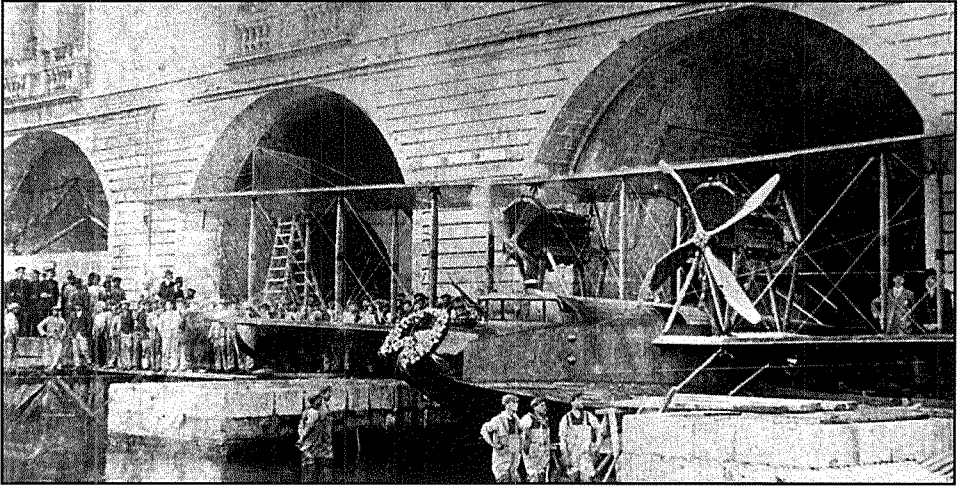
This cover addressed to the UK bearing a penny stamp, cancelled “RECEIVED FROM H.M.SHIP/ NO CHARGE TO BE RAISED”, bearing the rectangular cachet “R.N. SEA PLANE STATION/8 JUN 1917/ MALTA/ Ref.No.”, and PASSED BY CENSOR/ R.N. SEA PLANE STATION.



R.N. sea plane station 6th July 1917 hand stamp. (courtesy T. Camilleri)

All the covers I have seen bearing the “SEA PLANE STATION” cachet are addressed to the UK and the time taken to arrive there, suggest that they went there directly. However a cover is reputed to exist which went to Hong Kong, presumably via Egypt.

Felixstowe F 3, assembled at MALTA DRY DOCKS



First Felixstowe F3 built at Malta Dry Docks, November 1917. (photo R. Caruana)

The demand for more planes for the Central Mediterranean Station, operating from Kalafrana, was so great, that the U.K. could not meet with the demand, and so on the 3rd May 1917, it was decided to build twelve **Felixstowe F 3 Planes** at Malta Dry Docks.

The first **Felixstowe F 3 (N 4310)**, operating with Rolls Royce Eagle VIII engines, was completed in November 1917, moved to outside French Creek in Grand Harbour, from where it took off for Kalafrana.

Eventually twenty three of such aeroplanes were built in Malta Dry Docks.

Mr Carmelo Giuliano BEM, Departmental Manager Malta Dry-docks, passed the following information to Mr Karmenu Ellul, author of "The History of the Dry Docks", written in Maltese, saying,

“xoghol iehor li kien isir u li ghadu jissemma sal-lum hu dak tal-bini tas “sea planes”.

Dan ix-xoghol kien isir fil “Boat House”, kien isir mill injam, u strixxa ma’ ohra kienu jigu kklincjati. Il- bini ta dawn baqa’ sejjer sas-sena 1920.”

