Little did Hardy Gates, Captain, U.S.M.C. – Retired, imagine when he enlisted in 1947 that his adventures would include piloting President Richard Nixon on Marine One or performing a zero-visibility helicopter landing for President Lyndon Johnson onto an aircraft carrier.

Gates was accepted for U.S. Navy flight training in 1949, despite his 6’6” height. He recounts an experience reminiscent of the movie Pearl Harbor, in which he convinced the flight surgeon to approve him.

Prior to the Korean conflict, pilot slots were rare, so when the war broke out he was called to flight training at NAS Pensacola, Florida. After finishing pre-flight/primary and basic training he reported to NAAT Cabinass Field in Corpus Christi for advanced training.

While in Corpus Christi, he met his future wife. “There were about 150 people at the dance hall – which was built like a chicken coop – with fold-out windows,” Gates said. “Suddenly, everyone started moving toward one person. I asked who she was and was told, Betty Butterfield.” Betty came over to talk to him, he said, and made such an impression his next tour through Corpus Christi, they were engaged by their fifth date.

They were married 51 years and have four girls: Sheri, Leslie, Cathy and Donna. Since Betty’s death in 2004, the girls look out for their father. Leslie lives in San Antonio, and was instrumental in helping her father select Independence Hill Retirement Community for his home. Gates moved to San Antonio from Atlanta when he retired from his second career of 21 years managing technical applications for the laminate company Wilson Art.

But before that, Gates had an illustrious and decorated military career, logging more than 8,000 flight hours and earning 26 Air Medals and Unit Citations.

He began flying F4U propeller aircraft in Korea.

“Basically what we did was close-air support for the troops on the ground. If somebody was in trouble – the forward air controller would call the airstrikes – you’d make close-air runs until you ran out of ammunition or gas,” he added.

He left the service briefly to complete his college career, but when the Vietnam War started, he rejoined the Marine Corps as a Warrant Officer and transitioned into helicopters. “They were looking at the Army’s Warrant Officer helicopter program, and as a test program they transitioned 100 pilots from fixed wing to helicopters,” he said. He not only flew more than 4,000 helicopter flight hours for three Vietnam tours during the 1960s, he was a test project pilot for the CH53 heavy lift helicopter.

Gates’ skills proved invaluable when he was chosen to pilot President Johnson to the Aircraft Carrier Saratoga returning from Vietnam. Although the California coast was completely fogged in, he said, the president was not to be deterred. Gates described a landing on the moving carrier, the proficiency of which might have been the precursor to his next assignment – Command Pilot for Marine One and President Nixon at Quantico, Va., from 1969-73. He retired from the Marine Corp after this assignment.

All settled in at Independence Hill, Gates enjoys playing bridge, traveling, reading, and anything technical.

Did you know that there are VA Benefits that can help offset the cost of living in a retirement community or assisted living?

Attend an informational session on the Veteran’s Aid & Assistance Benefit Program at Independence Hill.

Thursday, March 2, 2017
10:00am
20500 Huebner Road
San Antonio, Texas 78258
RSVP to (210) 764-5260 by February 28th
Refreshments Served