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, Olga attended the University of Puerto Rico. There, she tried to join the university’s Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) 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.

Olga worked in several 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. 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 Lt. Col. 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 Olga as a pilot candidate. In January 1980, she entered the Flight Screening Pilot Officer Training School. Upon graduation, she attended Undergraduate Pilot Training. She graduated in the top 5 percent of her class (of 48), with a fighter qualification to fly the T-38 as an instructor pilot. The Air Force then assigned her to Laughlin AFB in Del Rio, Texas as a pilot instructor. There, she became the first female Northrop T-38 Talon (T-38) UPT flight instructor.

During one of Olga’s 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 in San Antonio, Texas, where she became the first female T-38 instructor pilot.

In 1987, Olga 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. In June of 1988, she became American Airline’s first Latina commercial airline pilot and was one of the first Latina airline captains in the United States. She retired from the airline in February 2008.

Olga founded the Ballet Folklorico Borikèn, a Puerto Rican folk dance group to celebrate her heritage. She 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 is also a founder of and 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 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.”

Olga’s personal mantra is, “Querer es poder” which loosely translated is, “Where there’s a will there’s a way.”