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## **The heart of man plans his way but does not establish his steps**

A retired chief warrant officer's path from Lebanon to Alaska

### **JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska —**

In life, most of us do not end up where we started or where we wanted to go. We get bounced around, our plans are shaken and sometimes shattered. Resiliency allows us to make new plans and repeat the process of goals, achievement, failures and successes.

As Winston Churchill said, "It is a mistake to look too far ahead. Only one link of the chain of destiny can be handled at a time."

Pierre Aslou was born in Lebanon; not one of the many cities in the United States named Lebanon but the country bordered by Israel, Syria and the Mediterranean Sea. The practice in Lebanon at the time of his birth was to name male children after religious figures. The country was almost evenly divided between Christians and Muslims. As his family was Christian, he was named Pierre after Saint Peter.

In 1975, a war broke out between the two major religious groups. Aslou, nine at the time, lived in a section of the country that was predominately a Muslim area. His father worked in the same area as a civilian for the Lebanese Army, which did not allow his safe travel to and from work due to the rising tensions between the two religious groups.

"Everything was happy and normal until that first bullet was fired," said Aslou. "We had lived there for so long my dad, my mom and the other two or three Christian families who lived in the neighborhood were very liked. The other neighbors smuggled us out of the area in the middle of the night."

Those Christian families were taken to an area of Beirut known as the Green Line, a demarcation line that separated the Muslim areas in the west from the Christian areas in the east.

Aslou's family became homeless and unemployed, having abandoned their home and his father's job to increase their safety and likely save their lives. Conditions worsened as hostilities between the two sides progressively increased.

"You were identified and beheaded by your name," Aslou recounted. "If your name was Pierre, and you were caught by the other side, they would behead you because they knew you were Christian, and vice

versa if your name was Mohammad and you were captured by the other side. You couldn't fake that you were from another religion because of your name.”

In 1979, Aslou's father immigrated to the United States in hopes of finding a better situation for his family. His mom followed in 1982 and his brother in 1983.

“When it came time for me to leave, everything went to hell, and I couldn't leave the normal route where you buy a ticket and hop on a plane,” lamented Aslou. “The war had escalated.”

Aslou was scheduled to leave Lebanon in September 1982. However, the newly elected president of Lebanon, Bashir Gemayel, was assassinated when a bomb exploded September of that same year. The Sabra and Shatila massacre that followed the assassination killed up to 3,500 civilians and dramatically heightened security concerns in the country.

Heightened unrest put Aslou's plan to leave Lebanon and join his family in the U.S. on hold.

After the plans to get Aslou to the United States had failed, his father flew back to Lebanon to facilitate his departure. His attempts to get his son out of the country by contacting official channels were unsuccessful, leaving the pair with few alternatives.

“It didn't help that I was with the Christian militia, and I had long hair and a long beard,” said Aslou. “I was fighting for my survival.”

His father eventually paid to have him smuggled by truck from the Christian side of the Green Line, through the Muslim area, to the Beirut International Airport, which was controlled by the Lebanese Army.

“They put me under vegetables, luggage and crates,” recounted Aslou. “I had to shave my beard...and look presentable in the event I made it to the airport so the Lebanese Army wouldn't arrest me for looking like a freedom fighter.”

Bribes of money and cigarettes allowed Aslou to safely travel through several security stops along the way.

The airport had been heavily damaged in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. It was also the site of the barracks bombings, which killed 299 people, including 241 U.S. service members in October 1983. Despite all of the damage, there were still some flights out of the country.

After purchasing a ticket, Aslou flew to Jordan where he applied for a visa at the U.S. Embassy. After two months of waiting, his visa was granted, and he flew to Fort Lauderdale, Fla. in Sept. 1984 where the rest of his family was waiting for him.

Aslou's only knowledge of the U.S. was what he had picked up from watching the occasional TV show while in Lebanon.

“I thought that everyone drove Camaros in the U.S., all the women wore bikinis and everybody was happy,” said Aslou. “It just so happened that it was spring break back in the 80's, and my dream was true. I thought I landed in heaven.”

It is not an easy task to transition from being in the middle of a religious war to the scene of an 80's sitcom. There was a lot of culture shock to overcome.

"I came from an area where at night if you didn't hear any bombings, shelling or automatic weapon firing, that meant the front lines fell and the enemy was coming to get you," Aslou emphasized. "Transpose that over to the U.S. where everyone goes to sleep by 10 o'clock and everything is nice and quiet. That unnerved me."

Despite knowing several languages prior to arriving in Florida, Aslou only knew a few basic words in English. He was unable to carry a conversation with his limited English.

"I couldn't understand my cousins who were born in the U.S.," said Aslou. "That really frustrated me."

He quickly enrolled in English composition and grammar classes. He spent a lot of his time watching TV to help with his vocabulary and colloquialisms. He also practiced his English in front of a mirror.

Aslou attended trade school and began working on air conditioning and refrigeration as soon as he received his work permit and green card.

He started dating a woman from Florida and they were soon married.