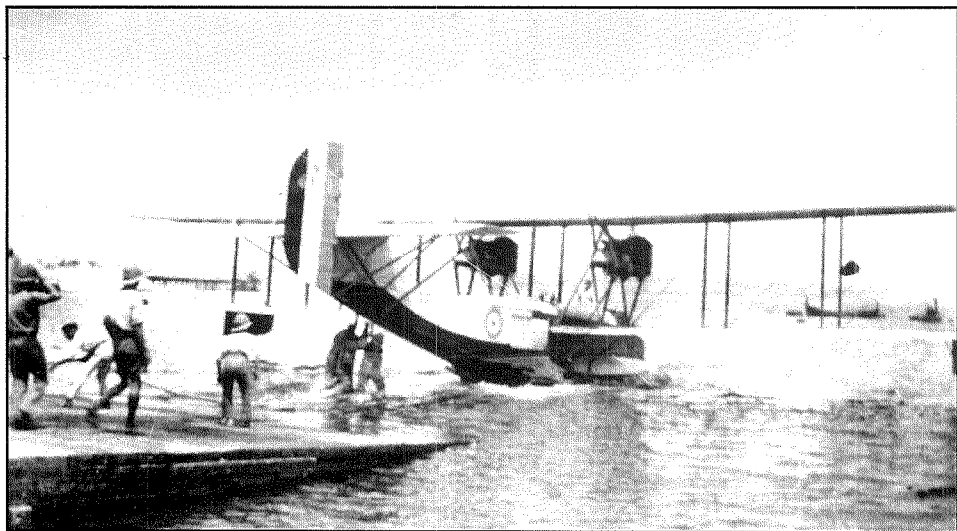
(Other work that used to be done, and is still being mentioned to-day, is that of the building of sea-planes. This work used to be carried out in the “Boat House”, until 1920, from wood, and the strips held together by stapling.)

My friend, Mr Michael Hull’s father, from Exeter, served at the Kalafrana station

in Malta during this period, and he has kindly sent me the following photos, which are being reproduced.



*1917-1919 Naval and Air Force Officers who served in the Kalafrana base.
(courtesy Mr. M. Hull)*



One of the Felexstone F3 Flying boats built at Malta Dry Docks, going down the slip way in Kalafrana. (courtesy Mr. M. Hull)

Originally the command of the Kalafrana station, at Marsaxlokk bay, together with that of Otranto, was under the direction of Commander Murray Seuter RN, and when the Air Force Constitution Bill was passed in the British Parliament on the 29th November 1917, and the RAF becoming effective on the 1st April 1918, the RAF Malta station was set up, Malta became the RAF Head Quarters, in the Mediterranean, passing into the hands of Wing Commander HM Cave – Brown and a Royal Air Force Sea Plane Base hand stamp was used together with the previously used RN hand stamp.

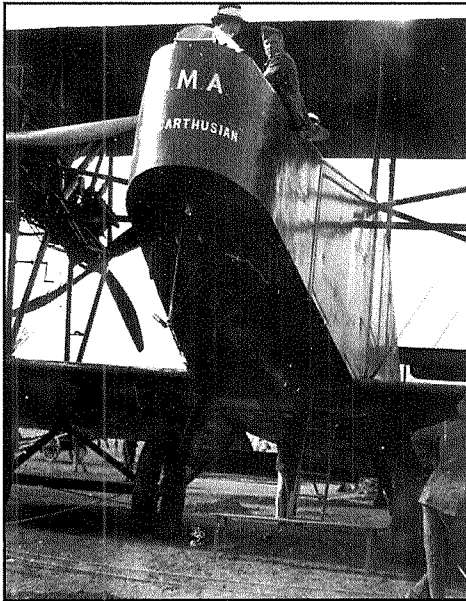
ROYAL AIR FORCE
SEAPLANE BASE
MALTA

A number of former Naval facilities were transferred to the newly-formed service, including the seaplane base at Kalafrana, the dockyard construction facility, and a balloon hanger unit on Manoel Island, behind the Lazaretto, known as the “Kite Balloon Base No 1”, which had been set up, under the direction of Wing Commander. H. Delacombe, fully equipped to house, maintain, and fill with gas.

These balloons were called by the Maltese *balloon barrages*, did not carry observers or passengers, and were moored in such a way, as to be on top of strategic places, or ships, as a defence from aerial bombardment.

A Metrological Office, attached to the already existing observatory facilities at the Royal University of Malta in Valletta, was set up, and the Kalafrana command passed into the hands of Colonel Randall.

