

MILITARY WOMEN AVIATORS ORAL HISTORY INITIATIVE

Interview No. 11

Participant Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Lieutenant Colonel Olga Custodio, USAFR, Retired Date: August 13, 2019

By: Lieutenant Colonel Monica Smith, USAF, Retired

Place: National Air and Space Museum

Director's Conference Room

601 Independence Avenue SW

Washington, DC 20024

SMITH: I'm Monica Smith at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Today is August 13, 2019, and I have the pleasure of speaking with Lieutenant Colonel Olga Custodio, United States Air Force, retired. This interview is being taped as part of the Military Women Aviators Oral History Initiative. It will be archived at the Smithsonian Institution. Welcome, Colonel Custodio.

CUSTODIO: Thank you.

SMITH: Let's start with you stating your full name and your occupation.

CUSTODIO: Okay. My full name is Olga Estelle Nevarez Custodio, and I am retired right now from the U.S. Air Force and from American Airlines.

SMITH: Thank you. So — and you served in the Air Force. Can you tell me your dates of service?

CUSTODIO: My dates of service is from 1980 to 2003.

SMITH: Did you serve continuously?

CUSTODIO: Continuously? Yes. I did 18 years. I mean — sorry. I did eight years active duty and 16 years of Reserves.

SMITH: Okay. What year did you make that transfer to the Reserves?

CUSTODIO: It was in 1988.

SMITH: Okay. And if you think of it later, you can email me. Okay. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: What were your approximate total flight hours?

CUSTODIO: Well, in the military, I had approximately 3,500 pilot in command time.

SMITH: What about civilian, since you're — [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Total, I have over 11,000 hours of flying time.

SMITH: Fantastic. What types of aircraft?

CUSTODIO: In the military, I flew —

SMITH: We'll take it all. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: All. We'll take it all. Okay. I flew the T-38 as an instructor pilot, and then I flew the T-41 in the military. And then from there, I went to American Airlines and flew the 727 as a flight engineer, as a first officer, then I went and upgraded to captain. I flew the Fokker 100, the 757, and the 767.

SMITH: Wow. And you also flew the T-37 in training as well.

CUSTODIO: In training.

SMITH: Right. Military training.

CUSTODIO: T-37. The Tweety Bird.

SMITH: [laughs] So let's talk about your road to the military, and let's start with where you were born.

CUSTODIO: I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1953, and my father was in the Army at the time. So I was born at the — I want to say the Brooke Medical Center¹ there in San Juan, and I think that's what they called it at the time. I spent about three months there with my mom, just because my grandmother was there, and she helped out. And then we left, and I went back to join my father. He was in the Army, and he served the latter part of World War II. He was very young. I want to say 18 years old. And then he went to the Korean War, and he served in the 65th Infantry in the Korean War. And then he came back, and after that, he married my mom, and then, you know, we had a military life with him. As an Army brat, I lived everywhere: in Taiwan, Iran, Paraguay, and that was very influential to me, his service to this country. And that's where my thoughts of joining the military began, as an Army brat.

SMITH: Were both of your parents from Puerto Rico?

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: Great.

CUSTODIO: Both from Puerto Rico, both from Curacao, Puerto Rico. Same town. Dad lived out in the country, and Mom lived in the small town. So, yeah.

SMITH: What were their names?

CUSTODIO: My dad is Ismael Nevarez. My mom is Olga Nieves.

¹ The ruins of Castillo San Felipe del Morro were used for administrative, housing, and the hospital at Fort Brooke in Puerto Rico. "The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico," National Parks Service, n.d. Accessed Oct 15, 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/60sanjuan/60facts3.htm>.

SMITH: And what were you like as a young child growing up? What were you interested in?

CUSTODIO: I did a little bit of everything. You know? I want to say that my parents kind of didn't stop me from checking things out, doing — you know, exploring things in —

[5:00]

not so much in school, I would say. Like, outside. So I was in the Brownies, I did the Girl Scouts. I really like going out and into the forest and kind of exploring and those sort of things. Climbing trees. [laughs] So I guess I was kind of like a tomboy, but you know, not really. But just that part of exploring things.

SMITH: Did you have any siblings?

CUSTODIO: Well, I have a — four years younger, a brother. He's four years younger. And we were kind of close. You know? I kind of took care of him when he was born, so I was very proud of being the big sister.

SMITH: That's great. So how did you decide to attend Officer Training School in 1980?

CUSTODIO: Well, after having lived all over the world, my father finally retired. And the last duty station that he had was in Paraguay. He was [an] Air Attaché. One of the things that I did see there was that I had an opportunity to see how the Air Force military were, versus the Army that I had known my whole life. And I thought that the Air Force was much better. [laughs] And —

SMITH: In what way?

CUSTODIO: In what way? I guess the way — I don't know. Just the way — my perception of how they were and their role and what they did. Nothing specific. It was just a perception that I got. You know? Knowing the Army and then seeing how the Air Force, I guess, treated their airmen. And so that kind of stuck in my mind in Paraguay. So after Dad retired, we went back to Puerto Rico. And to me, that was a culture shock, because we had — the family that I had known was my mom, my dad, my brother, and myself. And that was it. So we depended on each other, we helped each other, supported each other. And when you go back and there's family all around, it was like, now there's more voices adding to the mix, and how things should go, and what you should do and not do, and that sort of thing. So to me, it was a big culture shock. And —

SMITH: Were you in high school at this time, when you went back, or —

CUSTODIO: I was — having been in DOD schools — in Paraguay, we went to the American School, and the total sum of the high school, 9th through 12th, I think there were 15 of us. And so we were all in the same class. We all took classes together, and it just depended on what grade you were in what classes you took. So we had math — some were in algebra, some had trig, some — so it just depended. But we all took classes together. So by the time I got to Puerto Rico, I had enough credits, so I had — I was going to 11th grade, but with enough credits to graduate.

You know, I went ahead and graduated at 16 years old. And I knew I was going to college, because that was the only option at 16, because you're not old enough to do anything. So why not? So I went to the University of Puerto Rico, and I knew about the ROTC.² I knew there was a unit there, a detachment. So my plan was to go to the detachment once I enrolled in college, and enroll into that program, which I did. And I went there, and I talked to the captain.

SMITH: What year is this? Is this '76, or —

CUSTODIO: This is 1969.

SMITH: Oh, '69. Okay.

CUSTODIO: Yeah. [laughs]

SMITH: Oh, good.

CUSTODIO: Way back when.

SMITH: Yeah, no.

CUSTODIO: So anyway, so I went, and I talked to the captain. And he wasn't sure what I wanted. He was — you know, I don't think he had ever experienced a female coming up to him and saying: hey, I want to be in the Corps.

SMITH: And this was which ROTC? Army, or —

CUSTODIO: Air Force.

SMITH: Air Force. Okay.

CUSTODIO: Oh, no. Air Force.

SMITH: Okay. Just checking. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: I had made my decision. I was going to the Air Force for sure. So I walked in, asked him, and then he pointed to a room across the way. And he says: well, there's a sorority. It's called the Angel Flight.³ And you can join that. And I'm going: what do you mean? He goes: well, those are the females.

² Reserve Officer Training Corps.

³ Angel Flight began as "Sponsor Corps," a group of coeds supporting Air Force ROTC cadets in the 1950s; the first chapter was founded at the University of Omaha in 1952. New members had to be sponsored by an Arnold Air Society (the AFROTC honor society) member, permitting a closed demographic. Recruits were pledged, which explains Custodio's recruiter's reference to a "sorority." By the 1960s, Angel Flight was an official ROTC auxiliary, sometimes viewed as an organization that groomed future military spouses. The Flight was renamed several times during the 1980s and 1990s as the membership diversified. Angel Flight (now Silver Wings), and the Arnold Air Society planned ROTC social, community service, leadership, professional development, and/or philanthropic activities for the respective detachment. Accessed Oct 15, 2019, <http://www.ou.edu/student/angelfit/page2.html>; <https://www.unomaha.edu/news/2016/08/silver-wings-soars-home.php>; <https://lib.ecu.edu/heritagehall/about/angelflight>; <https://aas-sw.org/silver-wings/>; <https://aas-sw.org/arnold->

[10:00]

It's a sorority, and they support the cadets. And I'm like: you don't understand. I want to wear the uniform. I want to be enrolled in officer training here at the ROTC. And he didn't know what to do. So he said: well, come back in a week. Came back. He pulls out this test, puts me down. I fill it out, take it. And he says: come back in two weeks. So I come back, and he goes: I'm sorry. You didn't pass the test. I didn't fill out any forms, any — nothing. Just, here's a test, and I'm sorry you didn't pass. But there's no scores. There's no printout of what had happened. So I was devastated. But I was 16. Very naïve. And I took it — took him as — you know, on his word...

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: ...that that was a fact. So I tried the sorority.⁴ That didn't last. I think I spent two weeks there during August.

SMITH: What were they doing, just out of curiosity?

CUSTODIO: The sorority?

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: Well, they had these little uniforms, supposedly. A white blouse and blue skirts. And they would put you in formation. You'd march. But it was a sorority. I mean, there was no — I didn't see any purpose to their mission. You know? Just to support the cadets. And I'm like —

SMITH: Mostly girlfriends of cadets, or —

CUSTODIO: I didn't stay long enough to find out. [laughs]

SMITH: To find out. Right.

CUSTODIO: I didn't. And so now, I had to change my plan for school.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: Because my goal was to get a degree in math. And so I said: well, what am I going to do with a math degree? You know? And I knew at that point that I didn't want to be a teacher. I knew that that was not for me, to be in a classroom teaching. So I went to business, and I got my minor in math. So I had to change that plan. Because with a business degree, well, now you're marketable. You can go work anywhere. At the time, I worked in — once I knew that that was the goal, you know, to get the business degree in order to have a profession or a job after graduation, I took accounting. This is — accounting isn't math. I found that out really fast. So I had to drop out of that class. And I'm like: okay. Now — took it at the very end and passed, but I

[air-society/; https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/ghost-flight-the-1958-virginia-air-force-crash-that-according-to-the-government-under-no-e42904892da6](https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/ghost-flight-the-1958-virginia-air-force-crash-that-according-to-the-government-under-no-e42904892da6).

⁴ Angel Flight.

found out that accounting wasn't for me. So I knew I couldn't be an accountant, even though I loved math. So that was out the window. So I took office management, and I go: well, I could probably do this. So in my last year of college, I found a job — full-time job, and I went to work for a commuter airline in their accounting office. But I worked primarily for the controller. And I was taking my last few credits at night.

SMITH: And what year is this?

CUSTODIO: It was 1973. Right. 1973. And that's where I met my husband.

SMITH: Yeah. You were a junior in college, or were you —

CUSTODIO: Well, I was considered a senior...

SMITH: A senior. Okay.

CUSTODIO: ...because I was enrolled in night school, since I only had like — I guess 12 credits for the whole year. So I did like three classes and three classes for each semester. I figured that I could finish it off like that. And so that Christmas, and at the commuter airline, I met my husband. And three months later, we got married. So it was pretty quick. We got engaged a month later. My father was surprised. My mom was outraged, I guess. [laughs]

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: And — but it happened. You know? And so she knew that I was taking night classes. So at work, she would call me. She knew that I took classes, let's say — I forget the day — Tuesdays and Thursdays. So every Tuesday and Thursday, my mom would call me. "Well, how are you doing?" "I'm fine, Mom. What's up?" And she goes, "Oh, you're going to class tonight, right?" So she made sure that I wasn't going to drop out just because I got married and I had a full-time job. So she was very smart. Very smart. And I have to thank her for that,

[15:00]

because she made sure that I finished my degree. And you know, so very strong woman. Her mom was an entrepreneur, so she was as strong as her mom. And I thank her for that. And then so we got married, and I stayed there for about a year or so.

SMITH: At the commuter airline?

CUSTODIO: At the commuter airline.

SMITH: So I want to talk a little bit about your exposure to aviation there. What was your general impression of aviation, or —

CUSTODIO: Well, I knew the chief pilot. I knew a lot of pilots. They had a reservation center. So I had a good taste of what an airline kind of — the logistics, the ins and outs, how to run it, you know, what was required. You know? And I saw the pilots. They had a little simulator for

their De Havillands. They flew De Havillands at the time and — but that never crossed my mind, to become a pilot.

SMITH: Did you fly? Did you have the opportunity to fly?

CUSTODIO: Not at all.

SMITH: Even as a passenger, or —

CUSTODIO: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: Oh, of course. Since I was little, I was on planes. And I know flying — when we were coming back from Iran, you know, we were flying from Germany to London, London to New York. And looking out the window, seeing the world from that perspective, it always fascinated me. Always.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: So being in an airplane, for me, was comfortable. I didn't fear it. I loved, you know — feeling of being up in the air and seeing the ground from that perspective. So working at a commuter airline was like: oh, I'm going to get free flight benefits. I'm going to be flying everywhere. You know? And it didn't matter. We'd go to New York. We'd go here. You know? And so it was good. It was good. I really liked that aviation community as far as the flight benefits, obviously. You know?

SMITH: And had you met some of the Air Force pilots when your father was an air attaché?

CUSTODIO: Not really.

SMITH: You did not?

CUSTODIO: No, no. That comes later.

SMITH: That was later.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Meeting the Air Force pilots. Mm hmm.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: So —

SMITH: Let me go back.

CUSTODIO: Sure.

SMITH: But when he was an attaché, did — was there any exposure to —

CUSTODIO: Aviation?

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: No. Not at all.

SMITH: Okay. I just wanted to get that clear.

