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1st-generation Trinidadian Pave Hawk pilot calls Alaska, 176th Wing home

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — In Alaska bush pilot circles, a serpentine network of mountain passes compose the aviation arteries that make transiting the state's rugged terrain in small aircraft possible.

Carved out over millions of years from the immense force of ancient glaciers, the passes made early human migration possible across the North American continent, and now they grant technologically advanced HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters of the 210th Rescue Squadron access to all corners of the vast state.

That access was critical Dec. 15, 2020, when Alaska Air National Guard Capt. Timothy Lezama, 210th RQS HH-60 pilot, needed to get into the remote village of Newtok to evacuate a pregnant woman experiencing complications to the nearby town of Bethel.

An obstacle stacked on top of the challenging terrain was the added dimension of unpredictable and rapidly deteriorating subarctic weather. Socked-in passes providing zero visibility put the entire enterprise at risk, but rescue Airmen of 176th Wing were determined to break through.

Once the weather nominally cleared, it was up to Lezama and fellow pilot, Capt. Lane Williams, to journey 500 miles to provide the lifeline mother and child desperately needed.

First generation

Lezama's parents, Timothy and Lisa, grew up in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, a former British colony off the coast of Venezuela.

At a young age, the elder Lezamas emigrated to the United States via New York where they would stake their future on pursuing higher education.

"Education is how you escaped being poor," Lezama explained, saying his father studied to become a corporate lawyer and his mother learned to become a medical billing coder.

Lezama said successfully pursuing those education opportunities required years of work and a dogged focus on the promise of the future.

"Their whole mentality as immigrants was 'Work, work, work,' and they struggled a lot to bring me and my brother up," he recalled. "My mom and dad grinded, that's the best way I can explain it."

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Part of the grind included putting the brothers through private Catholic school, connecting the children to their family's faith while further reinforcing the centrality of education to the stake the Lezamas were placing in America.

After New York, the family moved to Philadelphia before settling in Parkland, Florida, when Lezama was 11.

Following father's footsteps ... almost

Lezama decided that, like his father, he would pursue a career in law, attending Florida Atlantic University.

"About halfway through, I realized I didn't want to pay for law school," he recalled. "Every lawyer I met said, 'Don't do it.'"

He said he began to garner an interest in intelligence when he was influenced by a professor who was an Air Force intelligence veteran.

"I wanted to work in intel, but I was a 22-year-old college student with no work experience," he said. "So, I joined the Air Force."

Joining the active Air Force as an operations intelligence specialist, Lezama was stationed at Beale Air Force Base, California, where he worked with drone pilots.

He said he developed a yen for the helicopter combat search and rescue mission after observing HH-60s in action through the lens of drone optics.

"I saw the 60s were doing all of their work in Afghanistan 2009-2010," Lezama said. "They were doing a lot of pickups – we did a lot of overwatch for them – so just seeing that mission, I knew I wanted to be search and rescue."

Lezama left the regular Air Force and joined the Air Force Reserve, continuing his service in intelligence at Homestead Air Reserve Base, Florida, where he got help pursuing his burgeoning dream.

"I talked to pilots at Homestead, and they helped get my package together," he said.

A commander recommended he seek service in Alaska, and Lezama followed his advice, applying for a position in the Last Frontier.

"I never visited Alaska before I was hired," he said. "I came up here a week after they hired me."

On angels' wings

Lezama reported for pilot training at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, where he would begin his pathway to the HH-60 cockpit flying fixed-wing T-6 Texan IIs before relocating to the Army's Fort Rucker, Alabama, to fly UH-1 "Hueys" for six months.

Finally, Lezama reported to Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, to learn the Pave Hawk, the U.S. military's only dedicated combat search and rescue helicopter.

With wings on his chest, Lezama reported to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. He said he found out he had a lot more to learn in order to ably navigate the challenges of flying search and rescue in support of Alaska's civilians.

“The schoolhouse is in New Mexico,” he said. “I think New Mexico averages like 360 days of sunshine a year, so you don’t train for Alaska’s weather there.

“I would say you don’t train for that at other rescue units either, because they’re in Florida, California, New York, Arizona and Georgia,” Lezama continued. “They don’t have the same terrain and weather that we have, and we’re rescue for the entire state of Alaska, which is huge.”

He said a recent deployment to the Horn of Africa further highlighted the unique challenges of rescue aviation in Alaska.

“Everything we do here is more difficult than anything we did deployed, which boggles my mind,” Lezama said. “Deployment is what we train for, but everything we do at home station is by far more challenging.”

Responsible for finding and rescuing isolated U.S. and allied service members – especially downed fighter pilots – in a combat zone, Airmen of the 210th RQS partner with HC-130J Combat King II aircrew of the 211th Rescue Squadron and CSAR pararescue personnel of the 212th Rescue Squadron to provide rescue services to the Alaska community.

In order to span the distances of the state to deliver lifesaving pararescue personnel, HH-60s rely on the HC-130’s ability to deploy refueling drogue to provide fuel midair to the helicopters. While the Combat Kings can fly above the weather and provide route reconnaissance information, Pave Hawk pilots have to often fly through the weather.

“You’re put in situations where you have to get to someone to help them,” Lezama said. “You want to get to them – life, limb or eyesight. You want to help, and when they’re on the other side of a mountain range, you have to pick your way through a pass at 50 feet to stay out of the clouds. I didn’t train for that sort of thing in New Mexico.”

Closing the distance

In order to reach the pregnant mother, Lezama and Williams had to fly for more than nine hours total. The focus required meant they would have to periodically swap control in order to stay sharp.

Between stints scouting ahead for weather, the HC-130 dipped to lower altitudes to refuel the helicopter on four occasions.

Lezama said he relied on the more experienced Williams, who knew the route and was familiar with regional aviation officials.

“Lane’s flown out in the Bethel area before,” he said. “He did a lot of coordination with the local airports and got a lot of the information we needed.”

After breaking through miles of tough weather and rugged terrain, Lezama’s HH-60 finally brought the help the mother so desperately needed. Volunteers transported the patient via snowmachine to the Newtok airstrip, where they met the helicopter. She was flown about 115 miles to the Bethel Airport where they were met by an ambulance from the Bethel Fire Department.

Nerves on end for hours, Lezama said he didn’t know how much of a toll the intense concentration was taking on him.

“The adrenaline and the desire to complete the mission – you kind of don’t feel that until the mission is complete,” he said. “It kicks in, and you realize how exhausted you are.”

Lezama said the mission typified what he experiences flying rescue in Alaska.

“It’s the most difficult and rewarding thing I have done by far,” he said. “When you pick someone up, it’s super rewarding regardless of the situation. Just flying up here doing what we do, and to support Alaskans, and working with extremely capable people is humbling and extremely satisfying.”

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)

<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/390400/1st-generation-trinidadian-pave-hawk-pilot-calls-alaska-176th-wing-home>



Alaska Air National Guard Capt. Timothy Lezama is an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter pilot with the 210th Rescue Squadron. Lezama is a native of Parkland, Fla., and his parents emigrated from Trinidad and Tabago. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)