First Temporary land landing strip – MARSALA



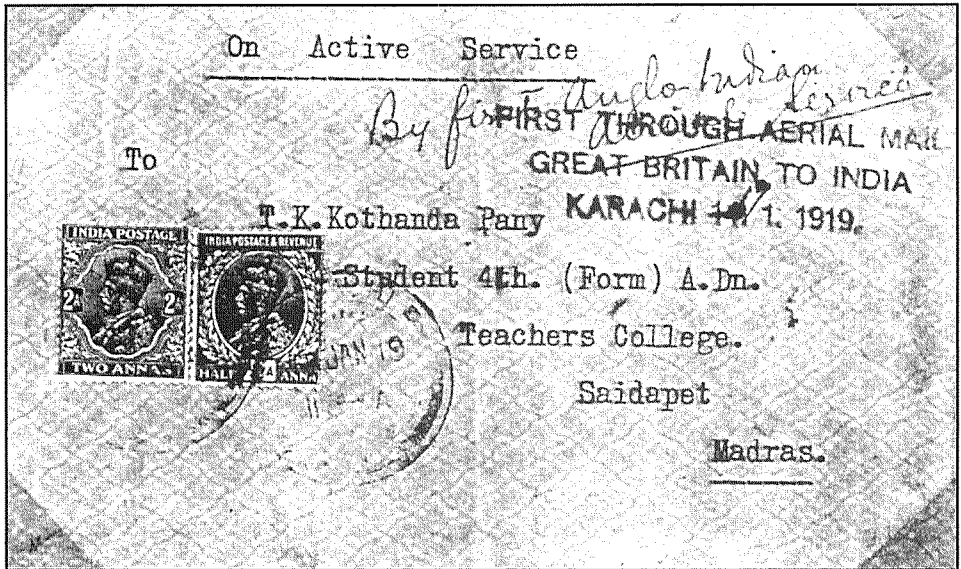
*Old Carthusian (J1936)
(photo R. Caruana)*

The base at Kalafrana had the disadvantage that it could not operate when the sea was rough, and so Marsa sports grounds, at that time in the hands of the Services, became the First temporary land, landing strip, to be used, by aeroplanes using wheels.

It is recorded that on the 21st December 1918, a **Handley Page V/ 15000** under the command of Major A.S. Maclaren, named **OLD CARTHUSIAN**, (J1936) and nicknamed the “*MONSTER*” by the Maltese, as reported in the Daily Malta Chronicle, of the 23rd December, landed at Marsa, on its way to Karachi, via Mersa Metruh, Helipolis, Baghdad, El Amara, Bandar Abbas, Jask Ormara,

arriving in Karachi on the 16th January 1919.

Mail from the UK, and mail from other localities was on board, but no mail from Malta, has been recorded so far, as having been picked up, a special hand stamp was applied at Karachi.



Mail from UK carried on this flight. (courtesy T. Camilleri)

According to the Manager of the Aviation Dept of Vickers Ltd, a Vickers Vimy commercial aeroplane with passengers on board, arrived at Marsa on the 29th January 1920, Piloted by Capt S. Cockerell, and Capt C. Broom. D.F.C..

This was the Times Africa Aerial Exploration Expedition flight, and as far as I know, there are no records that mail was picked up on this flight.