CUSTODIO: I just saw the uniform. I saw — you know, I thought it was beautiful. [laughs] And I liked it. I really liked it. You know, to — and then my perspective, again, of what the Air Force was about and their mission versus the Army. And so I had a little idea. I was young, but I was impressed. It really, I guess, impressed me to the point where I really wanted to join the Air Force. And then just the fact that my father had served, you know, seeing his service, I said: well, I'm going to serve too, because it's a great life. You're serving your country at the same time. We saw the world. Why not, you know? And then — but I knew it was the Air Force. That was very clear in my mind. [laughs] It was the Air Force. So —

SMITH: So you finished with the commuter airline.

CUSTODIO: Mm hmm.

SMITH: And by this time, are you close to graduation, or —

CUSTODIO: Oh, I graduated that semester.

SMITH: You had already graduated. Okay, great.

CUSTODIO: That same semester that my mom would call me...

SMITH: That you got married?

CUSTODIO: ...as soon as I got married...

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: ...to make sure I got my degree, right then. So I was done with that.

SMITH: And what year was that, the degree?

CUSTODIO: Let me see. '74?

SMITH: Okay. And let's talk about how you got in the Air Force.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: And despite the ROTC block. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Right. So, a couple of years later, let's say two and a half or so into our marriage, we started talking about joining the Air Force. And I'm like: great idea. So I knew I had my degree, I knew I could qualify for Officer Training School. He had three years of college. So he said: well, I could enlist, go to school at night, you know, get my degree, and then maybe

commission later. I'm like: good plan. So we'll both join. So we went to take the test. We went to the recruiter. We both got the highest scores during that whole thing. And there — yes, I figured out what had happened at ROTC. I said: I filled out this form. They sent for the test. They gave me the test, and these are my results. So now, it was very formal and official. So I figured out that what had happened in ROTC was just a blow-off, you know, like just to get rid of me, and go on your merry way and don't bother

[20:00]

me again. [laughs] But — so we got that, and I told the recruiter: okay, great. So I have a degree, and I'd like to go to Officer Training School. He goes: oh, no. We can't give you that. I go: why not? Well, we don't have anything available. Why don't you enlist, and then — I'm like: no. It doesn't work like that. I knew better. And I said: no. If this is not what I'm getting, then I'm not going in. My husband went ahead and joined. And I figured: well, a military spouse. Let's see how it goes. I guess I could live with this. You know? That's as — we're still in the military, and that's great. So he got stationed to Little Rock Air Force Base, eventually, after school and everything. And he was in airfield management.

SMITH: He enlisted.

CUSTODIO: He enlisted.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: I said "no." [laughs]

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: And I just knew that being enlisted and trying to get into Officer Training School was going to be very hard. And I just didn't want to deal with that. I said: no, I'll pass.

SMITH: How did you know that?

CUSTODIO: I think my father had an experience that he relayed to me when I was going to school. He said that he was enlisted, and he was trying to become a warrant officer, and they denied him. So I took that experience as, it's not as easy as it sounds, and it's a very tall hill to climb up. And I said: I don't want to go through that, because they told him no. We can't give it to you. You know? And it wasn't because he wasn't going to be qualified. It's just — they didn't do it. So I think that story that he shared with me impacted my decision not to enlist, even though I did want to serve. But I knew what I was qualified for. I said: why am I going to take something that's second best. You know? So I passed, and anyway — so [my husband] was in airfield management. And that's when we were around pilots and navigators and the C-130. And it was pretty neat. And I got to know these guys. You know?

SMITH: What was the first airfield management base that he was assigned to? Little Rock?

CUSTODIO: Little Rock Air Force Base.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: And we lived in Jacksonville, Arkansas.

SMITH: How was that?

CUSTODIO: [laughs] Small. Very small. But it was nice, because we — you know, Little Rock was maybe 20 minutes away — 25 minutes away. And we'd go into the city, and we'd go up to the Ozarks. And Arkansas was beautiful. You know? My daughter — our daughter was born there in North Little Rock, and she doesn't share that with many people. [laughs] Where were you born? Arkansas. And I think Clinton was the governor when we were there, at the time.⁵ So — but I found a job working with a bank, and then I found a job — I worked with the biggest law firm there was. So I became the assistant to one of the lawyers, you know, in Little Rock. So that was a great experience, you know, being exposed to — I forget the name of the firm, but — something Huckabee and — I forget, but it was right there near the river.⁶ Very nice.

SMITH: Is this the mid-'70s now? So '75?

CUSTODIO: About — no, '77.

SMITH: '77. Okay.

CUSTODIO: Around — because our daughter was born in '75.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Yeah, '75, '76. Around there. Wow. [laughs]

SMITH: So how did you like the military spouse?

CUSTODIO: It was alright. You know? I mean, when we first got there, what was intriguing to me was that just because we were enlisted, the first sergeant's wife came and said: oh, well, let me help you find an apartment. And something that shocked me is the places she was showing us was like — I don't want to live in a dump like this. You know? Just because we're enlisted doesn't mean we can't afford something nice. And —

SMITH: Was she aware that you were — you had a career, that you were working? Apparently not.

CUSTODIO: Apparently not. You know, people put you in a little box, and this is their perception of you,

[25:00]

⁵ William Jefferson Clinton served as Governor of Arkansas Jan 9, 1979-Jan 19, 1981 and Jan 11, 1983-Dec 12, 1992. National Governors Association. Accessed Oct 15, 2019, <https://www.nga.org/governor/william-jefferson-clinton/>.

⁶ Possibly Huckabee, Munson, Tilley and Rowlett, founded in 1984 by Mike Huckabee. Accessed Oct 15, 2019, http://huckabaylawfirm.com/?page_id=190.

and you need to fit in that box. And so I said “thank you,” and we went and found our own place. And it turned out that the apartments we rented were where all the officers lived. And so she was like, well — she was shocked that we ended up living there. But —

SMITH: Did you find that there was any prejudice towards you in that area, or —

CUSTODIO: You know, that’s something that — I really give people a chance. I never assumed that that’s where they’re coming from. And so unless it’s something very blatant, very out there, I’m just saying that it’s just based on their ignorance. You know? So I just push it off and keep going. So you know, I don’t have time for that. So it’s like, as long as you don’t personally block me, affect where I’m trying to do or get somewhere, then thank you, nice meeting you, and I keep walking. So I don’t see people like that. I assume every person is a great person, a nice person, and we’re going to have a good relationship, you know, until it’s not. [laughs] And then it’s like: thank you. But anyway, so there were a lot of officers in this complex, and actually, our upstairs neighbor was a pilot. And we kind of encountered each other many years later. And that’s something my husband remembers, because he was in airfield management. He managed all of the pilots’ and navigators’ flight records. So he’s still involved in aviation, you know, as we worked in the commuter airline. So he knew a lot of the pilots, too. And one of our best friends was a pilot. He’s so down to earth. I mean, somebody you could relate to. And he was Hispanic. He was Puerto Rican. Grew up in the U.S. He was an Army brat, too.

SMITH: Who was that? If you —

CUSTODIO: Huh?

SMITH: What was his name?

CUSTODIO: His name was — oh, gosh. I’m thinking of his son’s name. Oh, Edward — we called him Eddie. Eddie Wilson. Eddie Wilson. And Wilson is from his adopted dad. But he was a great person, and his wife, you know — unfortunately he passed away from breast cancer.

SMITH: Oh, my gosh.

CUSTODIO: Yes. I want to say about seven or eight years ago. But anyway, he was all heart. All heart. You know? And when you see someone who’s like that and know what they do, you can relate to that person. And to me, that was important, because when the time came that I entered, finally got my chance, I said: I can still be who I am, but still pursue this profession, and not have to change. So that really influenced me from him, because he was the best person, you know, with the biggest heart, that was our friend. It was great. But anyway, we stayed there in Little Rock. He got an assignment to Panama. Off we went to Panama, and I got a job with the Panama Canal Company — the Panama Canal government, when I got there.⁷ Because I always had to work outside the home. You know, being a housewife or a mom, a stay-at-home mom,

⁷ The Panama Canal Railroad Company was renamed the Panama Canal Company on Sept 26, 1950, then became the Panama Canal Commission in 1979, “Records of the Panama Canal,” NARA. Accessed Oct 15, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/185.html>.

that was never something on my list. You know? I tried it, but I still wanted something more. I wanted something more. And so I got a job there. And the best thing about that job is I worked at the Equal Opportunity Office. Now it's called Diversity, Inclusion — I don't know if they have a new name for that. But it was Equal Opportunity, and it was the first time that they actually had programs for women, on how to progress, how to — you know, get a pathway to a career. And it was the first time I'd really sat down and talked to other women who were professionals. And they were looking, you know, on their careers and how to get ahead. And so that was quite an education for me. And it just made me a little more assertive on what I was trying to achieve. So I figured if I'm going to be

[30:00]

a military spouse, then I need to find a career that will follow him everywhere he went. So I looked at getting a job with the Department of Defense. And I was able to get in. And it was — I guess I was a GS-4 or 5. I forget what I started at. And I was working at the air terminal at Howard Air Force Base...

SMITH: In Panama.

CUSTODIO: ...in Panama, around airplanes again. So very familiar. You know? The jet fuel kind of just starts getting into your system, and you're like — oh.

SMITH: What were your duties?

CUSTODIO: Well, I was in the admin office, so I worked for the air terminal manager, who was a pilot. And so I made sure that, you know, all the passengers that came and went, you know, all their paperwork was set. They — I think there was a money transaction, like \$10. They had box lunches, you know, when you went on the aircraft that came through. Some were chartered. Some weren't. Some were. You know, you could catch a hop on a C-130 or a 141 that might come through there, and people would try to get back to the States. So I'd just make sure that all the paperwork that was filled out was in order and filed and collected the monies that we sold the box lunches for these civilian passengers. Well, military spouses and military active duty that were trying to catch a hop. So I'd go and deposit the money over at the finance office. So those were basically my duties — what I did. But it was good. You know, it was around military people and the airfield. And so it felt good. And I knew that his next assignment, I'd be able to get a transfer or find a job with DOD, and at least I'd accumulate my years for retirement. I figured this is going to work out. And then that summer of '79, the Air Force had an open house at, I want to say, Albrook. We lived at Albrook, and I worked at Howard.⁸ And there was a table there with a pilot, an Air Force pilot, behind it. And there were brochures. And he informed me that the Air Force was looking for women pilot candidates. I mean, I just couldn't believe my ears. I'm like: oh, my God. [laughs] This is perfect. You know? To be in the Air Force, and get the best job there is in the Air Force. Sign me up. [laughs] And I go: well — he goes: well, yeah.

⁸ Albrook Air Force Base and Howard Air Force Base, Panama.

They just opened it, and we're recruiting women candidates to go to pilot training. And, great. So

SMITH: Because at this point — so, in '76, they opened up the training and the first class, I think, graduated in '77. So you are like, right in that...

CUSTODIO: Right. Right. Mm hmm.

SMITH: ...early time frame for women flying in the Air Force...

CUSTODIO: Exactly. Exactly.

SMITH: ...for the Air Force.

CUSTODIO: For the Air Force.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: I know the Navy's always been first to do everything. [laughs] But that's okay. You know? Because then it gives the Air Force a reason to go: well, they did it, we should do it too, so — which is great. But —

SMITH: So what did you have to fill out...

CUSTODIO: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: ...and what did you do?

CUSTODIO: Well, here's this. I went to look for a recruiter. I'm like: okay, now that I know there's an opportunity — I had my pamphlet — there aren't any recruiters in the Panama Canal Zone. The only recruiter I found was an Army recruiter, and I knew I wasn't going there. But I said: let me see what the Army has — you know, where the Army's at with this. So I walked into the recruiting office. I sat down, and — how are you doing? Shake hand. Please have a seat. And I go: well, what do you have for women in aviation in the Army? Well — you know, the guy scratched his head. Well, we don't have that. But we have this. And so he started to tell me about other opportunities. And when he found out that I was married and I had a 3-year-old, he got up and said: thank you. There's the door. And he kicked me out of the recruiting office.

[35:00]

And like I've always said: that's okay, because I didn't want [laughs] to join the Army anyway. So — but thanks. So I walked out, and I went to — I don't — I'm sure you remember, CBPO.

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: Civilian Base Personnel Office. And I went in there. Since I — the finance office was right next to it. And I said: look, I'm trying to find an Air Force recruiter. And they go: well, there's a staff sergeant that — he goes to the local high school, and he recruits high school kids out of, you know, the Panama Canal Zone high school. And I go: well, let me talk to him. So I

sat down with him, and he says: I've never recruited an officer before. I said: do not worry. So being DOD, I had access to all the local — to the regulations. So I jumped in. I found out everything necessary — all the forms, medical tests, the minimum scores, everything. All the requirements that was needed to get into the Air Force. So I sat down with him, and I said: okay. I'm going to help you help me get into the Air Force. And so I said: these are the tests you need to order. These are the forms I need to fill out. These are the medical tests. And I knew what the minimum — you know, you had 20/20, you know, the sitting height, all of that. So nobody was going to tell me: I'm sorry, you didn't pass. It's like: no, this is what we need. And so I talked to my husband. I said: this is what I want to do. And he was very supportive. He said: if that's what you want to do, then who am I to tell you not to do it?

SMITH: What time of year — is this still 1979...

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: ...when you were having this discussion with the recruiter...

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: ...about — do you remember approximately what time of the year? Fall, spring?

CUSTODIO: Well, it was right after the summer open house. So it was early —

SMITH: During the summer?

CUSTODIO: Early fall?

SMITH: Early fall. Okay.

CUSTODIO: So let's say it was July. So, late August. Now, I'm doing my due diligence and trying to find out — how am I going to make this happen. You know?

