Medicine man

Pharmacist opts for fast-pace life

by Tech. Sgt. Elaine Wilson
photo by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

Career Field Facts

AFSC: 43P
Assigned: 261
Duties: Directs procurement, storage, manufacture, distribution, control and evaluation of drugs. Supervises filling, labeling and dispensing of drug orders. Provides consultative services. Communicates essential drug information to patients and medical staff.
Civilian application: Pharmacist

Two years ago, Maj. Larry Taylor was a pharmacist, Northern Exposure-style. His drugstore was like a mini-Wal-Mart in the tiny, rural town of Maddock, N.D., which had a whopping population of 500.

People braved the frigid cold which could "freeze water midair" to browse his stock of household goods and outdoor merchandise. He only filled about 40 prescriptions a day so when he wasn't peddling his wares, he worked community projects, dabbled in town politics and, as one of the few medical experts in town, dispensed advice more often than medicine.

Business owner, community leader, family man, Major Taylor was living the American dream.

But this wasn't Major Taylor's ultimate dream. While people may have looked at his life through rose-colored glasses, he looked out and only saw blue — Air Force blue.

This military passion eventually led him to give up his small town pharmacy life for even bigger challenges at the largest hospital in the Air Force.

As a pharmacy flight commander at Wilford Hall Medical Center in San Antonio, he oversees the dispensing of more than 3,000 prescriptions daily and manages four pharmacies for the city's thriving military community.

"It was a difficult decision to leave my business, but this is where I wanted to be," he said. "I've always wanted to be an active member of the Air Force."

Major Taylor's passion for the military never wavered even as he was shuffled through five high schools as an Air Force brat. He earned an appointment at the Air Force Academy in 1976 and graduated as a missile launch officer in 1980.

"It was during the Cold War so it was an intense time to be working with missiles," he said. "My job was an important one that I took very seriously."

Major Taylor worked as an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile launch officer, instructor and curriculum developer. With a dozen years of military experience under his belt, he was looking forward to continuing his Air Force career.

The Air Force, however, had different plans.

With the Cold War at an end, the Berlin Wall down and the U.S.S.R. in ruins, launch officers just weren't in demand any more. Major Taylor was handed a pink slip and was reluctantly forced to walk away from a 13-year career.

"The military offered to pay for school so I just had to figure out what I wanted to do," he said. "I looked for a profession that would be in demand in the future and where I could help people. The pharmacy field was one of the top growing career fields where I could do both."

He earned his doctor of pharmacy in 1998 and moved his family to Maddock. He bought the town drugstore and operated the only pharmacy in the county. But, small rural towns in this area suffered from a declining agricultural economy, and Major Taylor's business didn't grow as much as he would have liked.

So, the budding entrepreneur crafted a plan to alleviate the hardship of rural patients who often had to drive up to 100 miles just to fill a prescription.

Using the Internet, he created a network of pharmacies. Technicians hired from the local community did the prep work and he verified the prescriptions and counseled patients real-time over an audio/video link.

Major Taylor's retail telepharmacy program was the first in the nation and earned him statewide recognition in 2003.

"People could get their prescriptions in minutes without a long drive," he said. "The idea caught fire. Now, there are 18 telepharmacies operating in North Dakota and other states are getting involved."

With his successful telepharmacy business, Major Taylor was flying high — but without the Air Force. Then the phone rang. This time, Major Taylor didn't have to seek the Air Force, it came to him.

"A recruiter called and asked me to come back in," Major Taylor said. "The Air Force needed pharmacists."

The budding entrepreneur then did something most in his position wouldn't have dared. He tossed it all and re-entered the military.

"I sold my business to a small North Dakota based pharmacy chain, and we moved to San Antonio," he said. It was a difficult decision, but being an active duty officer is what I've always wanted."

Although his slow-paced days are over, his ideas are still coming fast and furious. He integrates his business know-how with military culture, and has become an innovator. For starters, he helped establish a commissary refill pick-up service at Lackland Air Force Base, where "customers can get their prescriptions in just a few minutes."

He also helped implement a PharmASSIST verification system hospital-wide, which uses bar code technology to increase patient safety and enhance medication accuracy.

"Technicians scan medication bottles, and the system shows digital images of the medication, ensuring the patients receive the correct drugs," he said.

His latest project had him involved in designing a facility for a robotic processing center, which opened in April and can fill up to 4,000 prescriptions daily. Tapping into his telepharmacy past, Major Taylor hopes to take advantage of the robot workhorse and build a city-wide pharmacy service so military beneficiaries can call in refills and pick them up at the base of their choice.

Although he's gone from small town to big-city life, business owner to military officer, Major Taylor said he doesn't have an ounce of regret.

"You never really know why you go in the directions you do, but it always seems to work out," he said. "I'm an optimistic person and am extremely happy where I am right now. I'm where I want to be."

Maj. Larry Taylor

Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas
Years in the Air Force: 15
Hometown: Air Force brat, born at Wilford Hall Medical Center
Reason for Joining: Wanted to be a pilot
Assignments: Grand Forks Air Force Base, N.D.; Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif.; Lackland
Coming up: Deployment to Iraq
Best thing about the job: "Working with professional people."

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