By MARY DRENNON
Special to the Tribune-Herald

When Waco resident Frank Dawson, 79, joined the U.S. Air Force in 1961, he was hoping to be a mechanic. Instead, he became a parachute rigger, sewing, packing and repairing parachutes. It wasn’t what the young man dreamed of when joining the service.

Still, Dawson made the best of it and achieved his master instructor rating, the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree, at Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois. It’s also where he taught parachute rigging for six years all while running his own upholstery shop.

In 1971, Dawson was sent to Saigon in Vietnam, installed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

“It was strange to go into a war zone like that,” Dawson said. “It’s a totally different way of life.”

Instead of a gun, Dawson was given a “gun card.” If you came under attack, you had to go to a Conex cargo container a half-mile away to actually get the gun and only if you were fired upon. Things in Vietnam were winding down. Much of the remaining fighting was to the north.

U.S. AIR FORCE

Dawson worked the night shift packing parachutes. During the day he taught management courses to those seeking promotions at the educational center on base. He wore civilian clothes because it was a civilian job.

One day a pilot came into the shop and asked for “FD.” For every parachute packed, the packer put in a small piece of paper with the rigger’s initials. In this case, the pilot’s plane had been shot down and he was able to eject and land safely. The first thing this pilot did was look for the initials of the rigger.

“That’s a trip to the officers club,” Dawson said. It was a tradition among pilots that they return to base and take out their rigger if they had to use a parachute.

“It’s a feeling you can’t imagine,” he said.

Coming back from Vietnam, Dawson was instructed not to wear a uniform because of anti-war protesters. Anyone in a uniform was verbally attacked, maligned and even spit upon. Dawson went to Homestead Air Force Base in Florida, assigned to Air Defense Command. He packed for the F-106 Interceptors that would chase Russian planes out of Cuba.

“We had a five-minute alert. Planes had to be off the ground in five minutes,” he said.

Dawson was at Homestead for two years and the squadron divided; he ended up in Loring Air Force Base in northern Maine in January 1976. He went from 85-degree weather to 15 below, and no one in the family had winter clothes.

He was there for 13 months before he put in for special assignment to go back to Chanute in Illinois. He went back as a course supervisor in charge of parachute school. He was the non-commissioned officer in charge. It was a challenge for him to motivate 18- and 19-year-olds to be enthusiastic about sewing.

“Anything on that craft can break, but not the parachute,” he said. “When the pilot goes home and sits down at the dinner table, there’s not an empty chair. By doing a good job, that’s what you save. You save a family from that empty chair.”

Dawson retired from Chanute in 1981 as a master sergeant. He went to work for a SWAT security team at a nuclear power plant. The training was exciting, he said, but the job itself was boring.

Dawson did that for five years before he was injured and had two back surgeries and two years of rehabilitation.

Once he was well, he worked for the hospital where he did his rehab, working in the security department. He started as a supervisor and moved up to assistant director and then director. He did that for 18 years and retired, moving to Waco to be near family.

He and his wife, Bonnie, have been together for 64 years and married for 58 years. They have three children, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

A year after he moved to Waco, a friend approached him about opening a bakery. Dawson had long loved baking. Together, they opened Simply Irresistible, where he developed recipes and baked for 10 years.

Now he’s a property manager for Central Christian Church, as well as a lifetime member of the Veterans Association and the Central Texas Disabled American Veterans. He continues to sew and bake.

“The heroes (in Vietnam) are the ones who didn’t come back,” said Dawson, who looks on his service fondly. He credits his wife for helping him be a success.

“Your family standing behind you while you’re in the service is so important to keep going,” he said.

“Veterans’ Voices,” featuring stories about Central Texas veterans, publishes every Sunday.

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