

Bill Blakely, Phoenix, Ariz.
Flying High
By DIANA DECKER, Correspondent

Bill Blakely's positive attitude has won him awards and the praise of his co-workers in the Air Force. The internal changes resulting from his Buddhist practice make it all possible, he says.

The sky is the limit for Bill Blakely. As chief inspector for the 56th Fighter Wing, Luke Air Force Base, in Glendale, Ariz., honors have been rolling in. The first was Base Civilian of the Quarter, for April, May and June 1997. Then he was selected Supply Civilian of the Year. He also received an award of excellence from the fighter wing commander.

"It's been a good year," Bill says with a smile.

A retired Air Force master sergeant, Bill has been working at Luke as a civilian since 1979. That's also the year that he began to practice Buddhism. He credits faith for his honors. "They never would have happened without my practice," he says.

On the job, Bill inspects and identifies parts for the F16 fighter plane. An important part of his job is attaching the correct stock number to each part. If parts are not identified correctly, the chances for a wrong part to go on an aircraft increase — and could cause it to crash.

"It takes a lot of training to identify F16 parts," says senior master sergeant Tom Doyle, who nominated Bill for Base Civilian of the Quarter. The award is based on three things: significant performance in primary duties; civic and community involvement; and self-improvement. Sergeant Doyle listed Bill's three major accomplishments:

- He designed a continuity book, a reference of more than 200 pages, as a training aid for other inspectors. The book identifies problems and makes the inspection job easier. Bill also provided all the training for inspectors — not only in his duty section, but for other sections as well.

- He went above and beyond his normal job description in 12 documented cases to solve problems and went out of his way to provide customer service to other units, when he was not required to do so. The customer service surveys include several letters of appreciation specifically thanking Bill for his help.

- Bill's work group focused on reducing the number of discrepancy reports. If there are any mistakes when a part is shipped, the squadron receiving the part must complete a discrepancy report — a bad mark on the supplier. Bill played a key role in his group, which won the Team Excellence Award for decreasing discrepancy reports by 85 percent.

"We weren't talking, there was no dialogue," Bill recalls, assessing what the problem was. "We sat down with maintenance and established rapport with crew chiefs. By encouraging dialogue, we cleared up the problem."

Married for 26 years, Bill's wife, Kayoko, introduced him to Buddhism. They met in 1962 when Bill was stationed in Japan. By 1979, he says that "I recognized that she had something going. I'd see changes in her life. Ever since I started chanting and putting faith in the Gohonzon, I don't look for things. But things happen. Like these awards."

At the time Bill started to chant, he had a physical problem: possible cancer of the stomach. "When the Veterans Administration scoped it out, they thought it might be a tumor," he recalls. "I was so embarrassed about chanting, I remember going into a broom closet to chant. The next day, the spot [on my X-ray] disappeared. I never doubted [this practice] since that day."

After becoming an SGI member, he studied Buddhism, read the writings of Nichiren

Daishonin and started changing internally. He wasn't aware of the change, but his co-workers were. They would ask him how he could come into work every day saying, "This is a great day!" — even if it were raining or 120 degrees outside. If someone would say, "We can't...." Bill's response would be, "We'll get it done; we'll help each other."

He wondered why he was going to work with a different attitude, he says, until it dawned on him that it must be the practice. "I can't put a date and time on this realization," Bill says. "It took time to reflect on life and the way things used to be. I used to go ballistic when things didn't go well. I don't do that anymore. My wife can testify to that."

"He's right," Kayoko agrees. "He's more laid back."

"People started coming to me with problems," Bill recalls. "They'd say: 'We don't want to go to anyone else. We know you'll help us.'"

"Before, I never had the capacity to care about what was going on outside me," he says. "But my faith has told me that I am part of my environment, and I have to make the environment better."

Early in his practice, Bill sought guidance about the possible conflict between working with the military and following Buddhist beliefs. He was told several different times by SGI leaders that it didn't matter who he worked for — what mattered was his practice of Buddhism: introducing others to the practice, following Buddhist teachings, learning from the writings of the Daishonin and trying to make things better.

Bill was also advised not to feel discouraged if he could not introduce fellow employees to Buddhism. Nevertheless, he went on to introduce nine military friends — and six are still practicing.

Bill may have another honor to add to this year's list. He is waiting to hear about the Civilian Professional Provider of the Year award, which is based on performance. He will retire next year, after 20 years of civilian duty and a 40-year association with the Air Force.

His plans for retirement are simple. "I'll help in any way with the SGI-USA Phoenix Culture Center," he says. "Whether it be as receptionist or something else. The philosophy and the SGI organization have been so good to me. I just feel I want to do something in the latter years of my life to show my appreciation."

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