

# How Malta unfailingly jinxed Sir Alan Cobham



GIOVANNI BONELLO

Malta and Alan Cobham were not compatible. The ace aviator's encounters with the Maltese islands almost invariably ended in near-disaster, though he does not seem to have held that against the island or its inhabitants. I'll wade through that doomed relationship between one of the world's greatest airmen and Malta, as this has not, as far as I could ascertain, been recorded so far.

Sir Alan Cobham belongs squarely to legend. In the inter-war years his name had become a household word. His flying records, his pluck, his resilience, his inspired vision during what could still be considered the pioneer years of 'open cockpit' aviation, earned him a place at the very top among the elite aviators in history.

Alan Cobham was born on May 6, 1894. In World War I he joined the Royal Flying Corps, and distinguished himself through a compulsive interest in long-distance aviation. After the end of the war he had already established his exceptional reputation in a firmament teeming with heroic daredevils on both sides of the combat divide.

For his achievements and his exploits, King George V knighted him in 1926. Apart from his legendary feats, his most lasting legacies to the growth of air travel were probably his pioneering belief in the future of civil, as different from military, aviation, and his placing long-distance in-flight refuelling on a secure technical footing.

Malta features more than once in Cobham's colourful and adventurous life – and never happily. Several sources document his Malta connections, though the National Archives in Rabat seem to be entirely silent about him, and this possibly because his Malta misadventures may have been recorded in the more secret 'military' files which the imperial government did not leave behind after Independence in 1964.

But anyway, plenty of alternative sources fill in those blanks.

I have relied to some extent on Cobham's (edited and abridged) autobiography *A Time to Fly*, published posthumously in 1978 by Christopher H. Derrick, sadly crippled by the absence of an index. A chatty, racy, candid memoir, sometimes mischievously humorous, in which the author bares his soul, spreading equally across the pages both pride in successes and humility in failures.

His clinical depressions, his triumphs, his touching veneration for his adored wife the actress Gladys Lloyd, jostle for space. An overall stinginess in giving away precise dates detracts very little from the authenticity of the narrative.

Cobham's first significant encounter with Malta happened in 1927. He was piloting his then favourite aircraft, the Short S.5 Singapore model, a large seaplane powered by two Rolls-Royce Condor engines, claimed to be the "only all-metal flying boat in the world", which the pilot described as "a heavy laborious aircraft to fly; we had endless petty difficulties with adverse weather and difficult moorings and – on several occasions – with boats that threatened to ram us".

His wife Gladys accompanied him for the first time ever, together with Captain Worrall, engineers F. Green, C. E. Conway and cameraman S. R. Bonnett. They were heading for a survey flight round Africa, to explore the possibilities of a new airline of giant flying boats from Cairo to Cape Town and from there up the west coast of Africa to England.

Cobham left Rochester on November 17, and, because of the Malta debacle, reached the Cape on March 30 the following year. He returned to Rochester on June 4.

They left Ajaccio in Corsica and headed for Malta on November 24. No reliable weather forecast warned him what was in store. "Headwinds delayed us, and it was almost dark when we touched down alongside HMS *Queen Elizabeth* in St Paul's Bay. We tied up astern of her, and were welcomed on board for dinner; the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Roger Keyes, (later Admiral of the Fleet), offered my wife the hospitality of his quarters aboard. So far, so good."

On arrival, the local press waxed ecstatic about Cobham: "one of the most outstanding

figures in the world of aviation". The papers also reveal the first hitch: Cobham had announced he would be landing at Kalafrana, so all the VIPs flocked there to greet him. They waited and waited, but seeing darkness fall, Cobham changed his plans and landed in St Paul's Bay instead. In the following issue, the paper revealed that when in Malta, the Cobhams stayed at the Osborne Hotel in Valletta.