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: My mom thought I was crazy. The same lady who called me to tell me to go to school, to make sure that I finish my degree, is now telling me: what are you doing? I said this is something I've always wanted to do. I wanted to be in the military, and then get the best job there is in the Air Force.

SMITH: What about your dad?

CUSTODIO: He was on the fence, but he was supportive. You know? My dad and I, we've always been close. So he was okay. He was okay. And then even my mom went to my husband and said: are you going to let her do that? [laughs] And he told her: who am I to tell her not to? You know? Because she'll regret it if I make her — you know? It's not going to work. So —

SMITH: So you have to do all of the physical, the forms, tests, and eventually you get notified of what?

CUSTODIO: So, December 27, 1979.

SMITH: Wow.

CUSTODIO: That date is permanently in my mind. We receive a telegram saying that I had been accepted in to Officer Training School for the flight training program.

SMITH: So it was specific. It wasn't just OTS.

CUSTODIO: No.

SMITH: Like, open-ended.

CUSTODIO: No, it was with the flight training slot.

SMITH: Perfect.

CUSTODIO: Because, you know, on the form it says you have three choices. And so I said: I want to be a pilot. And he goes: what about the other two? I go: well, just put "pilot" and then "pilot." All three. And if you can't do that, then just, whatever you fill out, I'm not going to take if they don't give me this. And I figured, it's my third chance. I'm just going to go for it. And it worked out.

[Phone ringing]

[TAPE PAUSED]

SMITH: So we were — before the beeping —

CUSTODIO: Right. Right.

SMITH: I apologize. We were at December 27, and your notification.

CUSTODIO: 1979. Right. So I got the telegram. It was accepting me into Officer Training School, and then with the flight training slot after that. So one thing I did know was there was an age limit to flight training. You couldn't be older than 26 and a half. January was my birthday. I was going to be 26. So I had the flight screening program, Officer Training School to go through, before I started flight training. So I was going to be that close to my 26 and a half

[40:00]

year mark for flight training. So I couldn't screw up flight screening. I couldn't screw up Officer Training School — delay anything. If not, then I'd lose my opportunity.

SMITH: So you went to flight screening at Hondo...

CUSTODIO: Hondo, Texas.

SMITH: ...before OTS.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: Interesting. Okay.

CUSTODIO: Yes. So they made sure that the pilot candidates were going to be able to continue with the flight training slot.

SMITH: That makes sense, before spending three months.

CUSTODIO: Before spending all that money on Officer Training School.

SMITH: Tell me about your Hondo experience.

CUSTODIO: That was great, actually. You know? Very exciting, getting to Officer Training School, because we were in the same — it was at Lackland Air Force Base, but in Medina base. So Officer Training School at the time was at Medina Base.⁹ And we were all in flights and squadrons. I remember I was in Squadron 7. And one of the squadron commanders — later on, we ran into each other at American Airlines. And he goes: I remember you. [laughs] I was — what did he say? He says: I just saw women pilots with the window open, and they were drying their nails outside [laughs] — the nail polish outside the window. I'm like —

SMITH: That was his image of — yeah.

CUSTODIO: Yeah. That was his image. I'm like: well, yes. Now I hope your image has changed since then. But anyway —

SMITH: But before that, you went to Hondo.

CUSTODIO: I went to Hondo. But we stayed at the —

SMITH: The same —

CUSTODIO: At the same place. Our quarters were separate. It was in a different building. But we marched just like the officer trainees, and we — for the most part. The one thing — I don't know if you went to OTS or not.

SMITH: I didn't. I was ROTC.

CUSTODIO: ROTC. Okay. Well, one thing just to mention is I requested ROTC in '69, and the very next year is when they opened it to women. The very — but I didn't know that.

SMITH: And nobody let you know, of course.

CUSTODIO: No, of course not.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: I didn't know that. But that was 10 years from 16 to 26, when I finally got my opportunity...

⁹ The Air Force initiated OTS at Medina Annex, Lackland AFB, TX in 1959. "Officer Training School," Feb 11, 2015. Accessed Oct 15, 2019, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104479/officer-training-school/>.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: ...to get into the military. But anyway, I think there were two of us — two females in this group.

SMITH: How large was the flight screening group, roughly? Doesn't have to be exact.

CUSTODIO: It was small. I want to say about 20, if that.

SMITH: Okay. How did you get to the airfield from Lackland?

CUSTODIO: So they bussed us. So we took a bus from Medina Base to Hondo, every day.

SMITH: About how far is it?

CUSTODIO: It's far.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: I want to say it's about 40, 45 minutes. A 40- to 45-minute drive.

SMITH: To Hondo, Texas.

CUSTODIO: To Hondo, Texas.

SMITH: And how were you received there?

CUSTODIO: It was good. I mean, the flight that I was in, we — it was just like UPT.¹⁰ The same standards. You had the emergency of the day, so they'd call on people and — what are the procedures? What would you do? Blah, blah, blah. And then —

SMITH: Stand up, same thing.¹¹

CUSTODIO: All stand up.

SMITH: It's like a pre-UPT.

CUSTODIO: Pre-UPT.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: So the way —

SMITH: Tests? Tests every day?

¹⁰ Undergraduate Pilot Training.

¹¹ Each morning in UPT, while all of the students are seated around the flight table, an instructor begins an emergency scenario, then a student's name is called; the student stands up and verbalizes the next actions. If a serious mistake is made, the student is "sat down," and removed from the flight schedule that day.

CUSTODIO: Oh, tests. Yes. Yes, yes. So you had the ground school, then you had the flights, and then you had to solo. And then from there, if you didn't solo, obviously you weren't going to pass.

SMITH: How many hours was the program —

CUSTODIO: I want to say like 21.

SMITH: Okay. So yeah, everyone should have soloed by then.

CUSTODIO: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah. Yeah.

CUSTODIO: Of course. Plenty of time. Plus, then they gave you a navigation — like VFR¹² navigation. And so we had our own — they called us “Fishpots” — flight screening officer trainees. And so we had our own commander, you know, and the student commander. And one incident that I remembered — there was an instructor who took me on a navigational trip. And it was after a few rides. And you read the map, look at the ground, and then track your flight in order to do your

[45:00]

VFR navigating to get out and back. Well, he didn't want to let me use the map. And I was like: how am I going to get from here to there if you — no, no. You need to know this. And I'm like: okay. So he gave me an Unsat,¹³ because I got lost. Hello, I didn't have a map. So I kind of went back. I wrote everything that happened, as it was fresh in my mind. I went to my student commander, and I said: look, this happened. What should I do about it? And he goes: well, that's not right. I go: I know. So how do we — so this is where I learned the — what do you call that? The chain of command.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: What you need to do and how you need to proceed. I'm like: okay. So we went to the military flight commander at Hondo, presented the case. Luckily, my student commander came with me, you know. And he goes: well, that's not right. So he went and presented it to the contractor commander, you know, who was in charge of the contract. Because these were all civilian pilots that were teaching...

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: ...the Fishpots. And they found out — well, that's not right. And so I got pulled into this conference. So there's the contractor in charge of all the civilian pilots, the military commander, and then me, and then they pulled in this instructor. And they ask him: what

¹² Visual Flight Rules.

¹³ Unsatisfactory grade on the flight.

happened? And he got fired. But you know, it was not fair. I don't know if he was trying to kick me out of the program or what, but I knew that it wasn't right.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: And I spoke up for myself.

SMITH: Had you talked to other students to find out that everyone else got to use their charts or maps?

CUSTODIO: Right. Right. Yes. I made sure that I had my facts.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: You know? How did you do this flight? What did you use? So yeah. It was very evident after the fact that he was unfair for me — to me, should I say.

SMITH: Well, thank you for speaking up, because I've heard so many stories about Hondo, particularly, with minorities...

CUSTODIO: Mm hmm.

SMITH: ...during that era. So thank you for speaking up to get things corrected.

CUSTODIO: No, absolutely. Absolutely. So I mean, if you don't speak up, nobody's going to vouch for you or advocate for you or anything.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: You know, you're your best advocate.

SMITH: Absolutely.

CUSTODIO: But you've got to know how to proceed and get your facts straight and know who to talk to.

SMITH: Did your experience change? Did you notice any change with your instructors? Like, had he been your primary instructor?

CUSTODIO: No, he wasn't.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: He was a guest instructor.

SMITH: Oh.

CUSTODIO: [laughs] Of course. Why would your instructor want you to fail?

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: He's primary instructor. He should — every instructor should want their student to succeed.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: I mean, that's the goal, right? So anyway, yeah. He got fired, and I went: okay. So I finished the program, went to Officer Training School. And now I'm in the flight with everybody else. The only difference is, the Fishpots, we got to wear little wings on our uniforms. So everybody knew that we were flight trainees, you know, going to pilot training.

SMITH: How long had you been in Hondo? Maybe a month, or —

CUSTODIO: I want to say six weeks.

SMITH: Six weeks. Okay.

CUSTODIO: Yeah, something like that. Six weeks. So it was the end of February — March, April...

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: ...May, and OTS is about three months or so. Three and a half months. So anyway, my roommate — her name was Mary. I remember that. She was going to be in finance or something. And the thing about her was she was always studying. I mean, she'd crawl into the closet with her flashlight so they wouldn't [laughs] catch her, and she'd be studying. I'd go: Mary, just do your best, you know. I mean, you need your rest. You need to — she wouldn't want to lay on the bed to, you know — because she wanted to make sure the corners were tucked in. And I'd just like, rip it up and...

SMITH: [laughs] Too tired.

CUSTODIO: ...I'm going to get my rest. Forget it. So I get demerits. Okay. It's part of the program.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: But, you know, obviously I was older. She was young, right out of college. She was trying to —

[50:00]

and I'm like: okay. Whatever.

SMITH: What were your barracks like — your rooming situation?

CUSTODIO: They were like college dorms, I'd have to say. You know, I'm — and they were nice. My favorite part of the day was at night when they played "Taps." I loved that. I just — I mean, I can still hear the bugle, you know, like, oh. So nice. And I've — from day one, I put that uniform on, and I still remember — I still get goosebumps, you know, being in uniform.

SMITH: Was it just the two of you and —

CUSTODIO: Just the two of us.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: And it was a mixed dorm, so there were guys at the other end of the hall. I mean, it was all mixed in.

SMITH: And your class — your OTS class was about how many?

CUSTODIO: Well, in my flight, I want to say there were 12, if that. I don't remember. There were two of us that were flight trainees. So —

SMITH: And how did you perceive you were treated? Like, any differently than —

CUSTODIO: Well, yes. Absolutely, because all the other OTs there, officer trainees, they looked at us like: look at these guys, you know. They looked like we didn't belong with them. And they thought that we weren't personable, we weren't approachable, that they — and I'm like: we're just like you guys. We're just following a different career path, you know. But I realized that it — we kind of didn't fit in. So what I did is I applied to be on the staff, because if you're on the staff, you know, you have your student commander, and then I forget the different staff positions that there were. And the officer trainee staff was able to live in another dorm. And so you could march by yourself, because you had responsibilities that you needed to go to. You didn't have to be with another officer trainee marching through the campus. You would get to your classes as needed, you know. I mean, you'd have to be in your class, but you didn't have to go with your flight to the classes. So I figured, you know what? If they're not going to accept me in this flight as part of them in the dorm, I'll just go ahead and find a staff job. So I did, and I got one of the staff jobs. And we moved out to another dorm. And it was great, because you could come and go and do whatever you needed to. You could eat by yourself, because you'd get to the dining — the chow hall, and if you were the only one, you'd have to wait till your table was full before you could sit down and then eat your lunch or dinner or whatever it was. But as a staff member, you could forego that, which was great. And then we had responsibilities to take care — and we'd help the commanders do the inspection — the dorm inspections and things like that. So that was pretty good. And I figured: well, I could do this.

SMITH: Were other Fishpots on the staff? Was that common?

CUSTODIO: No, not really.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Not really.

SMITH: Did the instructors or the — you know, did they treat you any differently as a Fishpot than the other--

CUSTODIO: No, but they were aware that we were there. And then it was fine. My flight commander was a female. And let me tell you, she was awesome. She was awesome. And one thing that sticks with me, and I share this with every female that I talk to, that we get into a conversation about relationships. She said: it takes a very secure man to love an independent woman. And that's so true. So true. So anyway, she was that good.

SMITH: Awesome.

CUSTODIO: That good.

SMITH: So you graduate from OTS.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: And now — then you're headed for flight school.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: And your OTS graduation — what month was that?

CUSTODIO: I want to say it's sometime in June.

SMITH: Okay. In early summer, and —

CUSTODIO: Early summer.

SMITH: Do you go to Laughlin right away, or did you have some time in between?

CUSTODIO: I don't — that was a blur. You know?

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Graduation and then starting flight training, getting settled. Because here I am, married with an enlisted. He got orders to Laughlin.

SMITH: Interesting.

[55:00]

CUSTODIO: So they worked with us.

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: That was the hard thing, is to get orders together. And the Air Force was just starting to deal with things like that, with two — a married couple having joint assignments. So it was very unique. And the uniqueness for us is he's enlisted, and I'm an officer. And we have a 4-year-old now. So we — talk about being out of the box. We were like, way out there. We had our own category.

SMITH: Did anyone give you a hard time about that?

CUSTODIO: No.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: No, no. They were very supportive. They wanted us to succeed, so they really helped make this happen for us. So he got based in flight operations. He was at base ops. And in fact, I think they gave him a harder time than they did me.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: You know, being in UPT.

SMITH: And I'll just point out — I think. Correct me if I'm wrong. 'Cuz flight records for the — at base ops would be different than student flight records, so there wasn't —

CUSTODIO: Correct.