HAL FAR Airport

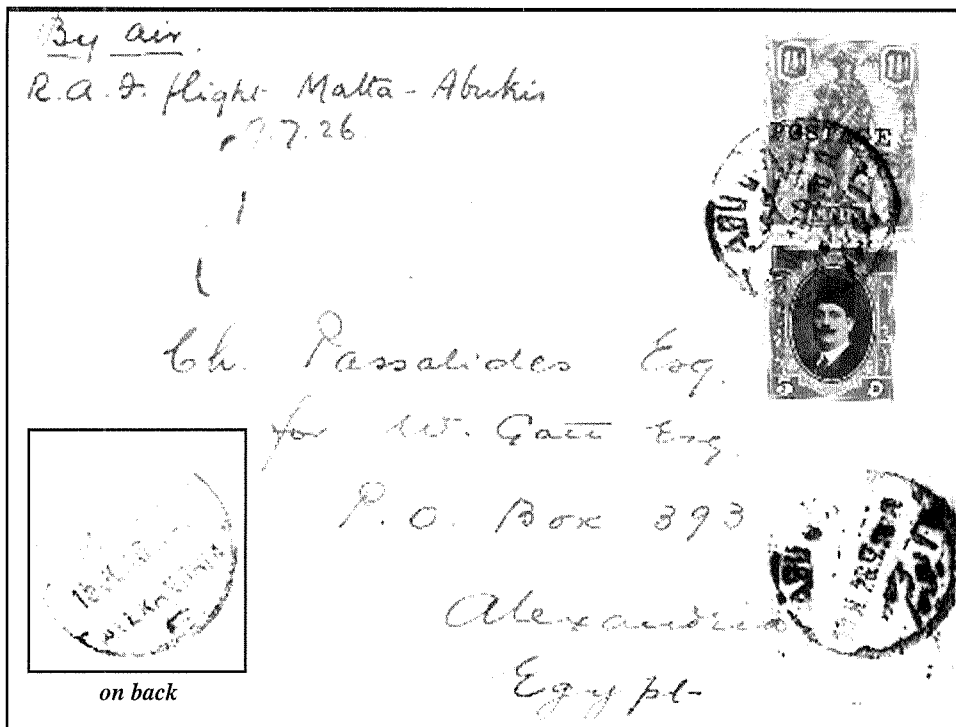
The next Official First Air Port constructed in this period was that of **Hal Far**, inaugurated by Governor Field Marshall Lord Plumer, Commander in Chief of Malta's Armed Forces, on the 11th January 1923.

From here, all aerial training manoeuvres were organised.

Every year air shows were held and Hal Far became the Military as well as Civilian Air Field, at that time, for both private and commercial aircraft.

First recorded mail from MALTA

The first recorded mail carried by air was that carried on one of a **Supermarine Southampton flying boat**, leaving Plymouth on the 1st July 1926, for Abukir Egypt via Kalafrana Malta, arriving on the 6th July, and leaving on the 9th, via Benghazi Sollum, arriving in Abukir in Egypt on the 10th July.



RAF flight Malta - Abukir 9.7.26. (courtesy T. Camilleri)

Mail was picked up from Malta, and a surviving letter has the manuscript information, "By Air/RAF Flight Malta-Abukir/9.7.26" and bearing a 1 1/2d Melita Malta stamp, but not cancelled in Malta. It was posted when it arrived in Abukir on the 10th July, and an additional 5mil Egyptian stamp added, for onward transmission to Alexandria, arriving on the 15th July.

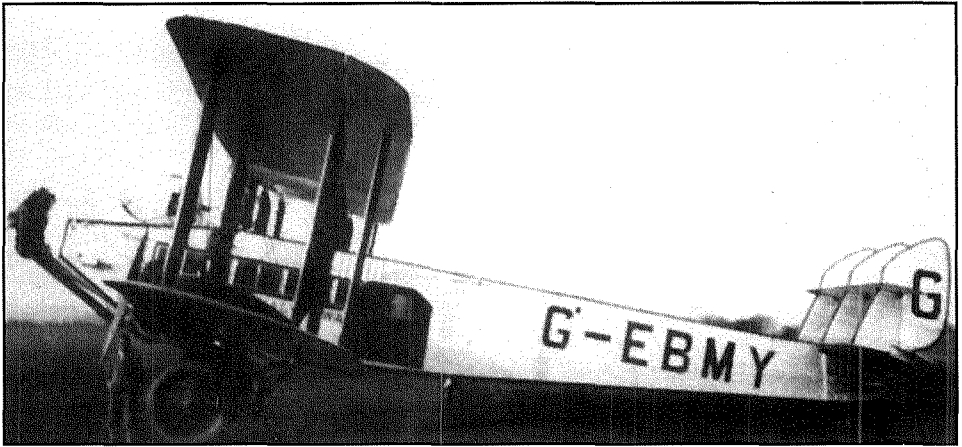
First Private Pilots to land in Malta - 1926

1926 Hal Far - Malta, saw the landing of the First Private Pilots, T.N. Stack, and B.S. Leete, belonging to the Lancashire Aero Club, UK, each piloting a **De Havilland D.H. Moth aircraft**, on their way to Iraq.