That, sadly ended his run of good fortune. Gladys went ashore the following day, to explore Malta by car, and the sightseeing spared her the subsequent disaster. "Rather foolishly" Sir Alan decided to fly the aircraft to the Kalafrana seaplane base, on the southeastern side of the island, to refuel before resuming his flight to Benghazi. He failed to factor in the gale-force southeasterly that was blowing.

**"The pilots had been instructed to shoot him down if he gave any sign of turning back to Malta..."**

The next day Cobham took off from St Paul's Bay and touched down in St George's Bay (the Kalafrana inlet below St George's chapel, not the one next to St Julian's). Owing to the heavy swell, his aircraft had to be towed laboriously to its moorings a long distance away. The towboat "foolishly pulled us sideways on to this. The wing dipped horribly and, before we knew where we were, the starboard float had been wrenched off".

Three men immediately rushed out on to the port lower wing to keep the boat more or less balanced and stable. In that precarious condition they were towed to some sort of safety. They moored the damaged flying boat in the raging gale with a load of sandbags on its port wing.

"The high winds and the rough seas continued for days, giving us no possibility of beaching the Singapore for repairs without damaging it badly." They had a pleasant lunch with

the Governor, General Sir John Philip Du Cane, but medium-rare protein hardly helped the stricken aircraft. The weather only worsened and the seas mounted higher. Soon the portside float became waterlogged and broke off too. The port wing went under in spite of a number of RAF men piling their weight on the starboard wing. They decided to try to beach the injured boat at any cost.

"It was dragged up a slipway on its keel by no fewer than 300 men, after the failure of a first attempt to drag it up on a trolley. The operation was indescribably wet and cold and noisy and violent, and it cost us the starboard lower wing and an elevator, though the strength of the keel meant that the hull got away fairly lightly."

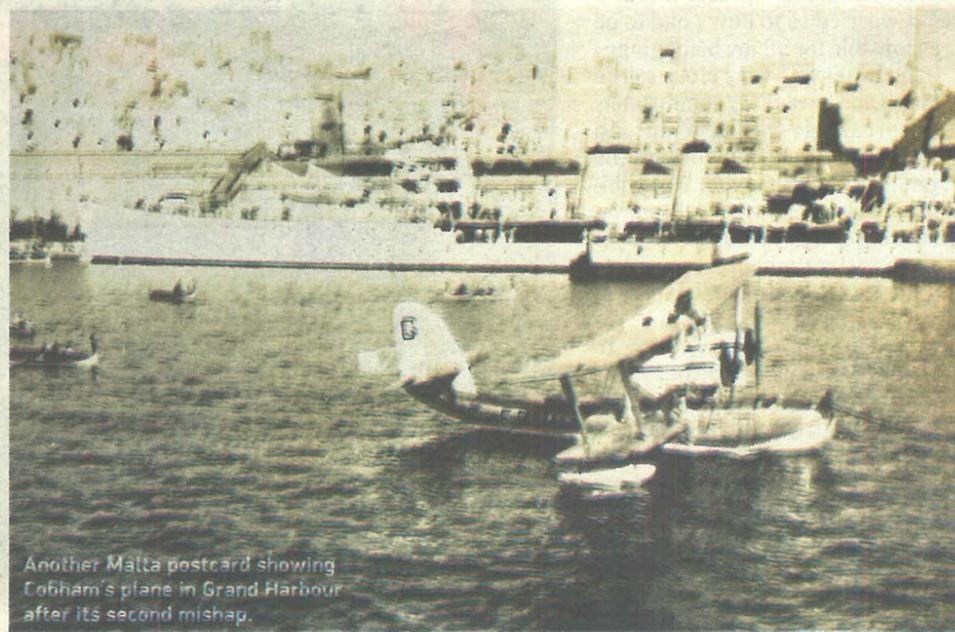
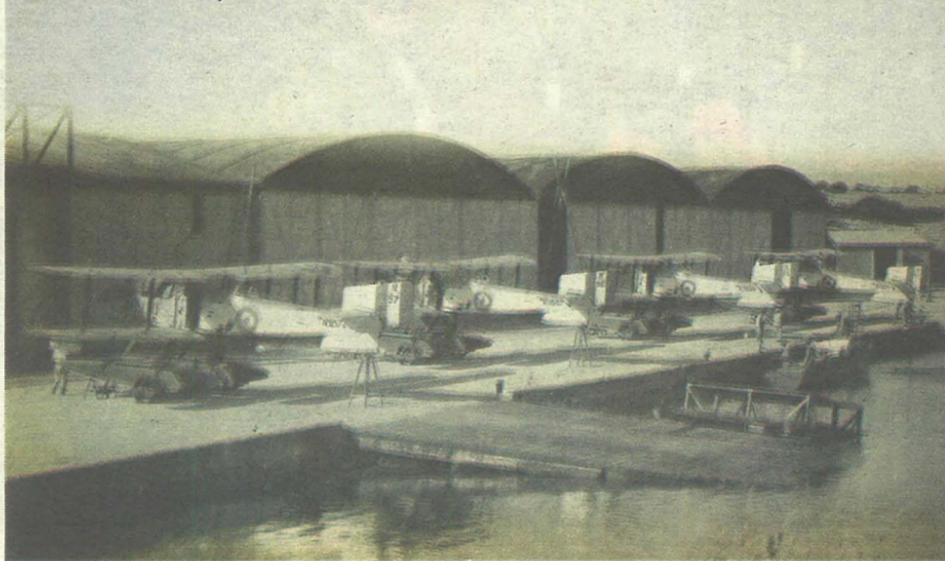
The papers carried a press release from Royal Fleet Auxiliary headquarters, Malta, describing in some detail the mishap, and announcing that Cobham's flight would be delayed by "a few weeks". In a later edition, an eyewitness recounted in great detail how the storms buffeted the aircraft and the heroic efforts required to salvage it. The accident, the author said, served as an eye-opener for the urgent need of a civil aerodrome in Malta.