SMITH: So just for anybody listening. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: We both worked — we worked — we both worked for the DO.¹⁴

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: So we were both under the DO. Obviously, I'm in flight training, but he's active-duty working, you know, base operations. So if we were doing cross-countries, or whatever, we would have to go to base ops and put our flight plan in. And he'd close it out, whatever would be needed.

SMITH: But there's no intersection with your grading and anything like that.

CUSTODIO: None. None whatsoever.

SMITH: I just had to say that.

CUSTODIO: No, no. Absolutely. No, no, no, no. So the training squadron's one thing, and then flight operations for the base...

SMITH: Is different.

CUSTODIO: ...is different, even though we're both under the DO. It's just too different.

SMITH: So tell me about your first day at Laughlin.

CUSTODIO: It was pretty neat. You know, there was — I wanted to say — I thought there were like 49 of us for some reason.

SMITH: Wow.

CUSTODIO: But there — I went back to my flight records, and I'm looking, and I'm counting. And I think there was less than that.

¹⁴ Deputy for Operations; later, this position became the Operations Group Commander.

SMITH: So were you — well, they do — by the time you graduated, there was a time when they had the double classes. Were you going through training during that period, or did you just have a large class?

CUSTODIO: Well —

SMITH: Because you were 81-05. Is that —

CUSTODIO: 81-05. Right. So I want to say — I counted like, 27 on my orders.

SMITH: For graduation. Okay.

CUSTODIO: But in my mind, there were a lot of us, unless they divided us at the time, which I don't remember, into two separate classes. You know?

SMITH: Were there other women in your class?

CUSTODIO: Well, that one that was in my flight training at Fishpot, she came. But within the month, she washed out.

SMITH: Oh, no.

CUSTODIO: Right when we were doing physiological training. You know, the PLFs.

SMITH: Right. Yes.

CUSTODIO: You remember PLFs?

SMITH: Parachute landing falls.

CUSTODIO: I know. So —

SMITH: Did they hook you up to the back of a pickup truck, and then they —

CUSTODIO: They pull you, and then they drop you, and then you land on a cactus.

SMITH: Yeah. You're running behind the pickup truck, go up in the air a hundred feet or whatever.

CUSTODIO: [laughs] Right. Yeah, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: And you get to do that for free, instead of Cancun, where you have to pay for it. [laughs]

SMITH: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It's crazy. [laughs] Anyway —

CUSTODIO: Right. Exactly. Exactly. But —

SMITH: What was your instructor pool like? Were they all —

CUSTODIO: My instructor in T-37s was a C-130 pilot, and he was great. He was so laid back. He was awesome. I mean, it was fantastic. I really enjoyed him, because he didn't have a problem with me being there, as a female.

SMITH: Right. What about your classmates?

CUSTODIO: They were — we were tight.

SMITH: Good.

CUSTODIO: We were really tight. And the good thing is — well, we had — I think he was a captain that was in our flight, so he was a student commander for our group. And he did — he wore that captain's bars like: I'm the captain, and I'm in charge. And we're like — so every — there were a couple of first lieutenants, and all of us were second lieutenants. Little butterbars. You know? And the whole class was like: look at this guy. Who does he think he is? [laughs] But anyway, he was — he washed out because of MOA: manifestation of apprehension.

SMITH: Airsickness, or —

[1:00:00]

CUSTODIO: Airsickness. Right. And so one of the first lieutenants kind of took — I think he was a nav — a navigator — took his position. And he was great, because when we got to nav training, there were lots of us that the clue bird didn't show up for. And so he said: come on over. And we all asked: could you help us? He goes: piece of cake. And then the lightbulb came on, and we were like: yes.

SMITH: Where the source of commissions for most of your classmates?

CUSTODIO: There were a couple of ROTC — I mean, not R— OTS, of us. Some — I think that's what the deal was. We were divided into two groups when we got there. That's why there was like, 27.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: But — so there was Officer Training School and ROTC. And then —

SMITH: Any Academy?

CUSTODIO: Prior — like navigator or somebody who was a first lieutenant that was in a different career field that came. I don't know what kind of commission they got.

SMITH: From — just from active duty. Right.

CUSTODIO: Active duty. Right.

SMITH: No Academy?

CUSTODIO: No.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: No, I think the Academies — they kind of keep them together...

SMITH: Together. Yeah.

CUSTODIO: ...in groups.

SMITH: Were there any women in the other section that you can recall? You mentioned the one that was with you at Fishpot. But I'm just curious if there was —

CUSTODIO: Right. There was, because when I got to T-38s, somehow she came to our class. And I don't know if she washed back, or if they just transferred her from one of the other flights into my class.¹⁵

SMITH: Got it.

CUSTODIO: So when I graduated —

SMITH: Who was that? Do you remember her name?

CUSTODIO: Oh, I want to — Stephens. Something Stephens. She was a nurse.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

CUSTODIO: And she came to pilot training. And I think she got 135 or 141s. Debbie. Deborah Stephens, with a "ph."

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: And I did contact her later on, and she had some kind of inner ear problem.

SMITH: Oh.

CUSTODIO: So she got disqualified. But this is years later, after she —

SMITH: She had already been a pilot.

CUSTODIO: Pilot. Right. And in her aircraft — but —

SMITH: Now, tell me about your Tweet solo and how you celebrated.

CUSTODIO: Yes. Well, in that Tweet solo, obviously — you know, everybody comes out, and they throw you into that — into the tank, you know, with water. So we — and back then, you know, we didn't have phone cameras. So I was like: where are my pictures? [laughs] You know. I couldn't find any pictures. But it was great. And the guys were very supportive. You know? But —

¹⁵ A student can be "washed back" to a later class for a variety of reasons; a student who "washes out" is eliminated from UPT.

SMITH: How did you like flying? We have the picture you sent of you...

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: ...just to bring back the memory of —

CUSTODIO: Very hot. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] Right.

CUSTODIO: I mean, it's so hot, you can feel your boots sinking into the asphalt. That's how hot it gets out there.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: And you can recall that.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: So coming back from flights was like: phew, my gosh. But on one of my solos, what — you know, the one thing I didn't like about the Tweet were the spins.

SMITH: Hmm, okay.

CUSTODIO: So it was like — the first — my first impression of the spin, I think, when the instructor showed me — I had my eyes closed the whole way down. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] Oh, no.

CUSTODIO: I'm like: oh, God, no. You know? And so he goes: okay, let's go up and do it again. I'm like: okay.

SMITH: So —

CUSTODIO: So we went up —

SMITH: Yeah. Just explain what you do to put an aircraft in a spin.

CUSTODIO: Oh, okay.

SMITH: That aircraft in a spin.

CUSTODIO: Right. You pitch up, you push opposite rudder, opposite aileron, and then the plane just pitches over. And then so you're facing down, and then you're facing up, and facing down, and the aircraft is just spinning down to the ground.

SMITH: Towards the ground. Right.

CUSTODIO: And so now you have to apply the procedure of neutralize — whatever.

SMITH: The 37¹⁶-word, bold-face... [laughs]

CUSTODIO: [laughs] Yes, the bold-face.¹⁷

SMITH: ...that you have to remember.

CUSTODIO: You're like: well, okay. So after doing it a couple times, I'm like: okay. I'm just going to go through this, because I have to. It's on the syllabus. I've got to check it off. But I never enjoyed them.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: You never enjoyed them. Who enjoys spins?

SMITH: I did. I'm strange.

CUSTODIO: You did?

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: Oh, my gosh. [laughs]

SMITH: But you kept your eyes open, obviously. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Oh, obviously. But the first time, no. I was like — and then the second time, I'm kind of like: okay. So you know, we'd do our spins.

SMITH: Right.

[1:05:00]

CUSTODIO: We'd get through that, and it was fine. I was like: no. I like to fly airplanes. I don't want them out of control. [laughs]

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: So I was like: okay, this is fine. But on one of my solo flights, I took off, and right after gear-up, the screen went dark.

SMITH: Oh, with the oil, or —

CUSTODIO: A turkey buzzard came and hit the windscreen, and then it slid off. And then my first reaction was like: my engines. You know? Are they going to be okay? So I check the engines. It was fine. There was blood and feathers. And so I declared an emergency and came around. They put a chase aircraft, you know. And I'm looking at the instructor. He's going: don't look at me! [laughs] Keep your eyes —

¹⁶ The spin recovery boldface was more than 40 words.

¹⁷ Bold-face actions are the portions of an emergency procedure, in bold type, that a pilot is required to memorize and perform immediately.

SMITH: Could you see out? Tell me what your visibility was.

CUSTODIO: Well, yeah. I mean, there was blood. It was smeared and everything. But yeah. But that first impression of just darkness, boom, bang, and then you know, you see this thing slide off to the left, and you're expecting it to go into the engine. And luckily, it didn't. So pull the engines back, you know, slowed down, declared the emergency, and came around the pattern. So there was a chase aircraft, looked—got my gear, flaps—everything looked fine. Landed. Obviously, all the trucks are chasing you down the runway. You pull off and jump out, and you know, shut it down. And everything's good. And 30 minutes later is when your knees start shaking, and you're like: oh, my God, what did just happen? But it was a very — Ahah moment for me, because it taught me that this is exactly where I needed to be and what I needed to be doing. It just validated my performance. It validated me as a pilot, I think, and the fact that I could handle anything that came my way. So it was — at the time, when you have an emergency, you just do what you know, and what you're taught. And you have your checklist, and you do it. And that's what makes you a good pilot, because you know what to do to maintain aircraft control, assess the situation, and then take the appropriate action. And you do all that. You do your bold-face. You do your checklist. You get the airplane on the ground safely, and then you have time to sit there and think about what happened.

SMITH: As you fill out your safety paperwork. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Right. [laughs] Right, right. So it was — but then, you — after you get over the fact that you survived this, you know, then you think: wow, well, I did pretty good.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: Yeah.

SMITH: So what was the reaction back in the flight room when you came back in after that flight?

CUSTODIO: So — oh, yeah. Yeah, no. Everybody was like: well done, good job. You know? So it was really good.

SMITH: Cool.

CUSTODIO: Really good.

SMITH: So you finish up the T-37s. Was it still contact, instruments, and then formation?¹⁸

CUSTODIO: Formation. Same thing. And then we went to T-38s, and I —

SMITH: How was that transition for you?

CUSTODIO: I fell in love with it. [laughs] That was like: I'm home.

¹⁸ The interviewer is listing the three main categories of T-37 training flights: contact, instruments, and formation.

SMITH: [laughs] It's a big difference from the T-37 — loud, hot.

CUSTODIO: Hot.

SMITH: And it maneuvers well but doesn't go very fast...

CUSTODIO: Fast.

SMITH: ...to the white rocket.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: So first ride in a 38...

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: ...was like what for you?

CUSTODIO: It was — it felt good. To strap into that jet felt great. That — you know, it was everything I thought it would be, because I remember when I was in school, and TV wasn't 24/7, and they'd end the transmission with "High Flight."¹⁹ And it was a T-38. And I always remembered that. And I said: I'm going to fly that thing. And I just remembered the "High Flight," signing off on the TV.

SMITH: When did you first have that thought, that you can kind of go back to — I mean, was this while you were in training?

CUSTODIO: This is when I knew I was going to flight training...

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: ...is when I remembered me seeing "High Flight."

SMITH: Okay. So it was more a retro—

CUSTODIO: So it wasn't — it wasn't when I was seeing "High Flight"...

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: ...oh, I'm going to fly this jet. No. It was like when I flew the jet, it was like: I remember seeing this.

SMITH: Got it.

¹⁹ Nightly, during the 1960s, an Air Force video of a F-104, accompanied by the recitation of "High Flight," a poem by Royal Canadian Air Force pilot John Gillespie Magee, Jr., ended the broadcast television programming. "Words to High Flight," May 6, 2016, USAHRA. Accessed Oct 16, 2019, <https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/753695/words-to-high-flight/>. The two aircraft are similar in several aspects.

CUSTODIO: So it brought back that memory of me seeing that and not knowing at the time that one day, I would be flying that aircraft, you know. So it was kind of surreal at the time, but it was like — it felt great. I loved — the T-38 was my jet.

[1:10:00]

SMITH: What were your training highlights in the 38?

CUSTODIO: I loved acrobatics. Loved it. My cloverleaf was like, spot-on. I mean, I could hit — if they had marks in the air, I could hit that mark every time, on speed, with the attitude in the aircraft. You know, all the time.

SMITH: Explain the cloverleaf.

CUSTODIO: The cloverleaf — so you start off really fast at one level, and you pull up. And you get inverted, and you have to turn 90 degrees, inverted, and then bring the aircraft back around. So you were going to hit every four — 90-degree, four points, all the way around, to finish your — it's a four-leaf clover for the — so you have to be up here with enough speed that when you pull down, you're going to have that speed to be able to pull up again and hit that altitude at that 90-degree point, inverted, to pull up for your next leaf. So, yeah. It was great. And all my students, I made sure that they could do the clover — if anything, if you can't do a barrel-roll or whatever, you do a cloverleaf, because I'm going to teach you exactly how you need to do this. So that was my favorite, other than formation flying and the straight-ahead rejoins. Man, you'd see everybody come in, and they'd just *fleeeehh-eeeerrr* [zooming and screeching sound], come back. I'd get in there. I'm like — and I'd park it. I'd park it and be like, right in. Right in. So —

SMITH: So apparently, you impressed enough instructors where they said: she needs to come back here as a first assignment instructor pilot, or FAIP.

CUSTODIO: FAIP.

SMITH: So —

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: Did you know? Did you have a sense during training that you were going to stay?

CUSTODIO: That's what I requested.