As far as I am aware no commemorative flight covers were carried on this flight, or have come to light so far.

First Commercial Flight UK MALTA - 22nd December 1926

The first commercial flight, from UK to Malta, took place on the 22nd December 1926, when two **DeHavilland DH66 Hercules (G-EBMY and G-EBMW)** of



First commercial flight UK - Malta DeHavilland DH66 Hercules (G-EBMY) (photo R. Caruana)

Imperial Airways with paying passengers on board, including Air Vice Marshal Sir Sefton Brackmer, the Director of the UK Civil Aviation, landed at Hal Far Airport, on its way to Cairo, Egypt, from where the extension to Karachi had to take place.

In fact G-EMBW had been named *City of Cairo*.

A week later, another aeroplane (**G-EMBX**), having on board the UK Prime Minister Sir Samuel Hoare, also on its way to Cairo, landed at Hal Far

No commemorative covers have been recorded so far, as coming to Malta, or from Malta, on these flights.

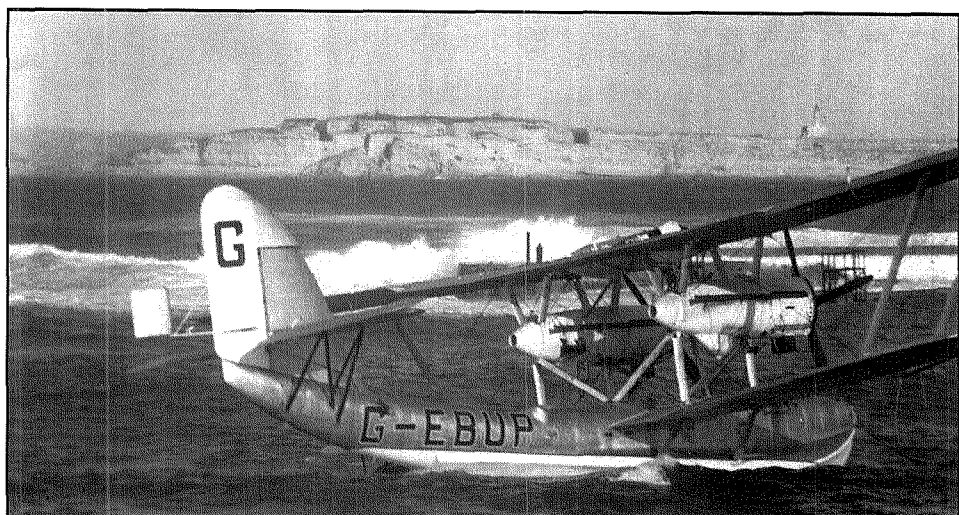
Sir Alan Cobham



No doubt Sir Alan Cobham's "**SHORT SINGAPORE**" stop at Malta on his way to Africa, on the 17th November 1927, deserves special mention, as it was indeed a historical event.

Sir Alan accompanied by his wife Lady Cobham, Capt Worrall, as assistant Pilot, Green a Rolls Royce Engineer, Conway assistant Engineer, and Bonnett as Cine Photographer, left Rochester, UK, on the 17th November 1927, arriving in Malta from Ajaccio in a storm, at 5pm of the 24th November 1927.

Waiting for him at Kalafrana, were journalists, and the Hon. Minister for Industry and Commerce, Judge Alfred Parnis, with instructions from the UK Secretary of State, to give Cobham all assistance possible.



Sir Alan Cobham's "Short Singapore". (photo R. Caruana)

They waited up to 8.30pm, for the arrival of "*Short Singapore*" in vain, as Cobham at 5.15 pm in darkness, spotting, HMS Queen Elizabeth's lights in St Paul's Bay, landed next to it, and he and his colleagues spent the night on HMS Elizabeth, flying to Marsaxlokk the next morning, where because of bad weather the aeroplane, had to be towed to Kalafrana. On its way there, near the Delimara lighthouse, a big wave caused considerable damage to the right float, and they had to seek shelter under the cliffs of Delimara, waiting until the 29th November, when it could be towed to Kalafrana.