When the Gulf War started in 1990, Aslou talked to his wife about the duty he needed to fulfill.

"I told my wife I wanted to join the Army – that I wanted to serve my new country because it's given me so much," Aslou stated. "I wanted to pay my dues."

She agreed to the idea of him enlisting with the stipulation that it would only be three or four years and then they would return to Florida.

Breaking his tailbone after falling off a ladder required him to recover for a year before he could complete his enlistment. The Gulf War ended prior to him being allowed to enlist, but he decided to join anyway.

He enlisted in the U.S. Army, completed basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and arrived at his first duty station with the 4th Infantry Division, heavy artillery, Fort Carson, Colo.

He followed the advice of his leadership and started building his promotion points by taking tests and classes, where he earned high scores and an opportunity opened up for him that he was not expecting.

Aslou was called into the intelligence sergeant's office by his platoon sergeant in July of 1994. He didn't know what it was about, but it seemed urgent. He was hesitant to go, but he did not have a choice.

"I grew up where the word 'intelligence' isn't a good word to hear because someone would disappear overnight," Aslou said. "Intelligence is a bad word in the Middle East."

He arrived to find a sergeant major and a sergeant first class wearing class A uniforms and looking at his military records. The sergeant first class spoke to Aslou in Arabic in which he responded, and they began to banter back and forth.

Aslou recalled, "Apparently, he liked the way I answered because he turned to the sergeant major and in English said, 'I like him. He's a smart ass.'"

That is when Aslou found out he had scored high enough on his Arabic and English tests to attract the attention of recruiters from the Army intelligence field. They wanted him to become a human intelligence operator.

Aslou accepted the offer, shipped off to Fort Huachuca, Ariz., home of the Army Intelligence Center, and graduated from the interrogators course the same year. He requested to go to Airborne School and graduated from that in Nov. 1994. By December he was already on an assignment in Haiti.

The overseas assignments continued with missions in Germany, Italy, Bosnia and Kosovo.

Always looking for ways to improve, Aslou attended the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape course. He enjoyed it so much he became a SERE instructor. Then in 2003, he graduated from Warrant Officer Candidate School.

Shortly thereafter, he deployed twice to Iraq.

With overseas time served in Haiti, Kosovo, Iraq, Bosnia and Afghanistan, he missed his family and desired some time at home with his wife and two daughters.

“I called my branch manager and told him I was tired,” said Aslou. “I need to go somewhere where they don't deploy. I don't recognize my kids and they don't recognize me.”

He was offered an assignment with a brand new airborne unit in Alaska that he was told would not be deploying. Living in Alaska had been Aslou's dream since he was a little boy in Lebanon, so after consulting with his wife he accepted the assignment.

The relocation to Alaska had them saying farewell to 95-degree weather and welcoming 45-degree temperatures. With his family still in guest housing, Aslou reported to his unit.

He recounts his commanding officer saying, “Don't unpack, we are leaving. We are going to Iraq.”

After staying in Alaska for enough time to help find a new home, he joined his new unit in Iraq where the 11-month deployment extended into 15 months.

Following his deployment to Iraq, Aslou was only home for a year before deploying again; this time to Afghanistan.

After all his deployments, Aslou gladly accepted a position as an instructor at the Army Intelligence Center that he had attended years before in Arizona. He oversaw the construction of mock villages to facilitate accurate training scenarios for deployed environments.

Aslou met a commander from the Alaska Army National Guard during a training session. Several weeks later, he began receiving communication from the AKNG requesting that he join their ranks.

“I don't have a desire to join the National Guard,” he told them. “I've been active duty for 21 years. I appreciate the offer, but I don't want to become a National Guardsman.”

The National Guard did not back down so easily. They informed him about the full-time opportunities available within the National Guard and talked about Alaska. He was reminded of how much his family had fallen in love with the state during his previous assignment there.

After more than a year of negotiations, the active duty Army finally released him to the National Guard. Aslou and his family were back in Alaska by October 2014.

Aslou spent nearly four years in the Alaska Guard, first as the human intelligence Chief Warrant Officer 4 for the 297th Battle Field Survialence Brigade and then on the joint staff as the deputy director of intelligence.

“Out of all the assignments that I've had in the Army, the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th infantry Division, and the Alaska National Guard are some of the better assignments I've had,” reminisced Aslou. “These are my good memories. I built a community of friends that will last forever.”

Aslou retired in May after 26 years of proudly serving his country.

Despite their previous agreement to return to Florida after the Army, Aslou accepted a full-time job with the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management in Alaska as a training specialist.

“We'll stay here in Alaska until our bones are tired of the cold,” concluded Aslou.

Aslou and his wife plan on fulfilling their original agreement of moving back to Florida when they are ready for warmer weather and sandy beaches.

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#### **PHOTOS**

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **Flickr link** includes an event album with the complete selection of full-resolution, free downloadable images. (May not be accessible from all military computers.) [add link here](#)
2. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.) [add link here](#)