SMITH: You asked for it—

CUSTODIO: I asked for it. I wanted that for two reasons. I could stay there, because he was there, and we had now a 4 — no, she was 5 by the time I finished training — 5 years old. And it'd be stability for the family, but then I'd be able to fly the fastest jet there was in the inventory for women at the time.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: And you needed to get your fighter qualification in order to fly the jet.²⁰ So you had to go to water survival, ground survival. You know, you can't do all those trainings without being able to fly a fighter, but I was okay with that. I mean, I got the fastest ship that there was. So anybody flying a supersonic jet needed that qualification, and then graduating in the top of the class there — I wasn't the top, but it was top 5 percent.

SMITH: Top 5 percent is pretty close to —

CUSTODIO: Yeah.

SMITH: You were giving everyone good competition.

CUSTODIO: Yeah.

SMITH: They were looking over their shoulder at you. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Right. Exactly.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: Exactly. So you know, I thought it was pretty good. You know? And I really loved the fact that I came back as a FAIP, because it just made me a better pilot. So if you could teach this, it just makes you a better pilot, if you understand everything about the airplane, everything about flying, what it takes to be a pilot. And —

SMITH: Before we get to the IP time, I just want to — want you to talk about being a mom [laughs] during pilot training.

CUSTODIO: Mm hmm.

SMITH: You know, how did you balance everything?

CUSTODIO: Okay. So what we did when I was a student is I knew I needed time for the family. And in the evenings, he — the DO made sure that if I was early on the schedule, he was late. So we always had somebody to take our daughter to daycare and pick her up.

SMITH: Nice.

CUSTODIO: So they worked with us like that. So they were able to put his schedule around my schedule, because mine was a priority. My schedule was priority at the time. And it worked out great.

²⁰ Custodio is referring to the FAR—fighter, attack, reconnaissance—designation that students are given during UPT, versus the TTB—tanker, transport, bomber—designation, indicating who is qualified for assignments in different categories of aircraft. This system was in place until the mid-1990s. "U.S. Air Force Pilot Selection and Training Methods," T.R. Carretta, 2000. Accessed Oct 16, 2019, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a430320.pdf>.

SMITH: How did your daughter manage? Like, did she understand: oh, Mommy's going to fly? Or would that be tough?

CUSTODIO: Well, I'll tell you about my daughter. To her, she thought every other mom was a pilot, because that's all she knew.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: It wasn't till she got to middle school when she — her teachers found out what her — what I did, and they were like: oh, my God! And she's like — what's the big deal? [laughs] To her, it was normal. She grew up with this. You know? She grew up around airplanes and everything.

[1:15:00]

So it was normal to see me go fly, and you know, and my flight suit and the military. And so for her, it was fine. You know? She was good.

SMITH: Your parents — had they warmed up by graduation? This is--

CUSTODIO: Oh, yeah. Very proud.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Very proud. Now it's like: oh, my daughter the pilot. And yeah. But the thing is that my dad actually — he had told me he wrote to the governor of Puerto Rico at the time, and: look, my daughter's graduating. She's — nothing. It —

SMITH: Oh, to get some type of acknowledgement, or a thank you? Some kind of letter from the governor.

CUSTODIO: Right. Right.

SMITH: Wow.

CUSTODIO: Yeah, so —

SMITH: And here you are, a pioneer, and —

CUSTODIO: Exactly.

SMITH: So you were — how did you come to know that you were the first Latina or —

CUSTODIO: Latina, Hispanic, female military pilot. I'll tell you exactly how that went down. So I have an Academy grad female student sitting at my table. Eventually, I became the — what do you call it, 89 pilot instructor?²¹

²¹ The 89 ride is (potentially) a struggling student's last flight; the 89 pilot must evaluate the student's performance and potential to successfully complete UPT.

SMITH: So explain what that is.

CUSTODIO: Okay. The 89 pilot instructor takes students who are very weak, works with them to try to get them up to par in the syllabus to continue training. And if they don't pass their check rides, then they're — they go to a board, and then are washed out of pilot training. So I worked with the weakest students. And I had a female Academy grad, and she goes: well, I really need to get this ride, you know, under my belt, because I have my check ride, and I'm going to be the first Hispanic female pilot for the military. And I'm looking across at her, and I'm like: I think you're looking at her. I'm sitting right here.

SMITH: [laughs] What year was that?

CUSTODIO: I want to say it was like '82.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: And so her name was Rosanna Garcia, and her dad was in the Air Force. And she was one of the first few, I guess, going through the Air Force Academy.

SMITH: Which is why she probably thought that she would be —

CUSTODIO: Right, that she'd be the first...

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: ...female, you know, Hispanic military pilot.

SMITH: And perhaps someone had said that to her at the Academy.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: Who knows? So —

CUSTODIO: But you know, that never crossed my mind.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: It — I was doing this because I wanted to serve. I wanted to be a pilot. I wanted to wear the uniform. I didn't want to be the first anything. You know? It just happened. And so — and I'm looking at her. I'm like: Rosanna, I'm Hispanic, and I already have my wings. So — and she's like: oh. So it just kind of threw her back and opened my eyes. And I'm like: wow, I never thought of that — thought of having that mark. You know? I knew I was the first T-38 instructor — female instructor at Laughlin. But I never thought —

SMITH: Female Hispanic instructor at Laughlin.

CUSTODIO: No, female, period.

SMITH: Oh, female, period. So —

CUSTODIO: So I was the first T-38 female instructor at Laughlin.

SMITH: At Laughlin. Wow.

CUSTODIO: Period.

SMITH: Thank you. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: So that I knew, but it wasn't something I was — I just wanted that. You know?

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: It just — and I worked for it, too. You know? But for her to come and say: oh, I'm going to be — I'm like, no. Sorry. Lost your chance. [laughs]

SMITH: So you were for — what was your buddy IP program like? Did that go smoothly? Were there any challenges working with the other instructors?

CUSTODIO: How would I say — I have to say that the majority of my peers have been — throughout my career, have been fantastic, in the military. And my flight commanders — and I think the fact — when you're older and you're going through something like this, there's more professionalism. How you express yourself, you feel more professional, more dedicated, and very serious about the task at hand. So I didn't have to worry about — I had a family. You know? So my thing was my family and my job. And this is who I was. And like I said, I take everybody for who they are. I don't discriminate.

[1:20:00]

I don't put anything, you know — put you in a box. You're a person just like me, and we're going to get along unless somebody screws it up [laughs] on the way. But you know, for the most part, it's — it was like that. And I think when you're open like that, people see that, and they can connect with you unless they're not that kind of person that wants to connect.

SMITH: So what about some of the other — others that were not “for the most part”? Just a couple of examples of things that happened.

CUSTODIO: Well, you know, Monica, I have to say, I can count — you know, with that instructor that I had at — I can count with one hand the times that I've had confrontations and bad connections that I've had to stand out and stand up for myself. But for the most part, you know, if nobody wants to be my friend, that's fine by me. You know? I don't need that. So if there were people who had — I never knew about it, or just ignored it, just because. [laughs] You know? So I can't talk to that, because I felt comfortable.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: You know? I really can't talk to that. And sometimes you could see it, but it was like, you don't have to deal with it, as long as it doesn't affect your pathway directly, you don't have to deal with it. Why deal with it. You know? Unless they're willing to listen to what you have to say and you can give them your perspective and your point of view and tell them that

they need to understand that women — we're here to stay. [laughs] You know? And that's how life is. But if they're not willing to listen, why are you going to —

SMITH: Well, what kinds of things would you hear, just in passing? I mean, this is Del Rio, Texas.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: And you're Hispanic. It's largely a white male population at Laughlin, so I would imagine that you heard things that weren't always great.

CUSTODIO: If I did, I probably blocked it out of my mind.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: You know? Because it's something that — you know, growing up around the world taught me to respect different people, different cultures. And I consider myself a world citizen. But the biggest thing is that everything we have here — our freedom, the way we live, our way of life — I do not take that for granted. And there's so many people that don't understand that, and they need to go out and see how other countries are. And I think that's the biggest thing that a lot of people here in this country don't understand, and they take everything for granted. So — but I'll get off my soapbox now.

SMITH: No, that's well said.

CUSTODIO: And — but you know, I guess I chose to ignore those people, because I had more important things that I needed to deal with.

SMITH: What was your first flight like as a T-38 IP — first instructional flight?

CUSTODIO: My first students.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: This is great. So I had two second lieutenants sitting in front of me, and here I am, a second lieutenant. Female, in T-38s. So I would say: okay, this is what we're going to do. This is how we're going to do it. And they were like: are you sure? And I'd say: yes. And I'd pull out the book and review it with them: okay, it says right here, this is how we're going to do this, and this is how it's done, and these are the parameters. Again. Okay, we're going to — are you sure? They'd question everything I told them.

SMITH: White males? Just out of curiosity.

CUSTODIO: Of course.

SMITH: I'm just — I have to ask.

CUSTODIO: White males. White males, of course. But it was not only the fact that I was a female. I was a second lieutenant, just like them.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: I was a new instructor. And I put myself in their place, not as white males, but as a student pilot looking at a second lieutenant. I didn't care what you look like, but what experience do you have to teach me? You know? And I — that's the perspective I took on that. It's like: I understand that you're questioning what I'm trying to teach you, but we're going to walk this through together. So I would take the time — that's why I ended up as an 89 pilot. [laughs] Because I would take the time to sit there

[1:25:00]

and try to have them understand that what I was trying to explain to them was valid, so they could see it. They could hear it, and they could see it in black and white. After a while, what I said, that was it. You know? And off they went. And they — and I think I sent you a picture...

SMITH: You did.

CUSTODIO: ...of my student--

SMITH: --of Lieutenant Stutts.

CUSTODIO: Stutts.

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: He came up to me and thanked me for getting him through the program, and his wings.

SMITH: At his graduation.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: That's his graduation. Wow.

CUSTODIO: Yes. He was my first student. Absolutely.

SMITH: Awesome.

CUSTODIO: So it just takes patience. You know? The normal training technique was: sarcasm, ridicule, and I don't know what else. I didn't use any of that. I had patience. I would listen. I would see where they were coming from. And I had — for one maneuver, I had two or three techniques. If this doesn't work, let's try it like this. Or, let's try it like this. So I developed different techniques depending on the student's abilities. You know? On — and I worked with them. And I guess because of that, my commander — his name was Rob May, Robert May — the flight commander in the T-38 squadron. He went to the 560th at Randolph. And having had that experience, you know — and that was time for me to — where was I going to go next? So I reached out to him. I said: hey, is there any possibility of me going to the 560th to become a PIT instructor — pilot instructor training instructor. And so he vouched for me and recommended me. So I went to Randolph as the first female PIT instructor in T-38s there.

SMITH: When was that?

CUSTODIO: That was in — I want to say late '83.

SMITH: That's great.

CUSTODIO: Yeah.

SMITH: What was your experience like there, as compared to going through PIT...

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: ...a few years earlier.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: Were there things that you said: oh, you know — I don't want to do this, or: I want to make sure I do that.

CUSTODIO: Oh, no, no, no, no.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: I enjoyed the PIT.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: My training — you know, every training I went through is — it was great. And I have to say that I went back as an instructor. So I went to UPT. I became an instructor at UPT. I went to PIT. I became an instructor at PIT. So it just helped me become a better pilot, every step that I took, every job that I took. And remember, I said: I never wanted to be a teacher when I —

SMITH: Yes. And there you were at PIT. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Right, and there I was. And I'm like: wow, how ironic is this? You know? Here I am, instructing. But I never knew I had a passion for it. I think the subject matter was very different than being in a classroom, because now you have an aircraft that you're dealing with, and so many other things. And so I really enjoyed being an instructor. Really enjoyed that.

SMITH: I meant to ask you: at Laughlin, how long was it before another woman became a T-38 instructor? So you became one in 1981.

CUSTODIO: Mm hmm.

SMITH: And did you see another before you went to PIT?

CUSTODIO: Before I left?

SMITH: Yeah. In '83 — do you recall?

CUSTODIO: I don't think so.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: I don't think so.

SMITH: At PIT, were there other women that came to be PIT instructors, or did you just see them coming through?

CUSTODIO: They were coming through, and I think when I left PIT is when they got another female instructor there.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: But they were coming through to be instructors at others — at other bases.

CUSTODIO: As instructors. Right.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Right. Right. Mm hmm. They were coming through to be instructors. So — but you know, this is great. It was great. My time at Randolph was fantastic, and then I went to the school squadron, or, as — when I found out I was pregnant. And I was like: okay. Now — but I didn't know, so my husband says that our son is the youngest [laughs] ever to fly a T-38. So — but I guess, like, two and a half, three months in, I said: I think I'd better go and check this out. [laughs] So —

SMITH: Were there rules at that point...

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: ...about the —

CUSTODIO: As soon as you knew you were pregnant, they grounded you, immediately. And I could understand that. In a 38...

SMITH: Sure.

CUSTODIO: ...you're pulling 6 Gs. You know? I mean, they don't know what happens to the fetus with all those maneuvers and the Gs and all that. So I can — I could

[1:30:00]

understand that, but you know, in a 141 or a 135, in a cargo airplane — I know I spoke to some of the females later on. They said: well, as long as you fit in your flight suit, and it doesn't obstruct [laughs] your flight controls, then you're good.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: And I'm like: okay. So I don't know what it would be right now. You know? In fighters, I'm not sure what the policy is. But I'm sure that has an effect on your body. You know.

But anyway, our son was born there at Wilford Hall, and he was '86, I think. 1986.²² So we were still there at Randolph by that time.

SMITH: So before that, did you — were you an instructor at Hondo as well, or no?

