



## AGUSTIN PARLA

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His pioneering spirit in aviation is preserved in memorabilia at San Carlos Museum in Key West and his name is inscribed at the Smithsonian Institute as one of the "Early Birds".

May 17, 1913, Domingo Rosillo and Agustin Parla, pioneers of Cuban aviation, added their names to the history of aviation, by making the first international flight of aviation in Latin America. They established a world-wide distance record by flying their



airplanes the 90 miles from Key West to Havana in 2 hours and 40 minutes. This record was

snatched from nobody less than the famous French pilot and aeronautical designer, Luis Bleriot.

After the trip was completed, he declared:

- My impressions of today? You have heard me speak of the storm under the skull?

"I began to see that the gasoline level was dropping in the indicating tube, at a rate faster than



had been calculated. All around I could only see sea and sky. The machine performed perfectly; I saw the "Hatuey", and passed it. The tank was almost empty, but finally I saw Cuba. I had arrived without a drop of gasoline in the tank. I couldn't even make it to where I had planned to land, in the Polígono de Columbia. I had to land instead in el campo de tiro. The wind had made me use more fuel than I had planned. I had filled the tank with 50 liters, and on a lucky hunch, I had added 10 ounces more... "

**AGUSTIN PARLA**

**1887-1946**

**AKA Agustín Parlá Orduña**



THE COUNTY OF MONROE, STATE OF  
FLORIDA,  
RENDERS THIS TRIBUTE TO

**AGUSTIN PARLA  
ORDUÑA**

BORN IN KEY WEST ON OCTOBER 11,  
1887,  
OF CUBAN PARENTS EXILED DURING  
THE STRUGGLE  
FOR THEIR COUNTRY'S  
INDEPENDENCE,  
WHO WAS THE FIRST MAN TO FLY THE  
119 MILES OVER THE SEA FROM KEY  
WEST, FLORIDA,  
TO EL MARIEL, CUBA, ON MAY 19, 1913  
HONOR TO HIS MEMORY

JULY 4, 1957.

FUNDIDO EN LOS TALLERES DEL  
INSTITUTO CIVICO MILITAR  
CIUDAD ESCOLAR, CEIBA DEL AGUA  
-CUBA-

Photo Courtesy of Arely S. Guccione



**FIRST DAY COVER**

Photo & caption courtesy of Jose Parla, 8-7-04

## **AGUSTIN PARLA**

**Born October 10, 1887 - Died July 31, 1946**

**Parents emigrated to Key West during the Spanish - American War where his father, a friend of the Cuban apostle Jose Marti, worked and raised money for the Cuban revolution.**

**Agustin was born in Key West and was educated there. After Cuba was liberated, the family returned to Havana where he continued his education. In 1912 Charles F. Walsh, an American aviator took Agustin on his first flight seated on one of the wings of the plane. There began his enthusiasm for aviation. He received his pilots license at the Curtiss School of Aviation in Miami on April 20, 1912.**

**On May 19, 1913, without a compass to guide him, he left Key West carrying the Cuban Flag that Jose Marti had carried with him during his travels in Florida raising monies for the Cuban cause. He landed at sea near Maiel, Cuba where sailors rescued him from his hydroplane.**

**On September 24, 1916 in Buffalo, NY he flew over Niagara Falls and won the contest in which several nations participated. For this honor the Cuban flag was raised while the Cuban anthem was played. Famous Cuban composer, Antonio M. Romeu wrote a song titled "Parla Sobre El Niagara" (Parla over Niagara).**

**On May 20, 1919, Parla with American aviator Johnny Green inaugurated the first commercial flight in Cuba in the seaplane "Sunshine."**

**On May 7, 1920, he flew over Havana at night, that is considered the first nocturnal flight.**

**A bust was dedicated at the Key West International Airport on July 4, 1957 honoring Agustin Parla as the first man to fly between Key West and Cuba.**

**His pioneering spirit in aviation is preserved in memorabilia at San Carlos Museum in Key West and his name is inscribed at the Smithsonian Institute as one of the "Early Birds".**

**Editor's Note: This summary of his career was kindly provided by Thomas Peterson, the great-grandnephew of Agustin. He is being assisted by his grandmother and great-grandmother, the sister of Agustin. I am greatly indebted to him and the family.**

## **PARLA FAMILY HISTORY**

**Furnished by Arely Guccione**

**Via Email, August 16, 2002**

**My name is Arely Guccione and Agustin Parla was my**

paternal grandfather. I am 37 years old and reside in West Palm Beach, Florida. I have a sister named Gracie and a twin brother named Jorge Parla. Jorge has two children named Jose Parla and Karina Parla. The last name Parla continues.....

