



By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

Scott Harris loves his job. The U.S. Marine Major flies high as a helicopter pilot, and even higher because he flew for President Barack Obama for two years and still flies for Vice President Joe Biden.

The son of Phil and Betty Lou Harris of Imperial was back for a visit this past week, and sat down to discuss his unique vocation.

The 37-year-old wasn't originally headed for a career in the Marines. He graduated from Oklahoma Wesleyan University with math and business administration degrees, and began working in a bank in Bartlesville, Okla.

Harris got together regularly with a group of civic-minded young adults, one of whom was a Marine recruiter.

As the recruiter talked with him, Harris was remembering several coaches who were former Marines, and was "intrigued with it. I wanted to see if I could do it."

He enlisted in February 1999 as a combat engineer. After two years he was talked into applying for flight school and officers' training.

After flying fixed wings, or airplanes, he progressed on to helicopters, becoming rated on the CH46 Echo.

Harris enjoys the challenge of the helicopters. As he explains it, an airplane naturally wants to fly. You start it up and it goes up.

"Helicopters naturally don't want to fly. You have to fly it all the way," he said. Everything has to be kept at an equilibrium, Harris pointed out, or the copter tips. "You're constantly working. It can be intense," he said.

"I love it. It's the best platform out there," he enthused about helicopters. Plus, there's always a crew with the helicopter.

After being stationed on Okinawa in the Pacific Rim, and then in Iraq, Harris was transferred to Washington, D.C. He is one of about 70 pilots in the HMX1 Squadron, which flies the Marine One helicopter. These pilots have to have certain flight qualifications, with a broad base of experience.

The pilots typically serve a four-year tour. Harris flew the President during his second and third years, and currently serves as White House Liaison Officer, or the coordinator between the White House staff and his squadron. He also still flies the Vice President on occasion.

He once flew seven heads of state from Dulles Airport to Camp David for a presidential summit. Many of the flights are within the Washington, D.C. area. However, sometimes the VH-3, CH-46 and VH-60 helicopters are "folded up" and packed into C-17 transport jets for overseas duties. Harris goes along.

He said the President only rides in or on American vehicles and aircraft.

"Anywhere he goes, we go," he stated.

Asked if the helicopters are built with special protection as are the vehicles, Harris replied, "We

really don't talk about that."

He really hasn't had a bad experience in a helicopter. "Every time you fly you never get bored or take it for granted."

The aircraft commander provides terminal control for the President. For example, the President was flown in to a Wall Street landing pad to appear on a television show awhile ago.

Harris was on the ground directing the delivery. He watched the President descend from the helicopter and enter a limousine.

"This is cool," he remembered thinking. "It makes you proud."

Harris said the Marines are apolitical. "When you strap on the uniform, you are a Marine," he explained, regardless of what your private views are.

"It's always been a pleasant experience interacting with the first and second families," he added.

Although he's in his fourth year with HMX1, he won't be rotating out soon. Nine pilots, among them Harris, have been chosen to stay on a fifth year, to help the squadron integrate the Osprey V22 helicopter into use.

The Osprey takes off and lands like a helicopter with the propellers on top. However, in flight the propellers rotate to make the body act like an airplane, with speeds just under 300 mph.

So Harris, wife Katie and daughter Grace, 4, will remain in Stafford, Va., while he continues to serve his country.