Dr. David Wood, Air Force Veterinarian and biological scientist, observes an animal (rabbit) on a TV monitor during a simulated deep sea dive using a high pressure chamber.

Air Force Veterinarian Cared for Space-Program Monkeys

By Amy Morgan

The most interesting portions of his biological science career are so sensitive they are still classified, said retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel David Wood, D.V.M., Ph.D.

Wood was chief of the laboratory animal branch at Brooks Air Force Base in the 60s and 70s, primarily caring for the monkeys whose use undergirded America’s space program.

“NASA had a contract with the Air Force to study the long-term effects of cosmic radiation,” he said. “President Kennedy said we would put a man on the moon in the next decade, but a lot had to be learned about the environment in space.”

His most famous patient was Sam, the monkey who rode in the first capsule launch, paving the way for John Glenn and future Mercury astronauts. Sam was eventually given a place of honor at the San Antonio Zoo, where he lived to 25.

Of the many “Mercury Monkey” subjects, more than 330 were selected to be part of a long-term colony to document the results of their experiences.

“I recognized there was tremendous potential for data collection,” he added. In 1980, Wood was named project manager and chief of the Radiation Biology branch at the school of Aerospace Medicine to study the monkeys through their lifetime. His final published report on radiation risk to men in space earned him the Sir Henry Wellcome Medal and Prize in 1986. After he retired from 25 years in the Air Force, Wood continued his work with the colony through Southwest Research Institute for six more years.

Wood became interested in biological research when he was assigned to Hanford Nuclear Plant in Washington State – one of the Manhattan Project Facilities where the plutonium for the second atomic bomb was made. He studied possible affects of nuclear reactors on the environment – one of which included feeding cows with radioactively treated pellets, then drinking their milk himself!

“We designed the experiment, we did the math, and we were the volunteers,” he laughed. As someone who depended on animal volunteers, I felt I should also be a human volunteer. I’ve been irradiated, gassed, submerged, compressed, decompressed. I was a human guinea pig!”

He married his wife, the former Maria Alicia Molina from San Antonio, whom he met when he was studying for his master’s degree in laboratory animal medicine at Brooks. After a stint in Vietnam, the couple moved to a Navy submarine base in Connecticut. During those five years, his two daughters were born, and he was able to pass the Navy Scuba Course, which Wood described as far more rigorous than a recreational scuba lesson.

Born in St. Louis, Mo., Wood returned to San Antonio in 1973. He has lived in Independence Village for 12 years, after the death of his wife in 2000. He enjoys playing golf at the Club at Sonterra with his friends from the community. Golf privileges are one of the amenities included for those who live at Independence Village.

Wood’s older daughter lives in the Stone Oak area. Her sons attend Reagan and Lopez. His younger daughter is head coach of the Rice University Volleyball team and has two children, including Wood’s only granddaughter.

In keeping with his love of biological science, his dream is to travel to the Galapagos Islands and experience the wildlife. He volunteers with the Alamo Regional Academy of Science and Engineering, serving on the Scientific Review Committee helping students prepare science fair projects.