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INVITED FOREWORD: MALTA AIR TRAFFIC SERVICES



2020 started as a normal year. The prospects were of yet another record-breaking year both in terms of terminal and en route traffic in the Malta FIR. The anticipated challenges were immense, executing projects and implementing technology that provides additional air traffic capacity without jeopardising the continuous progress in increasing safety levels. With the start of a reference period and a performance regulation mandating highly ambitious cost-efficiency targets, this was not going to be an easy year. It turned out, however, that 2020 will be remembered as the year when life as we knew it changed...

News of the novel coronavirus spreading in Wuhan made the headlines in January. Subsequently, all of us in the aviation industry were following closely what was happening in Asia, horrified with the impact this was causing to air traffic. It did not take long, however, until we started feeling the brunt in Europe. It took only a few weeks, before the European traffic fell to 10% of 2019 levels. The aviation industry had never experienced such a hard-hitting global crisis since World War II.

But what did this mean for Malta Air Traffic Services (MATS) Ltd – the small ANSP providing air navigation services in the Malta FIR? What were the challenges?

As a small island nation with a single airport, Malta's economy depends heavily on air connectivity. It was crucial, therefore, that no matter what the situation, MATS needed to ensure a continuous service. The pandemic, however, brought with it two major challenges: the risk of infection of MATS staff that could compromise continuity of service and the drop in revenue due to the slump in air traffic.

At the start of the pandemic, a crisis management team was quickly set up. The major decisions that were taken at the time were to introduce several measures to minimise the risk of infection and revise

Company contingency plans to adapt to the unfolding situation. Operational staff rosters were modified with the objective to minimise the complement of personnel working in close (but necessary) proximity to each other and limiting to an absolute minimum the mixing of staff between watches, having standby units at home in case they need to be called in urgently and setting arrangements with fumigation companies for emergency call-ins in case of suspected COVID-19 cases, amongst others. All this was possible with the minimal traffic that was being serviced and it also contributed to much needed savings in operational costs. Operational training was halted. Major cost-cutting was achieved through the postponement of all non-essential projects.

Four months passed, quickly but painfully, and the relaxation of air travel measures were welcomed. Commercial traffic started picking up again, despite a slow

pace. Yet again, new challenges were encountered – with an increase in traffic, rosters needed to be revisited, training had to resume and with the knowledge that the virus will be with us for a while yet, projects had to be restarted. This time, however, we knew this day was coming and we had long been preparing for it. A key advantage was also the fact that we had accustomed and adapted ourselves and our lives to live with COVID-19. Once again, we made the necessary changes and we continue learning as we move along.

All this was possible with the professionalism and flexibility of MATS management and staff. We look forward to the days when COVID-19 is no longer a concern, when air traffic starts hitting records again, when the challenges we were accustomed to return. It will take a while, but I am confident that we will get there with patience and perseverance! 

Kenneth Chircop was born in 1982. He studied engineering at the University of Malta and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering in 2004. He started his professional career researching avionics systems at Cranfield University, UK. He moved to the industry in 2005, where he spent more than three years at Hunt Engineering UK Ltd., developing high-speed electronic systems for a range of industrial applications. In 2008, Kenneth returned to Malta to join the Department of Electronics Systems Engineering at the University of Malta, during which time he obtained his Ph.D. in aircraft trajectory optimisation techniques and worked towards the setting up of the Institute of Aerospace Technologies within the same university. In May 2016, Kenneth moved back to the industry to take up the position of Chief Executive Officer of Malta Air Traffic Services (MATS). Kenneth lives in the small village of Haż-Żebbug, a few minutes away from Malta International Airport, with his wife and their two children.