

= Romualdas Marcinkus =

Romualdas Marcinkus (22 July 1907 ? 29 March 1944) was a Lithuanian pilot . Marcinkus participated in an early trans @-@ European flight on 25 June 1934 , and was the only Lithuanian pilot to serve in the Royal Air Force (RAF) during the Second World War . In his youth Marcinkus was a Lithuanian multifold football champion and a playing coach for the Lithuania national football team .

While serving in the Lithuanian Air Force , Marcinkus was a paratrooper instructor , and headed the aviation sport and physical education department , and during his later years coached a junior football team . A few months before the Soviet occupation of Lithuania early in the Second World War , Marcinkus left Lithuania and enlisted in the French Air Force . After the Battle of France and the French capitulation , Marcinkus escaped to Britain , where he flew for the RAF . As a pilot for No. 1 Squadron RAF , he took part in various missions , including escorting bombers and night combat . On 12 February 1942 , during Operation Cerberus , he was shot down , became a prisoner of war , and was sent to Stalag Luft III .

At Stalag Luft III Marcinkus became an active member of an underground group of prisoners who organized and executed the Great Escape . Marcinkus was responsible for analyzing the German railway schedules ? a vital part of the plan . On the night of 25 March 1944 , Marcinkus became one of 76 servicemen who escaped the prison camp . After several days he was recaptured by the Gestapo and executed .

At the end of the Second World War , Lithuania lost its independence and Marcinkus was largely forgotten . His memory was kept alive by the Lithuanian émigré press . After Lithuania regained its independence in 1990 , more detailed accounts of his life were published there and abroad .

= = Early life = =

Marcinkus was born on 22 July 1907 in the provincial Lithuanian town of Jurbarkas . At the time Jurbarkas , as well of the rest of Lithuania , was part of the Russian Empire . Romualdas ' father , Pranas Marcinkus , served as a policeman in Jurbarkas , Taurag? , and Rum?i?k?s . His mother , Honorata Kroaz? @-@ Marcinkien? , came from an urban family of French origins . Marcinkus ' cousin , Vanda Kroaz? @-@ ?estakauskien? , stated that the Kroaz? family 's origins in Lithuania began with a Frenchman named Courvoisier , who came to Lithuania with Napoleon 's army during the French invasion of Russia in the 19th century and married a local Lithuanian woman .

Romualdas was the eldest of five children in the family . After his younger brother died during childhood he became the family 's only son . Following the First World War , Lithuania successfully re @-@ established its independence and the first gymnasium in Jurbarkas was established . Soon afterwards , Marcinkus attended the institution , and became passionate about sports , especially football . Romualdas , or Romas as his friends called him , played football for the local team . Marcinkus was known for his stamina and discipline among his peers .

= = In Lithuanian army service = =

At age 17 , Marcinkus moved from Jurbarkas to Kaunas , the temporary capital of Lithuania . In Kaunas , he attended the Higher German School . After graduating from the German School , he enrolled at the Kaunas Military School , intending to enlist in the Lithuanian army .

During this time the Lithuanian army was expanding and modernizing . The Lithuanian Air Force was especially targeted for rapid development and service in this branch was prestigious . Some of its earlier members such as Jurgis Dobkevi?ius and Antanas Gustaitis were instrumental in improving on aeronautical designs . While at the military school Marcinkus played for the KSK (Kauno sporto klubas) football club . After his father 's death in 1927 , Marcinkus took on the responsibility of supporting his remaining family , he also began playing football for LFLS Kaunas .

The aviator Steponas Darius , with associates , had established the Lietuvos Fizinio Lavavimo S?junga , which soon became one of the leading football clubs in Lithuania . Marcinkus joined the

club and won a national championship during his first season . On 27 July 1927 , Marcinkus played for Lithuania in an international match . Although they lost , Marcinkus managed to score his first goal in an international game . The Lithuanian team 's coach predicted a bright future for Marcinkus in football . At that time football was among the most popular sports in Kaunas .

In 1928 Marcinkus graduated from the Kaunas Military School and received a commission as an infantry second lieutenant . From 1930 until 1932 he attended the Vytautas the Great Military Institute 's aviation department and became a military pilot . While pursuing his military career , Marcinkus did not abandon his passion for football . He became a Lithuanian football champion three times . His team won the cup for the Baltic states ' championship twice , and he played over forty games for the national team . Eventually , Marcinkus became a coach for the national team . He also wrote several articles about football and ethics in sports . His many successes made him a celebrity in his home county . He is considered one of the best Lithuanian players of that time .