CUSTODIO: That was the last thing I did.

SMITH: That was the last thing. Okay.

CUSTODIO: Yes, so —

SMITH: So we'll — I just want to have you reminisce about a couple of photos.

CUSTODIO: Sure.

SMITH: One has your daughter. I think you were returning...

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: ...from a cross-country.

CUSTODIO: I was coming home from a cross-country.

SMITH: It says "'82."

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: So —

CUSTODIO: '82. And since my husband worked base operations, he — it was a weekend. He brought our daughter to the flight line, and I was getting out of the aircraft. And then she came up — because there weren't any other aircraft around. So she came up to the airplane to greet me, you know, when I got home.

SMITH: That's great.

CUSTODIO: Yeah. That's my favorite photo.

SMITH: That was precious. And then there's one — I think you said this one was from a two-ship —

CUSTODIO: Cross-country.

SMITH: Or no, a cross-country from Memphis.

CUSTODIO: It was a cross-country I did with another female, actually.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: So it was kind of the first female — all-female cross-country.

²² Wilford Hall Medical Facility is located at Lackland AFB in San Antonio, TX.

SMITH: T-38 crew.

CUSTODIO: T-38 crew.

SMITH: 1982.

CUSTODIO: '82.

SMITH: You went to Memphis...

CUSTODIO: '82.

SMITH: ...is what —

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: And then there's — let's see. We're going to go to '85, an all-female two-ship formation?

CUSTODIO: Oh, yes. That was at Randolph. When I finished my duty at Randolph, and I was going to Hondo. So we arranged to have a two-ship, all-female formation, because we had females that were — they were doing desk duty, but they were still qualified in the 38.

SMITH: Oh.

CUSTODIO: So they came. And there was another — by that time, I was already at the school squadron after I got pregnant, and that's when they got the second [female] 38 instructor at PIT. So she was there. I don't remember who they all were.

SMITH: Who they were. Yeah.

CUSTODIO: You know, I just remember going up, and it was right at dusk.

SMITH: Oh, nice.

CUSTODIO: So it was beautiful.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: I mean, we took off. It was still daylight, so at that — we got that 30-minute window, as we're coming back to Randolph in a two-ship. So the lights are coming on, and it's just — it was great.

SMITH: So it wasn't a cross-country.

CUSTODIO: No, no.

SMITH: It was just a — but it was a formation flight. Yeah.

CUSTODIO: It was a formation. We did extended trail.

SMITH: Nice.

CUSTODIO: We did it all. We did it all.

SMITH: What fun.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: And this — so this is from 1983.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: Dated May 22, 1983, Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

CUSTODIO: Right. This was the Women Military Pilots Association's first conference. We were all charter members of that, and actually, when I was at PIT is where the whole idea to have this all-female military aviators' association start. So we all signed up. The majority of the females were at Williams Air Force Base...

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: ...because there were a lot — a lot of the first females went through Williams Air Force Base. So they stayed there as instructors, and they brought more female instructors back there to Williams. So — but there weren't enough to do a four-ship — all-female four-ship. So we got some from Reese, Laughlin — there were two of us — and where — Reese, Williams, and Laughlin. I thought there was one more base. I'm not sure.

SMITH: I'm going to read the names that you gave me.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: Captain Barbara Brumme.

CUSTODIO: Uh huh.

SMITH: Lieutenant Olga Custodio.

CUSTODIO: Uh huh.

SMITH: I'm saying your name wrong. Custodio. Captain Karen

[1:35:00]

Daneu.

CUSTODIO: Daneu.

SMITH: Daneu. Captain Jane Logan.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: And the bottom, it's Lieutenant Gwen Linde.

CUSTODIO: Mm hmm.

SMITH: Second lieutenant Mee Mee Crane. Second Lieutenant Dee Hornbostel.

CUSTODIO: Hornbostel.

SMITH: Hornbostel.

CUSTODIO: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: I hope I say her name correctly. We'll spell it correctly in the photo credits. And Second Lieutenant Kathi Durst.

CUSTODIO: Durst. Yes.

SMITH: So that's a great photo. Four-ship, all-woman T-38 formation.

CUSTODIO: Mm hmm.

SMITH: Don't get to see that...

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: ...every day. And this, to your knowledge, was the first one?

CUSTODIO: Yes. So what date was that? 80 —

SMITH: May 22, 1983.

CUSTODIO: '83. Right.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: So Mee Mee — I think Mee Mee was 38 instructor at Laughlin at the time.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: So as I was leaving, she came in.

SMITH: She came in.

CUSTODIO: She's the one I think I did the cross- — may — no, it could have been a student. Nope. But I know she was there at Laughlin with me.

SMITH: So how many times a day did you tend to fly as an IP? [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Oh, gosh. At Laughlin?

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: Oh. So we would fly at least twice, and if we were behind on the syllabus, three times. So we would have 12-hour days. Sometimes, we'd have — we worked five, sometimes six, days a week, just to catch up on the syllabus. So it was long days. What I was going to tell you is when I was a student, trying to coordinate our daughter — so I would get home, and I'd have my emergency procedures, and I'm cooking, and reading, and studying. And on the

weekends, I would take Saturday off, and then on Sundays, I'd wash clothes and study. So that was my routine for that. As an instructor, they still worked around our schedule, and mine was still a priority versus my husband's. Sometimes it didn't work out. You know. But they worked with us. But the — we found some real good friends in town, and they helped us out. And when she started school — so it was — it wasn't bad. We always found people to support and help us. And then my parents would come and help out, too. So they were proud and supportive and all of that. So — but it was all good. And you asked me a question, and I just took off [laughs] on a different tangent. I forget what the —

SMITH: No, I was just asking about being the first four-ship.

CUSTODIO: Oh, okay. Okay.

SMITH: But I think if I —

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: I might have forgotten.

CUSTODIO: No, no, no. That's fine.

SMITH: Oh, so maybe this was the question. It was about the Hondo instructor time.

CUSTODIO: Okay. Right.

SMITH: So this is 1984.

CUSTODIO: That's at PIT. Right. I'm still at PIT at the time there.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Because the captain and then my scarf — I still have that scarf. Anyway, so from there, the Air Force opened a career track. It was called "instructor trainer career track," I believe. And it was a — instead of 141s or 135s, which I knew I would eventually go into, they opened up this new career field as instructor trainers' career track. And I said: well, I'm going to apply for that, because I really enjoyed instructing. And I requested to go to Hondo and become part of the T-41 Flight Screening Program. And I was able to do that. There was a —

SMITH: That's the right picture. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Yes. [laughs and points toward the picture].

SMITH: So this is '86.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: In '86. So in '86, I finally went over to Hondo, and what we did for the most part was monitor the contract the Air Force had with the civilian flight school that would fly our

syllabus. So it was the same syllabus that I had when I was going through. But it was a big change, because here you are in a T-38, and you're pulling downwind [laughs] — you know, I mean, your final turn to land. And you're just pulling for everything you have. And here, it's like: nope, not yet. Nope, not yet. Okay, when you can't stand it anymore, and the runway's right there,

[1:40:00]

then you turn, and then you line up with the runway. So that was the hardest thing for me, is to slow down.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: Because you're flying so fast in the 38, and here you're in a suped-up 172 or 82, whatever. And it was just slow. You know. But it was good. I really enjoyed that. And we were able to start the ROTC flight program, because a lot of dets²³ — I guess they pulled the funding for their flight school that they would go through when they were in ROTC. So we contracted Embry Riddle in Daytona Beach to do that summer's program. So we went out there early May to train their instructors to become instructors for our syllabus for the ROTC program. And we put — I think we put three rotations, three classes, of ROTC cadets, through the program. So once we trained their instructors to fly our syllabus, we had them checked out and everything. Then we just monitored, you know, the syllabus and the program that they took the student — ROTC students through. But it was a great time. I mean, it was a great TDY.²⁴ Daytona Beach. Who wouldn't want to be there? And they actually rented a whole wing of the Hampton Inn that's right next to the speedway and next to the airport, right where the school is. So, a whole wing. We had every officer that was on this mission — on this contract for us to go. They even sent a flight surgeon with us. So we had our own flight surgeon that was for the military active duty that we were there for this contract. And we could bring our families. But at the time, I had to wait till I finished with the instructor portion. And what I did was I rented an apartment for my parents to bring the kids, once my daughter finished school — to bring the kids to stay there. And they could stay at the hotel, or they could stay at the apartment. My husband was working, so he only had two weeks off. So that's all I saw him that summer. [laughs]

SMITH: And this was May of '86, or '87? So this like —

CUSTODIO: I want to say '86.

SMITH: '86.

CUSTODIO: Because I got there early 80 — no, I got there late '85, and then in '86, I was —

SMITH: Okay.

²³ [ROTC training] detachments.

²⁴ Temporary Duty.

CUSTODIO: I was there. And then we got the contract.

SMITH: Cool.

CUSTODIO: And I was selected as part of the group, because there were instructors from other airbases that were — formed part of this TDY group to go out there and monitor the contract for the Air Force to do the ROTC students.

SMITH: So when that contract was over, or when the training was over, what happened?

CUSTODIO: It was from May to August.

SMITH: And you — so you went back to —

CUSTODIO: We went back. We all went back.

SMITH: To Hondo?

CUSTODIO: That was a TDY.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: Temporary duty. That's all we did that summer. And the good thing is that, you know, we just monitored the contract. So our days weren't that long. We had our weekends off, and so it was —

SMITH: Nice.

CUSTODIO: And we were able to use their aircraft if we wanted to do any personal flights. So I took —

SMITH: What type of aircraft?

CUSTODIO: It was like, 172s or trainers. You know? And so I took my husband and my daughter up.

SMITH: Great.

CUSTODIO: I'm figuring I'm going to plant this seed. I'm going to see where it goes. And her comeback was like: well, you sat me in the back seat, Mom. How am I going to be inspired? And she dozed off. I'm like —

SMITH: [laughs] How old was she then? She must have been —

CUSTODIO: She was in, I want to say, fourth or fifth.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: No. I forget.

SMITH: Yeah, it sounds like a —

CUSTODIO: She was in elementary school, still. So it was, you know —

SMITH: Did you ever fly with your family again? Did you take them up other times?

CUSTODIO: No. I never took them up again. But later on, when I flew for American, they —

SMITH: Oh, sure. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: I took them — I took my daughter with me over a Mother's Day, actually.

SMITH: Oh, nice. Nice.

CUSTODIO: So she got to sit in first class. Because by — at that time, the aircrafts weren't full like they are now.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: Oversold, or — no. So there was always room. And so she enjoyed that weekend with me, because I had to fly on the weekend.

SMITH: So August of '86, you're back at Hondo. And then tell me about — then following year, you make this decision to...

CUSTODIO: Right. Right.

SMITH: ...leave active duty.

CUSTODIO: Mm hmm.

[1:45:00]

Well, before I actually — before I left Randolph, a lot of my peers were already going to the airlines at the time. And I was like: you know, I waited too long, worked too hard, to get where I'm at. I'm making a career out of the Air Force. So that was not in my thought process. It was there. And I have to backtrack. When I was going through — was it PIT? I think I was going through PIT. I just finished UPT, and there was another female going through, and she was going to T-37, the 559th Squadron, as an instructor in T-37s. I think she was going to Williams or some other base. She wasn't coming to Laughlin. But she said: hey, I'm going to go get my commercial license. Do you want to come? And I go: well, what are you doing? How do you do that? She goes: well, you study the AIM — the Airman Information Manual — and then they give you a test, and then you get your commercial license, because our flight training allowed us to be able to take the test and get the license for commercial pilot. And I'm like: what am I going to do with that? She goes: oh, come on. I go: well, I haven't studied the AIM. I don't know. And she had everything marked. She goes: come over. Bring wine. I've got chicken. We'll study it, and then we'll go whatever day it was to —

SMITH: Who was this? Do you remember?

CUSTODIO: I don't remember her name.

SMITH: That's alright.

CUSTODIO: Well, you know, I should look her up, because unfortunately, in a T-37, she overshot final...

SMITH: Oh.

CUSTODIO: ...and didn't make it out in time to eject.

SMITH: Oh, I'm sorry.

CUSTODIO: But anyway — I just remembered that. I'm —

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: But anyway, she said: well, come over. Bring wine. We'll study this AIM. So she was throwing out all this information, and I'm like, trying to absorb. You know? I think minimum passing was 70 or 75, or whatever. And I'm like: wait, if I make this, it's going to be like — so I think the next day or two days later, we went to the FAA. They gave us the test. You know, she got a 90-whatever, and I got 72, or whatever the minimum was, I got like, two or three points. I'm like: whew. [laughs] You know? I was like: okay, I got my license. And I'm like: what am I going to do with this? So I just stuck it in my back pocket, and I go: I don't think I'm ever going to use this, but anyway — you know, everything happens for a reason. And so sure enough, when the time came, you know — here it is. It's time to decide what I'm going to do. And that career instructor training track — AFSC,²⁵ they were going to make, they all of a sudden say: we're not going to do this anymore. So now I'm—was like, okay, what airplane am I going to? Where am I going to go? Now I have two kids. Our son was 2 years old, and I'm like — and he had gotten out of the Air Force by that time. He had a DOD job, very secure. Now I'm going to have to pull him out. So there was decisions to be made at the time.

SMITH: Sure.

