

# The Ladislav Marmol Story

a remarkable pilot



Compiled by Tony Fendall from  
various sources

## **Introduction**

This little booklet has been produced after the arrival in the Gliding Heritage Centre hangar at Lasham of the Zlin Z-24 'Krajanek' once flown by Ladislav Marmol.

"Krajanek" means a "travelling entertainer" who used to visit the villages of Czechoslovakia singing songs and telling stories. For this they received food and accommodation, seems they were very popular.

The glider has been generously donated to the GHC by Mr John Dredge. Little did I know, when trying to find details of the UK glider endurance record (33hrs 5mins) and the pilot concerned in its achievement, what a story was to be uncovered.

## **The post war background**

The Zlin Z-24 was a glider type, which was to replace the large number of German sailplanes on Czech airfields after 1945, and thus helped to complete the first generation of post war Czech sailplanes. The communists encouraged Czech glider pilots to destroy the 1930's designed German sailplanes, as they would now be given new, faster and better sailplanes. Thus the Krajanek was to replace the Grunau Baby 2b's and the Sohaj and Lunak were to be small, fast sailplanes to give the new pilots cross country experience, and, also aerobatics. The Communists would give suitable young pilots free glider training so that they could be used for military, or agricultural, or airliner flying. However, if the young pilot did anything wrong, the communists had the power to take gliding away from him. Gliding for older pilots, unless they could be used for instructors, was not possible, as available funds had to be channelled into the youth so that they could serve their Motherland.

## **Following from the Booker GC newsletter Jan 2010**

'Ladi' Marmol led an extraordinarily eventful life in which he clocked up a staggering 25,000 flying hours and completed over 20 log books. He was a pioneer in postwar agricultural aviation and the leading exponent of glider aerobatics in the UK in the forties and fifties. But that's only part of Ladi's story.

Ladi was born in Moravia, part of Czechoslovakia, in 1920 and soloed in gliders at the age of 14. When Czechoslovakia was incorporated into the Third Reich in 1938 Ladi's dreams of a flying career were scuppered and he found himself in a German labour camp. When war broke out he escaped to Vichy France where he was interned. From there he fled to Belgium but was recaptured and press-ganged into the French Foreign Legion. On the way to North Africa he jumped ship again, was caught once more and ended up working in a French salt mine. Yet another escape found him trekking over the Pyrenees and into the hands of Franco's police who locked him up in the notorious Muanda Delebro concentration camp. Although speaking no English, Ladi managed to adopt the identity of a fictitious Canadian called 'Bill Gray' and, with the help of the British Embassy in Madrid, to blag his way into 'repatriation' to the UK where in 1943 he joined the free Czech army and was eventually selected for pilot training. Unfortunately for him the end of the war came, pilot training ended, and Ladi was demobbed.

Undeterred, Ladi set up a flourishing import export business operating between Prague and Southend using flying club Austers! In 1947 he acquired two Czech Zlin Z-24 Krajanek sailplanes for aerobatic use. In November '47 he set out to beat the world glider endurance record set in Germany in 1933 at 36 hours and 5 minutes. On his third attempt starting at 12:28 on 12 April 1949 through running the ridge at Dunstable he set the UK record at 33 hours and 5 minutes, landing at 21:33 on the 13th. This actual Krajanek was restored by the late and great Mike Birch of Booker and is now in the GHC hangar at Lasham.



(Ladi Marmol's UK endurance record breaking Krajanek, courtesy of Paul Haliday)

Note that soon afterwards the FAI very sensibly excluded glider endurance flights from record claims, rightly fearing fatigue-induced accidents.

The author of the original Aeroplane monthly article, a friend of Ladi's, noted that, 'One unofficial record of Ladi's which also seems likely to go unchallenged is his slope soaring up and down the Dunstable ridge while flying inverted throughout. LGC tug pilots were also startled from time to time to find him upside down while on tow, and he is also remembered for his loops below the power lines which used to cross one corner of the airfield.'

Peter Treadway tells me of a story told by his late father of Ladi flying the Krajanek where his hat flew off, so he tried to regain it by flying ever descending loops! The rakish side of Ladi's life re-surfaced in 1948 when he was arrested in Prague, charged with spying and faced a 25 year jail sentence. However with another Houdini-like escape involving bribed guards, a smuggled crossing into the American sector, and a border shoot-out, Ladi was soon back in the UK for his duration record

attempts.

At this time he purchased the Czech L107 Lunak G-ALSI (the first prototype) in which he appeared at events such as the 1949 Air Pageant performing slow and hesitation rolls and spectacular tail slides (don't try this at home!).



(Ladi Marmol in Lunak G-ALSI)

The following year he teamed up with Freddie Laker in an aviation business called Air Ads which undertook banner towing and at night flew Miles Aerovans fitted with neon advertising signs on lattice frameworks along each side of the fuselage. This venture grew and branched out into agricultural aviation. At one time or another the company owned an astonishing line up of aircraft including Cessna 188 AgWaggon, Supercubs, Pawnees, a DHC-2 Beaver, Pilatus P6 Porters, Turbo Porters, a Rockwell Thrush S2R Commander and a Czech Let Z-37 Cmeláček.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s Ladi's company flew on agricultural contracts in Belgian Congo, Argentina, Brazil and the Sudan. Although he hired other pilots Ladi always undertook the major share of the flying programmes. Two of his pilots were Norman Smith (ex Booker CFI) and Denis Neville (ex Booker instructor).

### **A recollection from Wally Kahn**

I would very much like to add a great story about Laddie Marmol which concerns him beating up our awful new airfield controller at Redhill who hated gliding. We warned Laddie that when he came to visit us in his new Lunak about this dreadful man. Laddie was fantastic – he dived inverted straight at the tower and at the very very last minute when it looked to us - and the terrible controller who was hanging out of the window of the tower with his aldis lamp flashing red –that a collision was inevitable – Laddie pulled up and landed with us.

He was a great great man.

**This from 'Aviation' forums**



On Thursday 29th July 1976 Southend Pier Head was obliterated by a fire countless fire-fighters fought the blaze they were hampered by the pier head pump house being destroyed soon after the fire started. They were backed up by 8 fire tugs pumping 50,000 gallons of water a minute into the inferno the South-westerly wind fanned the flames across the pier head. Further help came from the skys when.....

"Southend based Ladislav "Ladi" Mormol took off in his tiny crop spraying aircraft with its tanks full of water bombing the immense fire from above. The tiny aircraft could carry 400 gallons of water at a time with the heroic pilot swooping down to 100ft on each pass an incredibly low height when the flames were leaping over 150ft into the air!" –the aircraft was his Rockwell Thrush Commander crop sprayer.

He continued active flying until his 67th year when he retired. At the end of his life Ladi returned to Czechoslovakia where his amazing life story began and where he died in 1997 bringing to a close a life full of adventure and achievements in aviation.

Based on an article by John Fricker that appeared in Aeroplane Monthly in April 1998.



(Rochford Lawn Cemetery, Rochford, Essex)