Cobham cabled Rochester to send a new wing for the plane, and this reached Malta on December 26; in the idle interval they carried out all the other repairs and also "sampled the extremely colourful social life in Malta", no doubt at its peak around Christmas time. By early January the engineers made the plane airworthy again, and Cobham tried some test flights and gave free joy-rides to Sir Roger Keyes, to Clarke Hall, the Air Commodore commanding, and some others.

They were now all set to go, but on the eve of their departure, the din of another gale woke Sir Alan up at night, and news reached him that the Singapore had broken loose from its moorings and had been swept ashore in St George's Bay. He instantly went down to see, cursing under his breath. He found the plane beached, thankfully not on the rocky side of the bay "its nose towards the sea, its tail hanging over a four-foot sea wall and with frightful waves threatening it with total destruction at any minute".

That was at 3am. It took them all day till night-time to get the plane secured in a more sheltered part of the bay. "The intervening

The sea-plane station in Kalafrana in the early 1930s.



Another Malta postcard showing Cobham's plane in Grand Harbour after its second mishap.



Sir Alan Cobham (1894-1973)

difficulties were indescribable." Furious waves punctured the brand-new starboard float and it became waterlogged and useless. They replaced it with the old one, hurriedly repaired. This operation, always difficult, became impossibly so during a gale.