I think Agustin Parla had two or three wives. Augustine's wife (My dad's mom) died of leukemia, so my dad ended up being taken care of by his aunt. I remember my dad telling me that he was only 5 or 6 when this happened. My dad because of this, I think, had a hard life. He was the nicest most easy going person you would ever want to meet. He married my mom Herminia and had us three kids.

In 1965 my mom and we came to the US. We were only 11 and 12 months old and my dad didn't get to come with us because of Fidel Castro. We didn't see our Dad until we were 5 years old and by then we had a stepdad. My dad went to Georgia and studied, got a degree and became a salesman. He died in April of 1998 of a heart attack.

Regarding your request for materials to help tell my grandfather's story, my sister Gracie has an 8X10 picture of Agustin, his wife ( I don't know her name) and my Dad Jose Parla when he was maybe 5 or 6 years old. I don't know if it's a copy. I don't think she'll send the one she has, but how does she send it to you?.....by scanning it or how. Let me know. I have a picture of his statue that's in the Key West Airport. I will follow up with you about anecdotes or remembrances. I will get together with my twin brother and my sister and my two step brothers. My dad Jose Parla had a second wife and had two boys Ray and Tony Parla. Ray is an Independent Film Maker in Miami, FL and Tony is a graffiti artist in New York. I'm very proud of them. I think they are in their mid 20's.

I also have a famous aunt whose name is Margarita Parla. She was a famous ballerina in Cuba. I think she was part French or something.

## **MARGARITA PARLA**

via email from E. Igor von Wurttemberg, 5-18-08

**Dear Arely Guccione:**

**It was the best of times; Mid-century ,1950s...Your aunt, Miss Margarita Parla was a touring ballerina, she also came up with the idea of speaking or singing while dancing ballet .. The idea , then, was not well taken by the general public.(STILL ISN'T )**

**During a performance at the magnificent "Teatro del Sauto" in sophisticated Matanzas, Cuba "Miss Parla was dancing**

**Swan Lake and on the final scenes she loudly said : " I am like the Swan, when I sing, I die" ...most of the audience rose to their feet and said: "let her sing , let her sing." ( Que cante , que cante)**

**After the above, it was impossible to continue with the ballet because the audience had turned the affair into a circus type comedy and Miss Parla would have none of it...she exited furiously, but most of us went home laughing and felt highly entertained.**

**I do not know if Margarita Parla ever performed in Matanzas again; pity ,it would have been a sold out performance.**

**Yours Truly**

**E. Igor von Wurttemberg WWW.EFWHALENCO.COM 858-336-8510.**

### **AGUSTIN PARLA MEMORABILIA**

**via email from Jose Antonio Parla, 8-7-04**

**Dear Mr. Cooper.**

**Thank you for your attention to my grandfather's history on your website. I am Jose Antonio Parla. Son of Jose Agustin Parla. I was born in Miami Florida in 1973 and now live in Brooklyn, NY. All my life my biggest dream was to visit Cuba and I finally went this Jaunary for the first time. There I met family I did not know existed on both sides of my family.**

**I visited the aeronatic museum where my grandfather Agustin Parla's history is on display. Both of the award cups for his flight from Key West to Mariel and his Niagara cups are there. As well as his pilot belt and wallet. There are a few photos of him and all of his medals awarded to him are there as well. These were awarded by the Cuban goverment and the Gallego society and there are metals given to him as sponsorship from Bacardi when it was still in Santiago de Cuba.**

**On my trip to Habana I met an uncle by the name of Cecilio Martinez. My father and him were raised together. Martinez is the maiden name of my grandmother who was the wife of Agustin Parla the pilot. Cecilio handed me down letters , photos, albums, newspaper articles of Parla the pilot. At the museum in Habana there were letters written by Jose Marti adressed to my great grandparents who were exiled in Key West FL, and helped to raise money from their Tabacco,**

Cuban independence struggle.

Along in this email I send you a picture of an original commemorative document made in behalf of my grandfather. You are welcome to post it.

All my best,  
Jose Parla.

## ONLINE RESOURCES - 1

If you search for "Agustin Parla" using the Google search engine, (9-24-03), you will find about 23 links.

