

Olga Custodio: The First Latina U.S. Military Pilot

Through stubborn perseverance and a singular determination to become a pilot, Olga Nevarez did not let early defeats stop her from achieving her goal. Born in Puerto Rico in 1954, she travelled the world as her father, a noncommissioned officer in the United States Army, transferred from base to base. She started school in Taiwan, and then moved to New Jersey, Iran, and Paraguay. When her father retired, the family moved back to Puerto Rico.

Graduating from high school at the age of 16, she attended the University of Puerto Rico. There she tried to join the college's Reserve Officer Training Corps program, but was turned down because the program did not accept women. After college, her attempt to be accepted into the United States Air Force Officer Training School also failed.

She worked in a number of different jobs after graduation. While employed in the accounting department of Puerto Rico International Airlines, she met Edwin Custodio. They married four months later. After the birth of her daughter Maria, she accepted a job with the Department of Defense in Panama. (A son, Edwin was born in 1985.) At the age of 26, and while working in Panama, she met with a recruiter and applied for the U.S. Air Force Officers Candidate School. According to Olga Custodio, when the recruiter asked her to list three jobs she wanted, she responded "A pilot, a pilot or a pilot."

The Air Force accepted her as a pilot candidate. In January 1980 she entered the Flight Screening Pilot Officer Training School. Upon graduation, she attended Undergraduate Pilot Training at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas. The Air Force then assigned her as a pilot instructor at Laughlin AFB. There, she became the first female Northrop T-38 Talon (T-38) UPT flight instructor.

During one of her flights, a bird struck the engine of her plane. A cool head and excellent piloting skills helped her recover from the emergency and safely land her plane. Because of her actions, the Air Force awarded her the Headquarters Air Education and Training Command's Aviation Safety Award for superior airmanship. A subsequent assignment took her to Randolph Air Force Base where she became the first female T-38 instructor pilot.

In 1987, Custodio resigned her regular commission and entered the Air Force reserves. She retired from the Air Force in 2003, having attained the rank of Lt. Colonel.

American Airlines hired her in June 1988; she subsequently became one of the first Latina airline captains in the United States. She flew Boeing 727, 757, and 767, and Fokker 100 aircraft. Her routes included the Caribbean, Central America, South America, Europe, Mexico, and Canada. She retired from the airline in February 2008.

In 1992, she founded the Ballet Folklorico Borikèn, a Puerto Rican folk dance group to celebrate her heritage. After retirement, between March 2007 and December 2013, she owned Dragonfly Productions, LLC. Her company produced several personal documentaries for clients and organizations.

She currently is an active member of the Hispanic Association of Aviation and Aerospace Professionals, Inc., a non-profit corporation that provides education, mentorship, and scholarship opportunities for Hispanics and underserved individuals striving for careers in the aerospace industry. She holds a leadership role in the Alamo City Chapter of the Women in Aviation International, a group that encourages the advancement of all girls and women in all aviation career fields and interests in San Antonio and surrounding cities.

Olga Custodio downplays her aviation “firsts. She humbly says, “Everything I did was for me and my family. I was not out to prove anything. I didn’t even know I was the first anything. I only realized I was the first Latina military pilot when I had my first female student at pilot training. She was the first Latina to graduate from the U.S. Air Force Academy.”

Her personal mantra: *Querer es poder* - loosely translated as “Where there’s a will there’s a way”