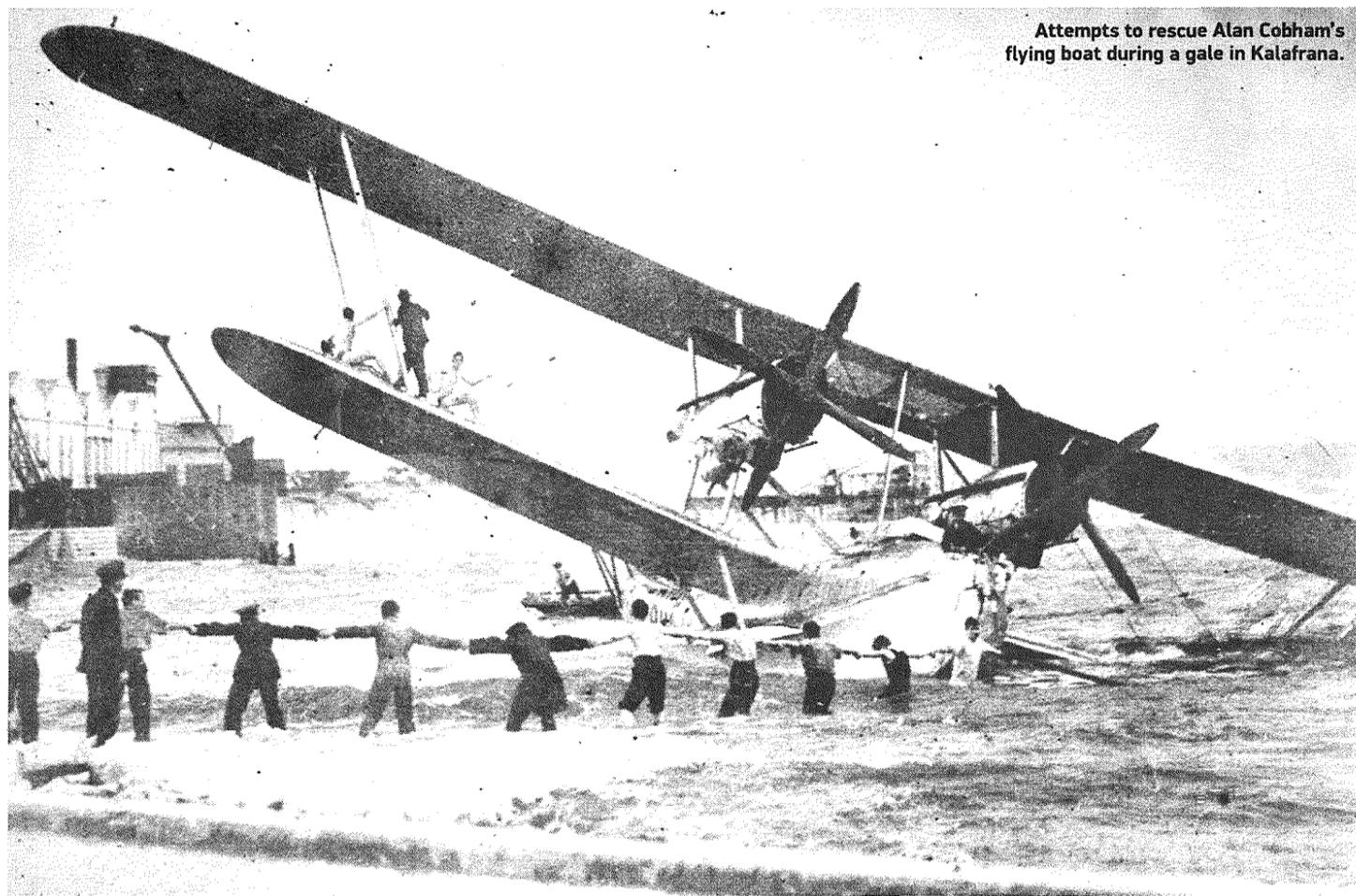
They tried to get the flying boat off the beach, using a towboat and the full power of the aircraft's engines. But the hawser snapped, leaving Cobham almost out of control while the gale howled and the waves crashed all over.

A new line had somehow to be got to them. Four men came out on a skiff and ended practically sucked into the propellers. Some fell in the sea and narrowly escaped drowning. But one managed to cling to the nose of the Singapore and also to the line. "It was only because of his heroism that I eventually found myself pulled slowly to safety."

The following day the sun shone brightly and Cobham flew the craft to Grand Harbour, where cranes lifted the airplane out of the water to be repaired again. On January 21 he and Gladys bid their farewells and took off for Benghazi, waved off from the island by a surprise formation of RAF aircraft as escorts. He heard that the pilots had been instructed to shoot him down if he gave any sign of turning back to Malta...