### [Agustin Parlá Orduña](#)

Cuban Aviation Pioneer, and First Cuban Pilot

This page on Rubén Urribarres' [Cuban Aviation](#) ,Aviación Cubana website offers some 14 biographies of important Cuban pioneer aviators, including Agustin Parlá Orduña, in English. To go directly to his story, click on the title above.

If time permits, and you want to know more about Cuban Aviation, you will be amply rewarded by going to the homepage and selecting several of the many sections such as: People, Articles etc.

Of special interest is a very nice article written by Rubén Urribarres entitled the [Audacious Flight of Rosillo and Parlá](#). This version is in Spanish, but I will post a machine-translated article in English below for your convenience.

### [Audacious Flight](#)

PARLA and ROSILLO MAKE the FLIGHT

Agustin Parlá has arrived at Key West with his hydroplane and hopes to make the passage at the same time as Rosillo.

El Mundo Newspaper

11 of May of 1913

May 17, 1913, [Domingo Rosillo](#) and Agustin Parlá, pioneers of Cuban aviation, added their names to the history of aviation, by making the first international flight of aviation in Latin America. They established a world-wide distance record by flying their airplanes the 90 miles from Key West to Havana in 2 hours and 40 minutes. This record was snatched from nobody less than the famous French pilot and aeronautical designer, [Luis Bleriot](#).

The aerial trip between Key West in the U.S.A. and Havana was considered to be extremely dangerous. North American

aviator **McCurdy** had tried it without success in 1913 and the two Cubans would repeat his attempt in the hope of better luck.

The City Council of Havana decided to reward the feat: *"Ten thousand pesos for whoever arrives first and five thousand for the second."*

The flight would depend on the support of three ships of the Cuban Navy: the "Patria", which would be stationed at 45 miles from Havana, the "Hatuey" at 30 miles, and the "24 de Febrero" at 15 miles from the finish. A North American ship: the Auxiliary Gunboat "**Peoria**" also would cooperate to insure the security of the intrepid pilots.

When the first airplane took off from Havana, the battery of La Cabaña would fire two cannon shots to announce the start of the passage.

Nevertheless, the day of departure had not yet arrived. Rosillo had gone to Key West before Parlá and had it not been that the propeller of his Bleriot-XI monoplane had been broken during a test flight, one he made to please the Cuban immigrants who longed for a triumph, the flight would already have been attempted. He had to wait until a replacement propeller could arrive from Cuba. Parlá arrived in Key West in his Curtiss hydroplane, which was powered by an engine of 80 horsepower.

Parlá, in spite of his lack of experience, had the superiority of his apparatus to make a flight over the water in his favor. If it had to land unexpectedly on the ocean, at least it would be able to float. Anyway, Rosillo's propeller was delayed even longer and although Parlá was ready for the flight, the conditions at the time were not favorable. It was known that Rosillo would bring a letter valise with him and an order to buy tobacco at the Gato factory. The tobacco industry would thus use aviation for its commercial operations for the first time. Finally, the long awaited propeller for the Bleriot monoplane arrived. Everything was ready for the 17th.

At the first light of dawn of that day, on the smallest of three signal masts of the Morro de La Habana, a red flag appeared: the public knew that it was the great day.

At 5:10 a.m., Rosillo departed. His airplane was baptized with the name of Habana and on the rudder was written, "Cuba."

He flew for 2 hours, 30 minutes and 40 seconds. At that point, he ran out of gas. A strong crosswind had made him consume more fuel than he had anticipated.

After the trip was completed, he declared:

*- My impressions of today? You have heard me speak of the storm under the skull?*

*"I began to see that the gasoline level was dropping in the indicating tube, at a rate faster than had been calculated. All around I could only see sea and sky. The machine performed perfectly; I saw the "Hatuey", and passed it. The tank was almost empty, but finally I saw Cuba. I had arrived without a drop of gasoline in the tank. I couldn't even make it to where I had planned to land, in the Polígono de Columbia. I had to land instead in el campo de tiro. The wind had made me use more fuel than I had planned. I had filled the tank with 50 liters, and on a lucky hunch, I had added 10 ounces more... "*

Parlá, on the other hand, had left at 5:57 and by 6:01 he had to return: *"I began the flight, but the apparatus did not respond properly. It would not let me compensate for the wind that blew. When I returned and inspected it, I found that two tension wires of the elevator were broken."* Rosillo was, without a doubt, the winner.