CUSTODIO: And I'm like: what's the best thing for our family? For me, my military career — but I knew that something had to give. But I knew that I wasn't going to give up my military career. So I looked at the Reserves as an option. The best option I could have to still wear the uniform, serve, and still be able to retire — you know, make it a full career for me. And that was a decision that we had to make together, because it was — it was not going to be easy to uproot the whole family. And off we went. You know? And especially for him. He had already started a very good career in contracting for the Department of Defense. So he was on a career-track projection to become one of the top contracting officers for the Department of Defense. So he supported me. Now it was my turn to support him. And I go: well, what can I do and keep flying? So I started looking towards the airlines as that option. But still, my first thought was: I need a Reserve job, because I'm staying in the military. I'm making this a career, even though it's in the Reserves. I'm going to continue to wear the uniform.

²⁵ Air Force Specialty Code—a code for a specific job or career field.

SMITH: So what type of positions did you

[1:50:00]

pursue in the Reserves?

CUSTODIO: Well, since I was at Hondo at the time, they had Officer Training School there. So there was an opportunity to become a flight commander in the Reserves at Officer Training School. So I inquired about that, and they go: yes, we have openings. And so right then, I went ahead and signed up and made that transition. So I never skipped a day. I got out, I went right into that. And I think I spent a year there in Officer Training School when the opportunity at Headquarters Personnel came open.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: And I went over there to work for Accountability and Readiness. And in that directorate, we would take care and account for every airman, everywhere in the world—whether they be active duty, Reserve, or Guard, on active duty orders. So we would account for every airman to make sure we knew where they were, you know, their duty stations, and accounted for them. The other thing that the directorate did — if any airman became on casualty status — medical, or they passed away, or that sort of thing — we accounted for that, too. Our job was to — if someone — an airman passed away, to do the next of kin notification, which was very hard.

SMITH: Sure.

CUSTODIO: Because you had to send an officer, a chaplain — depending on the age of who you were notifying — maybe a physician, you know, a nurse or a medic or something, to — just in case, because notifying next of kin of the death of their son or spouse is not an easy task. So —

SMITH: Right. And you were serving in this capacity for how long?

CUSTODIO: Oh. I stayed at that directorate, I guess, 16 Reserve years, 15 of those...

SMITH: Wow.

CUSTODIO: ...were in that directorate.

SMITH: So you went through Desert Storm. You went through the Balkans. I'm just framing this.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: There were lots of notifications.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: Not like the current wars, but still, it was not a completely passive period...

CUSTODIO: No. It —

SMITH: ...by any stretch of the imagination.

CUSTODIO: It wasn't. In fact, one of the things that we — was Kandahar, when they bombed the...

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: ...facilities there. We had to take care of that, because I think we lost —

SMITH: Khobar Towers, you mean²⁶?

CUSTODIO: Khobar.

SMITH: Yeah, in Saudi Arabia.

CUSTODIO: In Saudi Arabia, yeah. Khobar, sorry.

SMITH: That's okay.

CUSTODIO: Yes. We lost airmen there, and military personnel. So we had to take care of that. The other — the incident that comes to mind, but it was more the Navy's — when the *Cole* was hit by that little bomb.²⁷

SMITH: Bin Laden? Yeah.

CUSTODIO: Right. That they — they had a little boat that went into the side of the *Cole*, and blew that up. So we were involved with that. And 9/11. I was at home, getting ready. I already had my uniform on by that time. I was a captain for American Airlines. And I was getting ready to fly from Dallas to New York City. And my first thing I do every time I would leave on a trip is I look at the weather, to see what the weather's like, what I'm going to be encountering, get in my frame of mind of — okay. You know, if it's bad weather, am I going to have to go around it? What am I going to have to deal with? Delays, blah, blah, blah. All that.

SMITH: You were flying for American.

CUSTODIO: For American Airlines.

SMITH: Yeah. Yeah, I just want to make sure that's right.

CUSTODIO: American Airlines at the time. And I was already a captain for them then. And I sat there, and I'm just watching the TV. And I'm trying to think: now, how did that happen? How did that — you know, it just was not — I was not comprehending what I was seeing or hearing. And then the next jet hits. And I'm just — no words. You know? I just — and so I think everybody started calling my husband to say: hey, where's Olga? He goes: well, she was supposed to fly out today. He didn't know if I had already left

²⁶ Khobar Towers, located on Dhahran Air Base in Saudi Arabia, was bombed on June 25, 1996. Nineteen airmen were killed.

²⁷ Seventeen sailors died in the attack on the *USS Cole*, while in port at Aden, Yemen, on October 12, 2000.

[1:55:00]

or not. And anyway, so obviously, they shut down the whole airspace, the system. No planes. And I was activated that same afternoon.

SMITH: Sure.

CUSTODIO: So I was put on active duty orders. We stood up a — casualty operations. We actually went to Brooks City Base, took one of the buildings they had there, and we stood up to have our 800 number put out there. And then the Pentagon got hit. So we had to stand up another section for that. So we had the towers.²⁸ We had the Pentagon. And we would tell — you know, we were on TV. Not us, but the Red Cross, says: hey, if you know of a loved one, if they've checked in, if they're in the military, please call this number. And so we'd have this 800 number, phone banks, and we had lists. And we'd be writing down everybody who called in. Yes, I heard from my husband, or no, I haven't. And no — so we'd be checking. So it took a couple of weeks to get those lists, you know, down on who passed away, or who was still missing, or you know, if nobody had checked in, or if they did. So that was a big, big effort for our directorate to account for all those military members that were on those flights, at the Pentagon, and be able to deal with the notification. But I think at the time — I don't think we sent out notification, because the news was so big, and people were so aware, that they knew if their loved one was there or not, or had died.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: And it took a while for them to get back home, too. So you know, they were on flights coming from — on commercial flights. They were in Canada, or wherever they had to land. So it took a while to get notification that they were okay. So that was a big effort on our directorate to get all that squared away.

SMITH: Difficult time for everybody, and aviation actually — the country, the military, has not been the same since.

CUSTODIO: Absolutely not.

SMITH: So —

CUSTODIO: Absolutely not.

SMITH: And women were — by that time had been flying combat aircraft in some services. And I was curious how that decision to allow women to fly combat sat with you as you were — you had already...

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: ...transferred to a non-flying Reservist position.

²⁸ World Trade Center towers.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: And you were flying for American Airlines.

CUSTODIO: Mm hmm.

SMITH: But I just — I'm curious what your thoughts were. This would have been '93, I guess.

CUSTODIO: '93, right. I was already at the directorate there at Headquarters Personnel, flying for American Airlines. And I thought about — excuse me. I thought about when I went to the Reserves of getting a flying job. But I figure: if I fly for the Reserves, and I fly for the airlines, I'm never going to be home. So that was the other thing that weighed on my plate. It was like: okay, I can't fly for the Reserves. If I'm going to fly for American, I have to just pick one flying job. Because I — later on, I'm glad I made that decision. I talked to a lot of pilots that I flew with that were in the Reserves. And they go: oh, no. This weekend, I'm flying over here. And I have duty over there. And then they come and fly for American. And I'm like: so when are you home? Well, um — I'm like: okay. So I made — we made the right decision on that part, as far as the Reserve job that I was going to do. And the — I was at Headquarters Personnel when — oh, I just met her. She's general —

SMITH: Oh, Jeannie Leavitt?

CUSTODIO: Leavitt.

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: Just met her last month. And she was going through PIT there when she was told that she has gotten her F-15, and that she was going to be allowed to fly fighters. And I — she came through our office. I don't know why. But I met her. She doesn't remember this.

[2:00:00]

But I do. You know? I'm like: wow, nice to meet you. And she was all excited and everything. You know, when she first — but I was excited for her, because I knew we had the ability to do this.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: In fact, when I was at PIT, they would take FAIPs and let them go to fighter lead-in for a week, just to check it out. So they could tell their students: hey, this is what it's like. And I said: well, can I do that? Oh, no. Why are we going to waste a slot on you? [laughs] I was like: because I'm an instructor.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: No. But you know what? I was like — I had other fish to fry and place — and so I was like: okay, at least I asked. They said no. But you know, that was that. But yeah. You know? I knew we would be able to do that. And I — it would just be awesome [laughs] to go up and do

that right now. But — and I understand. Women have to put off having families and things like that and look at their career. So there's sacrifices that women have to make in the military in order to have a career in the military and still have a family life. You know, you've got to plan for that.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: It's not just happening. You know? There's got to be a plan, always a plan—

SMITH: Well, you helped open the door for people like Jeannie Flynn and many others by performing as well as you did as a 38 instructor. So a lot of people have you and many other women pioneers to thank.

CUSTODIO: Yes. Thank you.

SMITH: I'm curious what — who were some of your mentors?

CUSTODIO: Could we take a quick break?

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: Okay, and just hold that thought —

[TAPE PAUSED]

SMITH: Before, we were going to talk about mentors. But we're going to pause, because during the break, you were telling me about some training videos that you did...

CUSTODIO: Right. Right.

SMITH: ...in the 38, so —

CUSTODIO: So when I was in the school squadron there, we were writing training programs for the students. So when we would teach them: this is how you depart the traffic pattern to go out to your MOAs²⁹ and how you come back, you had to show them — we had training films to show them the ground reference points on how to find their way back. So I would take the — VHS video cameras, at the time, were about this big. So you had the whole gear. I had the — not that we were going to pull Gs, but we had the G suit, the parachute on the back, and then a helmet. And here I am, holding this VHS camera and trying to film the visual points that we're trying to put in this training film so the students could see how to get in and out of the traffic pattern. So it was quite hard...

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: ...to — so I'd pull the visor up, just so I could get near the viewfinder to make sure that I was getting what I needed to. And I'd have the other pilot turn the airplane to get me a good angle, because the canopy came to about shoulder height, and I had the seat all the way up

²⁹ Military Operating Areas; airspace designated for military operations that may entail aerobatic maneuvering.

as far as I could. So I — he could roll over, so I could get a good shot of the reference point on the ground, but —

SMITH: You're in the front seat?

CUSTODIO: I'm in the front seat.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Yeah. It'd be hard [laughs] to do it from the back seat. You know?

SMITH: I just — [laughs] just need to clarify.

CUSTODIO: I know. I know. And you know, in case of emergency, I don't know what I was going to do with the camera.

SMITH: Oh no.

CUSTODIO: Just sit it on my lap and — I don't know. But we didn't think that far through. [laughs]

SMITH: Right. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: It was like: we're going to get our reference points, but you know — so he took off. He landed from the back seat and everything. And I'm holding this video camera. But kind of upsetting for my stomach, just looking through this viewfinder, you know, doing these maneuvers in order to get a good shot. But I thought that was fun. And so we'd write the training script and the syllabus, and they had videos that they had to watch. And so I worked with AV a lot. You know? And at the time, they didn't have the computer graphics. The computer that they used was this huge machine, and they had a graphic artist there. And her controls were huge, to draw — you know, here's the aircraft. Here's your point. So she had to draw different visuals for the students to see

[2:05:00]

where their entry point was or exit point. And then you would show them a video of what it actually looked like. And so it was quite fun, you know, trying to do that. And I learned how to also write scripts. So it's not how you write. You have to write it as you have to say it, and read it. You know, very different. Very different. So I learned a lot there. And that was fun. That was fun trying to do that. That was the other aspect. So when I did choose that career path to become the career trainer, you know, in the Air Force, when they opened that up — so I had lots of blocks that I filled, you know, in order to...

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: ...be able to develop that. And in fact, I was selected to be on a committee to look at the ways we actually selected candidates for UPT.

SMITH: Oh, when was that?

CUSTODIO: That was when I was at Randolph. It was towards the end of my time there. And what was interesting is that they wanted to take the AFOQT scores — do you remember — did you do BAT³⁰ testing?

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: Okay. BAT testing scores, with AFOQT scores, and say: this is how we're going to select the pilot candidates. And I kept advocating — how do you know what their abilities are based on scores? That doesn't say anything. You're going to lose qualified, good pilots if you just go on that. But anyway, yeah. The BAT testing.

SMITH: Yes. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Put the small dot in the square, and one's going this way, and the other one's going that way, and you had to maneuver that.

SMITH: I don't think I took it as a requirement. It was something that I was asked to do just —

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: I think they were about to use it, and they were asking —

CUSTODIO: They were creating a database...

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: ...when we came through.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: That's all that they wanted, was a database. They followed us through to see how well we did, and they took those scores as something to set the margin or the qualification at. So if you were between these scores, then you had like, a higher percentage of being able to get through undergraduate pilot training. That's how they saw that — the ability. So now, if kids took that BAT test, it wouldn't mean anything. With all these computer games that they're doing?

SMITH: Right. Right.

CUSTODIO: They blow everybody out of the water. So, anyway — so mentoring.

SMITH: So something I didn't ask you about was just walking me through landing from the back seat of a 38. Like, teaching a student how to land who's in the front seat while you're in the back seat as the instructor...

CUSTODIO: Right.

³⁰ Basic Attributes Test; used in conjunction with the AFOQT to determine pilot selection in the 1990s. Carretta, 5.

SMITH: ...what that looks like, the challenges.

CUSTODIO: Right.

SMITH: I want you to talk about that.

CUSTODIO: So in the front seat of a 38, you've got this beautiful canopy. You can see everything. You can see out the front, you know, everything. The only thing in your way is an AOA vane — angle of attack — and that's it. In the back seat, you've got the front seat's seat, and all this hardware and a fuselage — aircraft framing. And what you see from the back seat is about this much on this side and this much on that side, to land the airplane on the runway. And once you start the flare, you lose sight. So you're just looking down on the side to land the aircraft there. So the big thing about being an instructor pilot is not only do you have to fly, but you have to fly and talk at the same time. And if you have that ability to fly and talk — the flying has to come naturally. You can't think about what — you just have to know, and then you're starting to talk to the student. And as they're flying, now you don't touch the controls because, you know, it's hard to — the biggest thing about the 38, you know, with the seating, is the back-seater or the front-seater always has to know who's flying the airplane, because you don't see each other. You're not sitting side by side, tandem. You know? It's pretty hard to make sure that, nope, you're not double controlling, because you don't know if it's the aircraft or the other person. But landing from the back seat, you know, is a big challenge, because you just have about that much space to see out the front in order to find the runway and then set yourself up on final.