Damage caused was severe and spare parts had to be brought to Malta from the UK.

During his enforced stay in Malta, Sir Cobham was requested by the Malta Government under Prime Minister Sir Gerald Strickland (1927-30) to draw up proposals for the construction of a proper Air Port.

On the 28th November 1927, Sir Gerald proposed the suspension of the standing orders, of the Legislative Assembly, so that a Committee of the House could be set up, to debate Civil Aviation in Malta, with the financial help of the Services, so that Malta could become a staging post for Air Traffic originating from the UK to other destinations, namely India and Africa.

Sir Ugo Mifsud, spokesmen for the Opposition, did not agree with the idea of involving the military, as they already had the experience of Hal Far which had existed since 1923 where Military Aviation matters were given priority. The time he said, "had come for the separation of Military from Civilian Aviation, and it was their duty to promote Civilian Aviation to help Malta's economy."

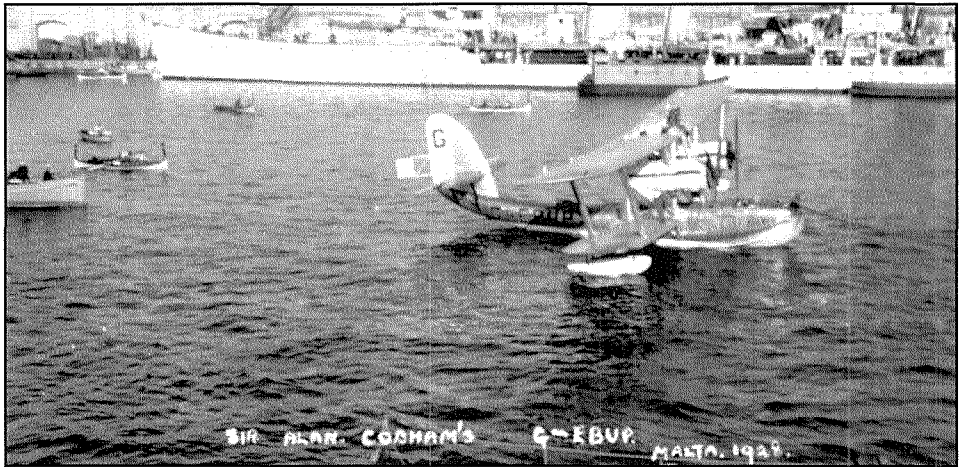
He suggested that as Sir Alan Cobham, one of the foremost pioneers of Civil Aviation was in Malta at that time, he should be requested to draw up a report for such a purpose, and submit it, to the Malta Legislative Assembly, for its consideration

On the 1st December 1927 Sir Alan Cobham met Members of both the Legislative assembly and the Senate together, in a historic meeting in the Tapestry Chamber.

Sir Gerald Strickland Prime Minister introduced Sir Cobham to them, who presented a detailed review of the great future that Civil Aviation had, the cost, and the possibility of Malta becoming the centre of Air Traffic between the UK and other promising destinations. He offered to tour the Island and come up with definite proposals. His final report bearing the date of the 4th January 1928 was published in the Government Gazette, and the Daily Malta Chronicle of the 23/24th January 1928.

It is pertinent to point out the great foresight that Cobham had in 1927, as when Official Aerodromes were constructed in Malta years later, both military and Civilian, they were all constructed on sites that Cobham had indicated.

Sir Alan Cobham and his crew, left Malta on Saturday the 21st January 1928, at 8am, from Grand Harbour, the bastions being full of Maltese waving him good bye, for Benghasi, and onwards round Africa.



Sir Alan Cobham taking off from Grand Harbour in 1928. (courtesy A. Fenech)

He had liked his first Malta visit so much that he returned again on the 25th July 1931 on his plane which he named “VALETTA”

In the Malta Government Gazette of the 20th and 28th March 1928, it was announced that Official Post from Malta was to begin on the 1st April 1928

A DH 66 Hercules, aeroplane was used. But this is another Chapter and I will talk about it in a future chapter.