

90TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AMAZING AND HEROIC DEED OF STEPONAS DARIUS AND STASYS GIRĖNAS

If you've ever flown to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, you may have noticed that one of the main streets leading from Vilnius airport to the city centre is named after the legendary Lithuanian pilots S. Darius and S. Girėnas. In Lithuania, their memory has been commemorated in many ways: a feature film has been made about their legendary flight across the Atlantic on the "Lituanica" aircraft, several songs about them have been composed, the pilots' images have been placed on the Lithuanian currency, the litas, and their bas-reliefs have been carved on the second largest stone in Lithuania, called Puntukas. The bas-reliefs on the Puntukas stone were carved in 1943 – on the 10th anniversary of their legendary flight. This year in July the legendary flight turned 90. There have been so many anniversaries of this flight, and so many beautiful and heartfelt words spoken, that it seems there is not much left to go on. However, Aurimas Valujavičius "went on" with his feat to commemorate the "Lituanica" flight. This year, in a rowing boat called "Lituanica", he crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Ayamonte in Spain to Miami in Florida (USA) in 121 days.

In 2013 (on the 80th anniversary of the flight of pilots S. Darius and S. Girėnas) the newspaper "Lietuvos Aidas" wrote: On July 15, 1933, Lithuanian pilots S. Darius and S. Girėnas, the famous pilots of "Lituanica", flew for 37 hours and 11 minutes without landing, and covered the distance of 6,411 kilometres. It was the second non-stop flight achievement in the aviation world of the time taking transatlantic flights into history books. Before the flight of S. Darius and S. Girėnas in the summer of 1933, there had been 73 attempts to cross the Atlantic, but only about 30 flights had been successful, and only on three occasions had it proved possible to fly more than 6,000 kilometres without landing. In 1919, British pilots Alcock and Brown were the first to complete a non-stop flight across the Atlantic.

To realise their idea, S. Darius and S. Girenas purchased a 365 AJ Bellanca Pacemaker CH-300 six-seater aircraft and modified it by extending the wings, installing a more powerful engine, and adding additional fuel and oil tanks. On 15 July 1933, at 4.24 p.m., after taking off from New York's Floyd Bennett Airfield in a small plane called

"Lituanica", the pilots set off to cross the Atlantic and fly to Kaunas, the capital of Lithuania at the time. Unfortunately, on 17 July 1933, at 0.36 a.m., on the territory of present-day Poland, near Myslibuz (formerly Soldin), in the woods of the village of Pszczelnik, the hearts of the courageous pilots who had flown across the Atlantic and most of Europe, as well as the roaring sounds of the "Lituanica" engines, fell silent forever. The end of the flight – Kaunas airfield – was about 650 kilometres away, i.e., roughly a tenth of the total way, or three hours of flying.

S. Darius and S. Girėnas' flight along the planned route was the one that was the most accurate. It was the second longest – 6,411 km – non-stop flight in the history of aviation. The "Lituanica" flight, which lasted only 37 hours and 11 minutes, not only made the name of Lithuania famous throughout the world. It went down in the history of transatlantic flights as the second longest in distance non-stop flight and the first flight that paved the way for the transport of mail by air.

S. Darius and S. Girėnas' deed has been the subject of extensive studies by historians and public figures. In 1933, immediately after the flight, the situation was not favourable for objective scientific research. Growing international tensions with Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the outbreak of World War II in 1939 contributed to the deterioration of the social situation. After the World War II, Europe was divided into two camps, and it was only after Stalin's death that a cautious attempt was made in Lithuania to reopen the issue, adapting the narrative, of course, to the realities of Soviet Lithuania of that time. In 1969, a 68-page booklet by Zigmantas Kondratas entitled "The First Lithuanian Flight Across the Atlantic" was published. It presented a more or less objective history, as far as the possibilities of the time (Iron Curtain, censorship) permitted. In 2016, Gražina Sviderskytė, in her more than 300-page Doctoral thesis (supervisor Prof. Dr Zenonas Butkus, advisor Prof. Dr Nerijus Šepetyš) "*Steponas Darius' and Stasys Girėnas' file: the historical process, approach, and the evolution of narrative*" writes: "At least three generations in Lithuania have already grown up with stories about *Darius and Girėnas*, remembered during trips to Puntukas in Anykščiai Šilelis or visits to the wreck of the "Lituanica"

in the museum in Kaunas. (...) From a scientific perspective, the flight of the "Lituanica" as a historical event has remained under-recognised, under-conscious and under-remembered". Who knows? Maybe it's better this way.

The following statement was issued by the pilots S. Darius and S. Girėnas before the flight:

We will fly to Lithuania!

The Lithuanian nation is waiting for her sons to undertake more courageous ventures. It is essential that her sons also contribute to the common work of exploring the little-known air currents of the North Atlantic and applying newly invented navigational methods and tools to daily life. We, who are living in a time when the air is being used for the benefit of Humanity, consider it our duty to carry out this work with dignity in the name of the nation.

Young Lithuania!¹ We pursue this chosen task under the inspiration of your spirit. May our success strengthen Your spirit and confidence in Your power and potential! But if Neptune or the mighty Thunder of the storms is ferocious to us by blocking our way to Young Lithuania and calling LITUANICA to himself, then you, Young Lithuania, will have to resolve, sacrifice, and prepare for a new undertaking, so that the Gods of the stormy oceans would be pleased with your efforts and determination and would not summon you to the Great Judgement.

May the accomplishment of LITUANICA strengthen the spirit of the young sons of Lithuania and be an inspiration to them for new challenges.

May the failure of LITUANICA and its disappearance into the depths of the Atlantic Ocean strengthen the perseverance and determination of young Lithuanians, so that the Winged Lithuanian may overcome the treacherous Atlantic for the honour of Homeland Lithuania!

Therefore, this flight is a dedication and a sacrifice to you, Young Lithuania! With the hope of Heaven's blessing, we will begin this great challenge!

STEPAS DARIUS
STASYS GIRĖNAS

Gintautas BUREIKA & Gediminas VAIČIŪNAS

¹ The independent state of Lithuania was restored on February 16, 1918.