"The Maltese episode," Cobham concluded "served as a reminder that aircraft - especially flying boats and seaplanes - were still very much at the mercy of the weather... and at the mercy of their own technical imperfection."

Cobham's pains turned into Malta's gains. In his forced and prolonged stay in Malta the restless pilot did not waste his time. He drafted an extremely detailed report on the advantages of Malta as a hub for worldwide air routes. Criss-crossing Malta by car and by plane, accompanied by the Minister for Industry and Commerce (presumably



Attempts to rescue Alan Cobham's flying boat during a gale in Kalafrana.

Dr Alfred Parnis), he identified the best places on the island to build airports and flying-boat stations. It is an absolutely captivating report - pioneering, visionary, and down-to-earth. He believed in Malta's untapped potential, and the future proved him right.

That precious account, now almost forgotten, published under the prophetic title 'Malta's opportunities as a great airport', would need a study and a celebration on its own. Today's Malta International Airport is ultimately the brainchild of Alan Cobham. But strangely you will not find any trace of this in his published memoirs.

Maltese postcard publishers could not resist the urge to cash in on the high-profile calamity. Almost concurrently, different editors released at least two postcards. One showed 'Sir Alan Cobham's Seaplane at Kalafrana, Malta', while the other had 'Sir Alan. Cobham's G-EBUP. Malta. 1928' in Grand Harbour, ready to take off. Both are today extremely rare.

Was this the end of Cobham's jinxed connection with Malta? Hardly. After the two frightening experiences in the island, the ace aviator had to face a third scary misadventure in Malta. On September 22, 1934, he was flying an Airspeed Courier with Squadron Leader William Helmore on his way from Britain to Karachi to demonstrate the feasibility and advantages of inflight refuelling "an

experiment of immense value". Cobham took on fuel and provisions in the skies over Malta.

Then something petrifying happened. "I found that the throttle lever was loose in my hand: I could move it backwards and forwards without any effect. I had no control whatever over the engine. I turned back at once... we slowly lost power and soon I found myself gliding in with the prospect of landing in some very small, stone-walled field".

This would be difficult at any time, but with the fuel tanks now full to the brim "any crash-landing would be followed at once by fire and probably explosion". Stretching to the utmost all his skills and sangfroid, he managed to belly-land the aircraft at Hal Far, shattering only the propeller in the process. In the face of death, "Cobham and Helmore stepped from the machine unharmed, as unflurried as if they had stepped from a train".

How had this come to pass? An examination of the engine immediately showed gross negligence in the maintenance of the aircraft. A cotter pin that held the throttle linkage had fallen out. This should have been held in place by a split pin that had never been inserted at all. "It was a criminal oversight and neither the work inspectors nor the AID had noticed it." Had the cotter pin failed when flying over the sea or through the clouds hiding the mountains of France, the consequences would undoubtedly have been lethal. "It was

a matter of a second or two which might have brought this experimental flight to a disastrous conclusion." The onward journey to Karachi had to be aborted and a crestfallen Cobham lingered in Malta up to October 10.

If the flight over Malta ended in near disaster, very real tragedy dogged Cobham that very same day. The W.10 aircraft that had refuelled them in mid-air after take-off at Portsmouth, suffered structural failure on its return and crashed, killing the whole crew of four.