[2:10:00]

But the formation was — is the best flying ever. [laughs] I know I had a student pilot in the front, and I had a solo student on my wing. That was one of the scariest training flights that I ever took. We went out to the MOA, and we started extended trail. So we were lead. My student in the front was lead, and the solo student was 2. So we pull off. He pulls off. And all of a sudden, I hear: lost wingman.

SMITH: Oooh.

CUSTODIO: I tell the student: roll out. And I asked the student: where are you? He goes: oh, I'm not sure. I'm not sure. So I said: okay, we're level at this altitude. Tell me where you are. The next thing I see is this 38, inverted, coming down next to us.

SMITH: Oh, my gosh.

CUSTODIO: And I said: okay, level off. I told them exactly where he needed to go. Put him in a holding pattern. I'm coming to you. And we're going home. And you're flying home. I'm 2. You're lead. You're taking us home. I'm not getting my eyes off of you again. That was the scariest moment. I said: you don't go "lost wingman" and then start maneuvering.

SMITH: And then go inverted. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: No. No.

SMITH: Oh, my gosh.

CUSTODIO: So obviously, he didn't pass that flight, but —

SMITH: Wow.

CUSTODIO: Yeah. That was scary to have a student in the front, and a solo student [laughs] on your wing. So kind of challenging. But you know, for the most part, I have to say, the students were pretty good. We had a student that went through T-37s. He was a commuter airline pilot, over 3,000 hours. He got to 38s and couldn't keep up with the airplane...

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: ...because, you know, you've got to think so far ahead that if you can't keep up with it — and he couldn't. So we thought he'd be like, number one graduate. You know? But the plane was way too fast for him. So —

SMITH: Oh, we didn't talk about your heavyweight single-engine.³¹

CUSTODIO: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: Yeah, yeah.

SMITH: Tell me about that IFE.³²

CUSTODIO: So we're at — I have a student pilot in the front and — actually, no. I'm in the front. He's in the back, because he's going to become an instructor. So I'm playing student, and —

SMITH: Was this at PIT?

CUSTODIO: This is at PIT.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Pilot Instructor Training. So the students in Pilot Instructor Training sit in the back, because they're going to be instructors. So I get to be in the front and play the student. And we had just taken off. We were right at weather minimums. And we get a birdstrike, and it hits our left engine. Yes. And so the — we pull up. The tops were very low, so they were like, at 5- or 6,000 feet. So we were in the clear up above, which was fine. Our alternate was Kelly, but the weather hadn't changed that much right at Randolph. And I remember the ops officer that was on

³¹ A heavyweight single-engine landing in a T-38 is very dangerous; simulated heavyweight single-engine approaches are practiced to a go-around, but are only landed in an actual emergency.

³² Inflight emergency.

duty at the time. I started calling for Gunboat.³³ Gunboat is like, the ops — officer's desk that monitors all the flights. Well, Gunboat was the callsign in Laughlin. So I reverted —

SMITH: That's like: I remember that. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: [laughs] I — so I reverted to Laughlin.

SMITH: Oh, no.

CUSTODIO: And he started laughing. He goes: yes. But he was from Laughlin, so he knew exactly [laughs] who I was calling. And he goes: okay, yes. We're here. What's going on? So I explained, declared the emergency. And so the checklist had called for — you know, once you pulled the power back to push it up 10 percent. And I said: I'm going to leave that back here. We're just going to do the single-engine. And so we went through our checklist, and we came back. And I landed the airplane. I mean, the weather was right at minimums. Saved it. And it was a good thing we didn't push it up, because it would really have seized the engine, because the bird was in there, and it had really messed up the engine. So luckily, we didn't push it up as the checklist called for and landed the single-engine. You know?

SMITH: And you received a safety award for that.

CUSTODIO: I received a safety award for that. You know? It was the first time it was like: wow. [laughs] So that was pretty neat, that I was able to get that award. You know? But like I said: you do what you have to do, and that's just getting the jet on the ground. So as long as your takeoffs equal your landings,

[2:15:00]

you're good to go. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] Agreed. Agreed.

CUSTODIO: Yes.

SMITH: So I did ask you about mentors.

CUSTODIO: Mentors.

SMITH: Yeah.

CUSTODIO: Right. So when I first started pilot training, there weren't any women. I didn't know who to talk to. How'd you do this? So one of the females in the very first class — they were the nurses that they had selected to put them through the program to see if females were able to fly. This is the Air Force. And I'm trying to remember her name, but she wrote a book.

³³ At training bases, the operations officer on duty had a dedicated radio call sign and communicated with aircrew when needed. Each training base had a different ops-o call sign.

And I went to the library — the local library in Del Rio, and I found her book. And so I read what she had gone through and everything, and that kind of gave me an idea of —

SMITH: Was this Connie Engel?

CUSTODIO: Connie Engel.

SMITH: Okay.

CUSTODIO: Yes. And so I read her book, and I figured: well, that was nice of her to at least write something down —and her experiences. So I had that as a guide for me.

SMITH: Nice.

CUSTODIO: You know, her experiences that she wrote down. But for the most part, you just kind of figure it out and do what you have to do. And I think that when you need to accomplish something, and there's nobody there to tell you: hey, this is how I did it, or: I recommend you do this, that, or the other — you just focus. You get focused, and you're very careful about all the decisions that you make. But I did have good commanders who recognized my potential and gave me opportunities. So —

SMITH: Do you remember any of them?

CUSTODIO: Well, Rob May. He's the one that — you know, he gave me the opportunity to be an 89 pilot in the squadron, which I thought was pretty neat. You know? That puts a lot of confidence in me to handle students that are weak and try and get them up. And I was able to do that with a lot of them. But I did go to a lot of boards, too, where the students didn't make it. But him giving me the opportunity, you know — and how you work with your peers. I think they — to feel that support, that you're part of the group, to me, helped. And then getting to Randolph. There's not a — there weren't a lot of mentors. I just would ask a lot of questions, and I would talk to everybody that I could, you know, if I had a — wasn't sure about something. So I have to say: everybody around me was kind of a mentor, but I just pulled each little thing that I could from them as I needed it. But I didn't have a mentor to say: here, let me help you, and this is how you need to work on your career, or what you need to do. So I had to find my own answers from everybody that I thought was going to be giving me a straight answer. You know? So —

SMITH: And who did you consider your support group or support network, if you had one?

CUSTODIO: My family. [laughs] Yeah. Always. Always. You know? Because sometimes people get to a point where they're successful, they're on their way, they're in the career. And the one support group that they have, they kind of push them to the side, and then they become very selfish. And that's something that I learned that you can't — you've got to — in order to take, you have to give. And that's really important.

SMITH: Well said. What kind of advice would you give a woman headed to flight training or considering the military?

CUSTODIO: I — as far as the military, I'm like: if that's in your heart, and you want to serve your country, man, go for it. Because right now — I'm not going to say that women have it easy, but they've been proven time after time. So they have a lot of shoulders to stand on right now. And they just have to believe in themselves. You know? I mean, a lot of — I talk to a lot of middle school girls, and they're like: oh, but I don't fit in. I go: you don't have to fit in. Fitting in is easy. It's standing out that you want to do. You want to stand out, not fit in, because later on, you don't know where fitting in is going to get you. But standing out, the world's your oyster. You can do anything you want. You know? Don't be afraid to be smart. And if people tease you for that, just

[2:20:00]

ignore them. So —

SMITH: Great advice. Great advice. Tell me about your transition to civilian life.

CUSTODIO: Well, actually —

SMITH: Both times. [laughs]

CUSTODIO: Actually, that was one of the questions when I went to interview at American Airlines. They have a whole table of captains, all male. I mean, there were about 25 to 30 females out of 6,000 pilots at American at the time. And so there were like, four or five captains, let's say, sitting at a conference table, and you're the only one on the other side. And you're — one of the questions is like: was — well, you've been flying small jets. So what is it going to be like to be in a crew environment, flying these big jets? I go: I think an airplane is an airplane, and if there's more pilots there, even better. You know? So something to that effect was my answer. I was like: why is it going to be different? You fly airplanes. So, some are big. Some are small. You know? But that was fine. And the whole process took forever, because it was a three-interview process. You went up three times. The first just for formality, paperwork, medical. The second, you had to go do a simulator to make sure that you could fly your instrument approaches and do holding. You know, basic instrument flying like that. And then the third one was the personnel interview and the captain interview to see if you were going to be able to make it. And you remember the pilot that lived upstairs from us, from Laughlin? I mean, Little Rock Air Force Base?

SMITH: Mm hmm.

CUSTODIO: Well, he actually went to fly for American. And when I went to Officer Training School to go to flight training, he contacted me and gave me a lot of great advice and made me feel like I was going to make it through the program.

SMITH: Wow.

CUSTODIO: My husband — I somehow connected with him and said: this is where she's at. She's at Officer Training School. This is her squadron. And he somehow got the pay phone that was down the hallway to ring. Somebody picked it up. She goes: hold on. And so they went to

my dorm and my bedroom and found me. And I talked to him for, I want to say, at least 15, 20 minutes. And he was like: this is great. I'm so happy for you. And I think he talked to Ed³⁴ and told him: yeah, I'd love to talk to her and encourage her. So he did call me when I was at Officer Training School. So when I got to American Airlines, and I was upgrading to the 76, he was actually one of the instructors that flew with me doing that training transition. So —

SMITH: Wow.

CUSTODIO: You know, small world.

SMITH: It is.

CUSTODIO: But it was great. I loved the crew concept, and you having flown big airplanes, you know...

SMITH: Yup.

CUSTODIO: ...that that's pretty neat. You know? To be able to sit there and — so what do you think? And what should we do? And you know. And is this the right decision? And are we doing this right? Or — so I thought it was pretty neat.

SMITH: I just looked up his name. Eddie Wilson. Is that who you're talking about?

CUSTODIO: Oh, no.

SMITH: No?

CUSTODIO: No, no. Eddie Wilson was a pilot friend of ours. But the person who lived upstairs from us —

SMITH: We didn't talk — we didn't get his name. Okay, I'm sorry.

CUSTODIO: No, I just mentioned...

SMITH: That's okay.

CUSTODIO: ...that he lived upstairs from us. But it was pretty good. I didn't have a hard time transitioning to commercial flying. I thought it was all good. I did fly with old pilots when I first started. They were just getting ready to retire. They didn't know what the heck the women were doing in their flight deck. They call them "cockpits." I call them "flight decks." And they would challenge me all the time. All the time. You know, we had to figure out fuel and air speeds for their landing weights, and we took — I was an FE, so I sat sideways.³⁵ We took care of all the systems, the hydraulics, the electrics. You know? The AC — and they would just throw things at you, like: here, get this. Here, blah. You know? And I'm like: okay, whatever. You know?

SMITH: You couldn't wait to upgrade.

³⁴ Edwin Custodio.

³⁵ Flight engineer.

CUSTODIO: Yeah. No, I know. But I knew they were going to

[2:25:00]

be gone.

SMITH: Right.

CUSTODIO: I knew they were going to be gone. And luckily, it just — they had just stopped letting them smoke in there, too. So that was a good thing. They had just stopped letting them smoke up there. So they were all old and nervous. [laughs] And I'm like: you know, I'll be here for a long time. You're going to be out the door pretty soon, and we're here to stay. When I started, I'd have to say it was like 0.01 percent females in aviation, and now 38 years, 40 years later, it's 6. We're still inching our way...

SMITH: Yes.

CUSTODIO: ...up there, but you know, it's —

SMITH: It's an improvement.

CUSTODIO: It is.

SMITH: Dramatic improvement from —

CUSTODIO: It is. It is. It is an improvement.

SMITH: Well, Colonel Custodio, we're getting close to the end of the interview. I just want to ask: is there anything else that you would like included or — in how you're remembered as an aviator?

CUSTODIO: I have to say this. One of the things that was important to me — and I mentioned fitting in versus standing out, you know — in order to — especially in aviation, you can fit in, but you have to be yourself. You know? One thing that I always did — and you can see my picture — is that, if there was a female accessory or uniform, I was going to wear it. Because in the military, we always wore male flight suits, male boots. There wasn't anything that the Air Force did to make it conform to females. So when I went to commercial flying, I had a custom suit made. There was a female hat. I made sure — I went out of my way to get that hat. I will not wear a men's tie at all. I said: if there's a little cross-bow, that's what I'm going to wear. So I wanted to make sure that we were females in this aviation profession, and that they saw us as such. So that was important to me. Because first of all, we're females. You know? And to me, the priority is: I always want to be remembered as a good daughter, a wife, a mother, a friend, a Christian, and that family is everything. And I was very blessed to have had a great career, but I included them with me.

SMITH: Well at that, I think we will end. Colonel Custodio, it's been my pleasure, my distinct honor, to interview you for the Military Women Aviators Oral History Initiative, and I just want

to thank you on behalf of the Smithsonian for your service to the nation and for taking the time to record this interview.

CUSTODIO: Absolutely. Absolutely. When you're this fortunate and blessed, you have to give back. You have to reach out and look back and bring people with you because, you know, without mentors, without people exposing and sharing, they don't know. They can read about it. They can see it, but when they experience it firsthand, I think that's really important. And it's my honor to have served this country, and I think I continue to serve, even through projects like this or any opportunity I get. So, thank you so much.

SMITH: Thank you.

[2:28:55]

[END]