In 1933 , Marcinkus advanced to the rank of lieutenant , which was conferred by Lithuanian President , Antanas Smetona . In the same year he married Aleksandra Lingytė . Lingytė was also a prominent Lithuanian sportswoman ; she won several basketball championships for Lithuania . Around the same time , inspired by Klemensas Martinkus , Marcinkus became a paratrooper instructor . Soon he became a parachuting master in the air force and participated in various air shows .

In 1934 Marcinkus was transferred to the air reconnaissance department , there he started improving his expertise in independent flying , mapping , photography , and weapon systems . 1934 proved to be a challenging year for Marcinkus . Antanas Gustaitis , a prominent Lithuanian aircraft constructor and commander of Lithuanian Military Aviation , invited Marcinkus to participate in a trans -European flight , along with Jonas Liorentas , Juozas Namikas , Jonas Mikšas , and Kazys Rimkevičius . After detailed planning and preparation , the trans -European flight was begun in the same year . During the 25 days of their flight , the pilots flew three of Gustaitis ' designed aircraft , the ANBO IVs , over 10 000 kilometers and visited 12 European capitals . The Lithuanian pilots were warmly welcomed in the countries they visited . They were received by the British Royal Family and the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini .

Upon his return , Marcinkus was promoted to the rank of captain and decorated with the Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas Knight 's Cross . He was also named head of the aviation physical education department . He went on to establish a junior football team and teach German . His superiors noted that Marcinkus seemed more interested in sports than in his military duties at that time . His sporting career ended in 1938 , however , when he injured a knee and was forced to abandon football . Despite the fact that he was decorated with steel wings (plieno sparnai) , the highest award in Lithuanian military aviation , the following year proved very trying on a personal level . He was burdened with debts and underwent a nervous breakdown . His military career was interrupted by a scandal and he was transferred to the reserves .

While the Winter War was gathering momentum , Marcinkus argued for supporting Finland , but Lithuania remained neutral during the conflict . Nevertheless , some Lithuanians left to fight alongside the Finns . In 1940 Marcinkus also left Lithuania , apparently intending to help Finland , although the war had ended by the time he arrived . Soon afterwards he traveled to France , then at war with Germany .

= = In French army service = =

Marcinkus arrived in France in mid -March 1940 and immediately requested acceptance into the French Air Force . Bureaucratic delays hindered his enlistment . By the time these hurdles were cleared , the Battle for France was rapidly drawing to a close . It is possible , however , that Marcinkus succeeded in shooting down several German military planes during his short career in the French air force .

After France surrendered , Marcinkus managed to make his way to the French colonies in Africa (Morocco and Algeria) . He decided to go to Great Britain and continue fighting , but the French army 's terms of armistice at Compiègne and tensions between Britain and France made this difficult

. On 12 August 1940 he was finally demobilized from the French army . Marcinkus and some of his associates concocted a daring plan to commandeer several aircraft without authorization and fly to England . The plan was not executed due to increased security at airfields and other circumstances . He finally received the necessary documents enabling him to go to Britain in autumn of 1940 .

= = In British service = =

In October 1940 , Marcinkus reached Liverpool , and from there travelled on to London . On 24 December of the same year , Marcinkus became a pilot in the Royal Air Force (RAF) . To achieve that , he changed some of his personal data ; he stated that he was three years younger , otherwise he would have been too old for service in the RAF . At that time , his homeland Lithuania had already lost its independence , and the Lithuanian air force was rapidly liquidated by its occupiers . Throughout the years , Marcinkus maintained close contacts with the Lithuanian attaché in Britain in order to receive news about Lithuania and his family .

On 1 January 1941 , Marcinkus was transferred to a training base . He demonstrated his flying skills , hoping to fly the British Hurricane fighter aircraft . He was successful and was transferred to No. 1 Squadron RAF . Marcinkus became the only Lithuanian pilot to fly for the RAF during the Second World War . Marcinkus wrote in his letter about the new challenges lying ahead :

I was transferred to the night fighters ? at that time the most dangerous kind of military aviation . But I like danger ? I faced danger during my entire life , in flying , sports , and personal life . With this I am satisfied , but ... I am lacking warmth and the comfort of my personal life in this country of " cold slob weather and so called correctness " .