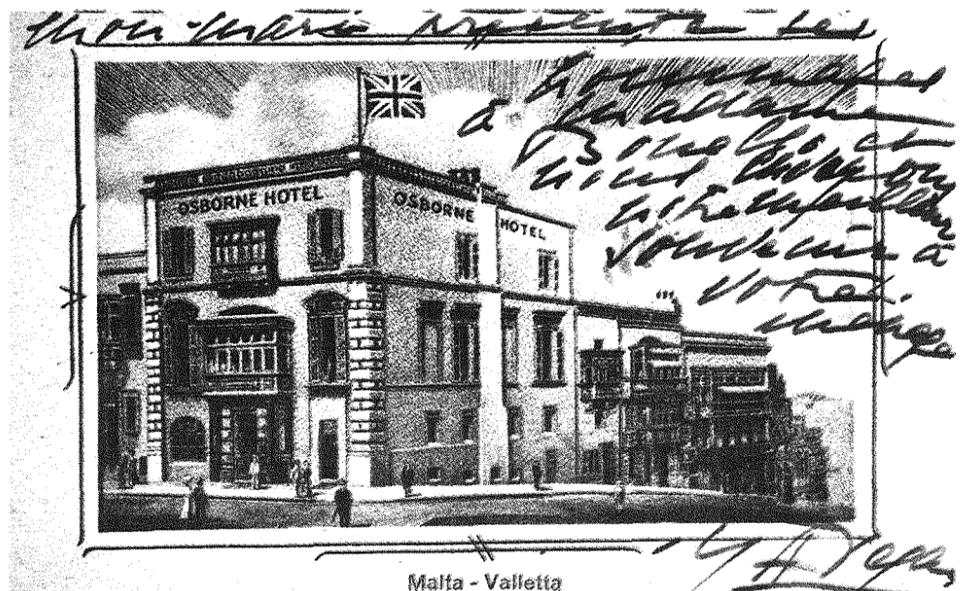
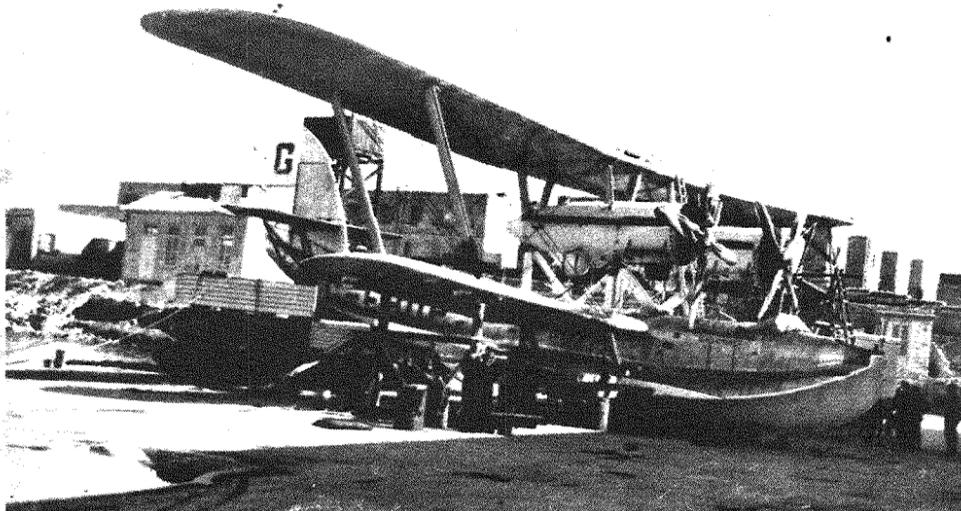
And the end of the Short Singapore seaplane, made famous by Cobham, had yet another tragic Malta connection. On February 15, 1935, Singapore seaplane K3595 crashed into the Peloritani mountains near Messina. All the crew and passengers were killed - eight RAF personnel including the half-brother of the First Sea Lord David Beatty, and a civilian senior technical officer. The Air Force brought their bodies over to Malta where they were solemnly buried in the Capuchins' Naval Cemetery near Kalkara.

Gladys Lloyd Cobham died on October 19, 1961, and her husband Sir Alan, on October 21, 1973. Two beautiful lives, beautifully spent.

**Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Leonard Callus and Maroma Camilleri. All images are from the author's collection.

Postcard showing Cobham's flying boat in Kalafrana, issued in Malta.



Malta - Valletta

The Osborne Hotel in Valletta where Sir Alan and Lady Cobham stayed during their delay in Malta.