On the 19th, at 2:00 in the afternoon and without previous notification of his intentions, Parlá again went in search of his goal. He did not have support from the Navy. Unlike Rosillo, who preferred to fly escorted by ships, Parlá flew on his own. The news came as a surprise in Havana and the public prepared to receive the resolute aviator. More than two hours had passed, still the Curtiss was not seen from el Morro. Had he perished? Was he floating somewhere of the Caribbean? Had he been blown off course by the wind, to who knows what place, and now he would fly without directions? everyone asked.

Soon the answer arrived: *"aviator Agustin Parlá landed on the water in the bay of Mariel, at the risk of his life, at 4:30 today, May 19, 1913. Motor failure had prevented him from reaching Havana, but he is well and already has started off by automobile for the capital "*

Of the flight from Key West a reporter wrote, *"... filled with limitless patriotism and a tenacious resolution, he embarked on the trial flight. As the town had followed it from start to finish, they finally learned that the aviator had moved steadily along the ideal course, the one that led to Cuba "*

The City Council of Havana awarded the second prize to Parlá, although, in truth, it was Cuba who won, as was affirmed: *"its name is registered in the history of aviation and will be placed among the advanced countries due to their persistence to advance aviation up to the maximum limit".*

*Revista Sendas. Year 2, number 10, 1998.*

### AGUSTIN PARLA - CUBA

This webpage on the Smithsonian Institution website offers a nice portrait, which can be enlarged, of Agustin Parla as a young man. You can access the site by clicking on the title above.

### AIRPORT HISTORY FOR MONROE COUNTY, FL

You will find a brief mention of his flight in 1913 in the "The Florida Keys Cybermuseum Transportation Room" page of the "KEYS HISTOREUM-" website, Presented by the Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys. You may access the entry itself by clicking on the title above.

If time permits, you will want to enjoy the many other features which are available from the homepage. You can access it by clicking on the website title immediately above.



### **JOHNNY GREEN AND SUNSHINE**

Johnny Green and the Curtiss flying boat "Sunshine", which Cuban aviator Agustin Parla used, on May 29, 1919, to make the first commercial flight from Cuba to the United States of America. I do not know who the other person is, in the photo, but it appears that they are named in the description on its back,

*"March 14, 1921, Seaplane "Sunshine", Johnny Green, Aviator, From St. Petersburg, Florida, Alida Blume"*

Photo & caption courtesy of Roy Nagl, 11-29-03

## ONLINE RESOURCES - 2

On September 17, 2005, Rubén Urribarres alerted me to a very informative new website which offers some additional insight into Parla's life and death. The article is in Spanish, but you can obtain an English translation by copying the URL and pasting it into the Babelfish program which is available from the Alta Vista website. The translation is a bit awkward, but I think you can make sense out of it and it does offer some information which is otherwise unavailable.

[Agustín Parlá](#)

### EL PRIMER AVIADOR CUBANO

Josefina Ortega | La Habana

If you read Spanish, you will enjoy this illustrated article to the fullest extent. If not, I suggest that you look at the photographs first and then obtain the machine-translation using Babelfish. You can access the page by clicking on the title above.

## In Memoriam

### Agustin Parla

Agustin Parla, October 10, 1887-July 31, 1946, Cuban pioneer aviator, came to Curtiss at Hammondsport in 1911 to learn to fly. He learned and soloed at Miami in March of 1912.

Returning to the States the following year he purchased a Curtiss seaplane and planned to make the first flight between the United States and Cuba but [Domingo Rosillo](#) was two days ahead of him.

Parla took off from Key West and flew to Mariel Bay, near Havana, on May 19, 1913, but cracked up in alighting. The distance was approximately 90 miles and the time 2:55:00 but he received \$5000 as a second prize.

He did not keep up his flying career but did continue to participate in aeronautic events. He represented Cuba at the Miami races in 1935 and spoke on behalf of the Cuban Senate in acknowledging greetings from the U. S. Secretary of State on the occasion of the 1936 Miami-Havana good will flight. State Secretary R. Walton Moore had commented on the Parla flight of 23 years before. Parla was then, 1936, Inspector General of Airports of Cuba, which post he held until recently. Parla was accepted for membership in the EBs in 1935.

from CHIRP - APRIL, 1947 - PESCO, CLEVELAND, OHIO - NUMBER  
35  
courtesy of Steve Remington - [CollectAir](#)