In one of the Marcinkus 's letters to the Lithuanian envoy , Bronius Balutis , he notes that he shot down his first German bomber , a Dornier Do 17 in March . Marcinkus also wrote that he was gathering skills and knowledge in order to make a contribution towards liberating Lithuania and restoring its independence .

In the RAF , Marcinkus carried out multiple tasks , including various training missions , night combat and bomber escort . In June , Marcinkus and his squadron members engaged in prolonged air combat with the Luftwaffe . As later reports confirm , the Germans lost four Me 109 fighter aircraft , one of which was shot down by Marcinkus . The original report submitted by Marcinkus claiming one Me 109 shot down on 21 June 1941 is held in The National Archives ; he states that he fired two short bursts from his guns from 100 yards behind the German . Sergeant Blasil , also of 1 Squadron , witnessed the plane break up in the air . On the allied side , one American pilot was missing . The last mission Marcinkus carried out as a RAF pilot was on 12 February 1942 .

On 11 February 1942 , a German operation codenamed " Cerberus " had commenced , in which a German Kriegsmarine squadron consisting of Scharnhorst , Gneisenau and Prinz Eugen , supported by a number of smaller ships , attempted to sail to their home bases via the English Channel . Six fighters from No. 1 Squadron were tasked with intercepting German ships and attacking German torpedo boats . Marcinkus was among the pilots . On 12 February , while attacking the Scharnhorst , his plane was shot down by anti @-@ aircraft fire and crashed into the sea . Romualdas Marcinkus suffered a spinal fracture and was rescued by Germans , subsequently becoming a prisoner of war . During the course of the battle , the British lost approximately forty planes and failed to prevent the German fleet from returning to Kiel and Wilhelmshaven .

= = The Great Escape = =

Marcinkus was sent to Stalag Luft III , a prisoner @-@ of @-@ war camp near Sagan that housed captured air force servicemen during the Second World War . The camp was restructured several times in order to accommodate more POWs . It would eventually hold over 10 @,@ 000 inmates . Marcinkus was the only known Lithuanian at the camp .

Squadron Leader Roger Bushell selected inmates and began planning an escape , at first focused on digging a tunnel . Already experienced from earlier escapes , Bushell became the nominal leader of this endeavour . The group expanded and accepted Marcinkus into their ranks ? his fluent

command of several languages , most importantly German , was seen as valuable .

The prisoners delegated various tasks amongst themselves in order to better implement their escape . Marcinkus began working on creating forged documents that would aid the escapees once they were out of the confines of the Stalag . He also contributed his intelligence to analyses of the Baltic and Low Countries . His extensive knowledge of Germany 's military and transport positions led to his nickname as " Know @-@ it @-@ All . " He analyzed German news reports , but his most important contribution was his compilation of the German railway schedules , an essential part of the escape plan . Bertram James remembered Marcinkus ' contribution to the escape operation :

While I didn 't know Marcinkus directly , but I remember him very well . I remember him as friendly guy , having a good character , he also had a phenomenal memory . He was especially good at memorizing numbers , dates , and after analyzing a pile of information , he made a precise compilation of the Reich 's railway schedules . These schedules were used by men , who during the Great Escape traveled by train , including me ... He was fluent in German , perhaps this allowed him to bribe or negotiate with German officials in order to get needed information , but I know for sure , that Marcinkus ' analyzed vast amounts of information and became very useful during the Great Escape .

During March 1944 , final preparations for the escape gathered momentum . In its original form about 200 prisoners were to escape . As cover stories , they were to pose as foreign workers from a number of countries . According to the plan , Marcinkus needed to be among the first escapees . He was selected to lead a group of four prisoners posing as Lithuanian workers traveling back to Lithuania . The group 's prospects hinged on the hope that the Germans encountered on the way would not speak or understand Lithuanian , as Marcinkus was the only member fluent in that language .

On the night of 25 March , the prisoners enacted their plan . Serious problems arose immediately . The tunnel hatch proved difficult to open and the tunnel exit was several metres short of the relatively safe forested area . These problems led to delays and only 76 POWs managed to make their break for freedom . As originally intended , Marcinkus was one of the first ten to escape .

