



## Author, activist speaks with Airmen

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7/2/2006 - **SOUTHWEST ASIA (AFP)** -- Cloaked behind stories, imitations and comedy, a former Air Force technical sergeant, New York Times bestselling author and activist shared his message of doing what must be done to not only survive, but thrive.

Dave Pelzer, author of a number of books, including "A Child Called 'It,'" volunteered his time and used his own resources to make three stops in Southwest Asia to share how he overcame the horrendous physical abuse his mother rained upon him as a child. His messages were clear: The power of forgiveness is priceless and focus, focus, focus.

After being rescued at age 12, Mr. Pelzer entered foster care. When he signed out of foster care at age 18, his file was nearly 10 inches thick.

"One publication basically claimed that in the state of California in 1973 out of 38,000 cases of child abuse, I was supposedly the third most abused kid," said Mr. Pelzer, who served 13 years in the Air Force. "Victims who were ranked one and two passed away after being physically rescued, so when I say it's an honor to be in your presence, you have no idea. I am the luckiest person I know.

"My mom was unfortunately abused as a child. She drank at 13 and became an alcoholic at 15. When she had three kids basically 14 months apart, it was very bad," he said. "But you know what's amazing? I would not change one day, one experience, because as negative as it was, my mom made me stronger. It made me humble and more appreciative of life."

A few of Mr. Pelzer's experiences included being accidentally stabbed in the chest by his mother and then having her refuse to take him to the hospital because of the negative appearance it would portray; his mother "forgetting" to feed him for 14 days; being called "it," and living in the basement with an Army cot and no blankets. Even so, a guiding principle in Mr. Pelzer's life is "hate no one."

Another torturous event was his mother's ammonia and bleach "game" where she would mix them 50-50 and then lock her son in the room with the fumes.

"It will burn your esophagus and finally burn your lungs. It's called dry land drowning," he said. "I learned very quickly to stay down until the gas went away. I simply did what I had to do. That is why we train as much as we do -- so it becomes automatic. It's not pretty, it's not fair, but you just have to cowboy-up and say, 'I don't want to be in this position. I see something else I want. I'm just going to pay the price and make it happen.'

"The question is how bad do you want it?" said the former mid-air refueler for SR-71 Blackbirds and F-117 stealth fighters. "Where are you in your life right now? What are your intentions and how do you intend to make them happen? The more we focus on doing the best job we can the better off we'll be."

When an adult made the prediction that Mr. Pelzer would be either dead or in jail by age 18, his social worker told him not to listen.

"She said, 'If my little David could survive all that he did without any help, without a college degree; what could my little David not achieve?' We have to adopt a certain mindset (that we can survive)," he said.

Mr. Pelzer's mother never allowed him to speak, which resulted in significant speech impairments. After a particularly tough day in junior high, he started to vent to his foster mother. She stopped him and said, "Life is never going to be fair. What do you intend to do about it? Where is your focus?"

"That was not what I wanted to hear," he said with the exaggerated drama of a teenager. "I had to do my chores. I had to do my homework, and then I had to do my (speech therapy)."

Mr. Pelzer stood in front of a mirror every day for 30 minutes and recited the ABCs. As he beat his hip in frustration with each mispronounced letter, it was nearly three weeks before he saw any improvement at all.



Author and activist Dave Pelzer talks with Master Sgt. Don Miller at a forward operating base in Southwest Asia on Tuesday, June 27. Mr. Pelzer visited troops at three locations to spread encouragement and forgiveness. Sergeant Miller is a C-130 Hercules loadmaster with the 746th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Melissa Padilla)

"But then there it was," he said. "Sometimes without even trying, if you do just a little every day, without putting stress on yourself, oh my gosh, it all comes together. You just keep on trying and trying and trying."

His message was heard.

"His information would be appropriate to anyone, anywhere, but it's especially important when we are all so far from home," said Master Sgt. Teri Herrera, 379th Air Expeditionary Wing judge advocate NCO in charge. "He reminded me that we should just let hard feelings and bad memories from the past go and move on. There is no point lingering on what has already happened; that's out of our control. What is in our control is our future, and we should grab on and enjoy the ride."

In order to enjoy the ride, the operations Just Cause, Desert Shield and Desert Storm veteran told the nearly packed base theater that there was work to be done.

"The number-one problem we have is unresolved issues. Look at it this way if you can: If you have a really bad tummy ache, what does the body automatically do? It regurgitates and when you get that junk out, how do you feel? You feel pretty good. You aren't ready for that greasy pork sandwich, but you do feel better. You've got to get it out and let it go. Let it go," he said.

"What is stopping you?" he said. "Reach beyond your norm; achieve your greatness. So when bad things happen you, know what you are capable of and what you have to do. Let go of all that dysfunctional hate and just be happy. Be happy now."