Recently, U.S. Air Force Colonel Pete Palazzolo celebrated his 93rd birthday, surrounded by family members, daughters Lucy and Claudia, and friends he’s made in his 11 years living at Independence Hill Retirement Resort Community. He was delighted to share his celebration and cake with one of his granddaughters, who turned 38 just one day later. A few days before, while watching the Queen of England celebrate her 92nd birthday, he pronounced her just “a young chick.”

Both of Pete’s parents were born in Sicily and immigrated to America not long after the turn of the century. He grew up in Chicago in the 1920s and 30s and enlisted in the Army Air Corps (before there was an Air Force) as soon as he graduated high school in 1943. He went straight to flight training and became an aerial navigator in 1944.

“In my time, when you took an airplane from one place to the other, you navigated by whatever was available – mostly the stars, especially across the ocean,” he said. Pete had an illustrious 30-year career with the Air Force, serving as Commander of an Air Force Communication Squadron in Tokyo in the 1960s. He eventually ended up at Randolph Air Force Base in the early 1970s, responsible for the reenlistment program for the entire Air Force, but it was flying he loved most.

“I remember with great nostalgia my days in the plane,” he said. “In the early 1950s flying hadn’t improved that much from the Amelia Earhart era. There was some danger, but a lot of adventure. We used to do a lot of kidding around.”

He remembers flying a plane full of refugee families from Hungary during the Cold War. “In those days we were very liberal. The kids could come up in the cockpit and look around. One little boy was very curious and was hanging all over my desk. I showed him the line of longitude on the map, and then sent him back to his seat to look out of the window at the ocean and tell me when crossed that line. We did things like that back then,” he said with a laugh.

Later, Pete was a navigator with an air rescue unit stationed in West Palm Beach, Florida. He vividly remembers assisting the U.S. Coast Guard when a National Airline DC-6 flying from Miami to New Orleans disappeared over the Gulf of Mexico. His crew landed an SA-16 amphibious airplane in the water in their effort to locate the debris. All in all, Pete accumulated more than 5000 flight hours. In his 93 years, Pete has outlived two beloved wives and seen many things change.

“The technology explosion is one of the most exciting things,” he said. Since he gave up driving just last fall, Pete has learned how to use his computer to order groceries online from HEB’s delivery service. “They do a good job, I order ice cream, and it’s here in two hours – still frozen hard as a rock.”

Pete joins a group of six friends to eat together at Independence Hill’s spacious dining room each night. He also enjoys happy hour and participating in water aerobics classes. He attends a men’s breakfast and never misses Friday’s noon mass, provided by the priest from Holy Trinity church just across Huebner Road.

“This is a relaxed life,” he said. “You don’t have to cook or clean.” Pete loves viewing the trees from the patio of his private cottage apartment and is pleased the community is right in the heart of everything - close to doctors, hospitals and, of course, restaurants, where the Italian-American orders his favorite – pasta with red sauce.