Marcinkus and the three prisoners in his group posing as Lithuanians ? Tim Walenn , Henri Picard and Gordon Brettell ? managed to reach a train heading towards Danzig (now Gdansk , Poland) . Most likely , they intended to travel to East Prussia , cross the Lithuanian border , and somehow cross the Baltic Sea to neutral Sweden . However , officials at the Stalag had discovered the escape and began manhunts . Marcinkus and his group travelled further than most of the escapees , but were captured by the Gestapo near Schneidemühl on 26 March . Marcinkus and his associates were brought to Stalag XXB and spent the night there . On the following day they were handed over to the Danzig Gestapo .

= = Death = =

Officers of the Danzig Gestapo took Marcinkus to a forest near Pru?ce and executed him . On 29 March his body was cremated in Danzig 's Gestapo crematorium .

The executions of the fifty recaptured servicemen were sanctioned by Adolf Hitler . Only three escapees managed to reach their final destinations . The Gestapo claimed that the recaptured servicemen were shot after resisting arrest and while attempting to escape again . By the time of his death Marcinkus held the rank of flight lieutenant in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve .

= = Commemoration = =

Details of the Great Escape executions reached the British Government . Its Foreign Secretary , Anthony Eden , then delivered this speech to the House of Commons :

His Majesty 's Government must , therefore , record their solemn protest against these cold @-@ blooded acts of butchery . They will never cease in their efforts to collect the evidence to identify all those responsible . They are firmly resolved that these foul criminals shall be tracked down to the last man wherever they may take refuge . When the war is over they will be brought to exemplary

justice .

The remaining inmates at Stalag Luft III erected a memorial to their fifty executed comrades at the end of 1944 . Following the war , the Allies launched an investigation into the escaped prisoners ' executions and named seventy @-@ two individuals as responsible . Marcinkus ' killer was convicted in 1948 . In the same year Marcinkus ' burial place was identified and an urn containing his ashes was transferred to the British section of the Old Garrison Cemetery in Poznań , his grave is marked by a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone .

Marcinkus was posthumously mentioned in despatches in the 1944 King 's Birthday Honours , he also received the 1939 - 45 Star , the Air Crew Europe Star , and the War Medal 1939 - 1945 . British authorities attempted to contact his relatives in Lithuania , but Lithuania ? as a Soviet Socialist Republic ? was behind the Iron Curtain , and they were advised to stop these attempts since his relatives might suffer negative consequences . At the time Soviet authorities saw those people who maintained contacts with the West as untrustworthy .

Marcinkus was seldom mentioned during the Cold War and his pre @-@ war biography was only reprinted in the Lithuanian émigré press , particularly in the US During the 1950s articles about Marcinkus began to appear in these newspapers , including Karys , Vienas iš daugelio (1950) , Paskutinis nuvykusio lakto atvirukas (1955) , and Kapitono Marcinkaus mirtis nelaisvėje (1956) . The first significant publication discussing Marcinkus in Soviet Lithuania appeared in a 1967 issue of the journal Vytis . Thereinafter Marcinkus 's life was more frequently mentioned , although much of the information presented was inaccurate and incomplete .

After Lithuania successfully re @-@ established its independence , interest in his story gained momentum in Lithuania and elsewhere . In Jurbarkas , a street was named after him . The Lithuanian Air Force now sponsors the Marcinkus Pistol Marksmanship Cup . In 2001 the British Ambassador in Vilnius gave Marcinkus ' previously unclaimed war medals to a surviving relative , his nephew , Alvydas Gabonas , during a commemorative ceremony . The RAF provided a fly @-@ past of Harrier jets from Marcinkus ' No. 1 Squadron RAF , in which one aircraft saluted the ceremony . In the same year a plaque was dedicated to honour the famous Lithuanian pilot in Kaunas . Gražina Sviderskytė , a CNN award @-@ winning journalist , wrote a detailed account of Marcinkus ' life in her book Uragano kapitonas (" Hurricane Captain ") , which was published in 2004 . A documentary film with the same title was produced in 2004 . Marcinkus ' life story was reprinted in various foreign publications in the USA , Canada , and Japan .