



A Miracle in Malta

A True Story By Curt is Jerry Smothers

Plans for a Reunion

In 1971, I was a Navy warrant officer in the Engineering Department aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Forrestal*. We were on a Mediterranean cruise, and I was especially looking forward to our port call at Malta. My wife, Jean, was staying with her parents in London and planned to meet me there.

After months apart, we would have five days together. It sounded simple enough.

A Breakdown in Communications

In those days, staying in touch meant letters, telephone calls, or telegrams. There were no cellphones or text messages to clear up a change of plans. What I could have done with a MacBook back then!

When we anchored off Malta, a British communications workers' strike had disrupted telephone service, leaving me unable to reach Jean. I went to the hotel and waited. A full day passed, and she hadn't arrived. With no word from her, I finally concluded that something had prevented her from coming.

I had five days of authorized leave and wasn't about to spend them alone. I checked out, took a cab to the airport, and decided to fly to London.

A Tap on the Shoulder

Standing in the ticket line, I was calculating the hole an unexpected airfare would make in my vacation budget when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around.

There stood Jean—my beautiful English Rose and wife of six years. Surprise gave way to joy and relief. Instead of boarding a plane, I headed back to the hotel with my wife. Our days exploring Malta's sights and history became a second honeymoon.

A Second Honeymoon

Our days together in Malta became a second honeymoon. We explored the sights of Valletta, toured the Grand Harbour, and visited a factory famous for its Maltese lace. After months apart, simply being together made every outing special.

We even slipped into a movie matinee to watch Charlton Heston take on the bad gorillas in *Planet of the Apes*. Grand scenery, famous Maltese delicate lace, and hostile apes—we managed quite a variety in those few days! The Maltese Grand Harbour tour was another highlight of our days in Malta before their government withdrew from NATO and closed the island to U.S. Navy ships.

The Near Miss

Only afterward did we piece together how narrowly we had avoided missing each other. Jean's original flight had been delayed. She had arrived about an hour before I reached the airport, exhausted from an all-day journey. Before trying to contact me at the hotel, she decided to sit down and collect herself.

An insistent taxi driver had approached her outside the luggage area, hoping for a quick fare into town. She declined and found a seat in the terminal. Then she spotted me in the ticket line.

Had she accepted that cab ride, she might have arrived at an empty hotel room while I was on my way to London. Her delayed flight, my decision to leave, and her few minutes of rest had somehow brought us to the same place at exactly the right time.

Someone Looking Out for Us

All these years later, I still marvel at that tap on the shoulder. Today, a quick message could settle the confusion that nearly sent us in opposite directions. Back then, we had no such help. Coincidence? Perhaps. But I've always liked to think an Almighty Webmaster was looking out for a young sailor and his English Rose.

I believe He still is.