

Mexican soldier gains citizenship;

Rites are 1st outside U.S.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

October 27, 2004 Wednesday, Home Edition

Copyright 2004 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
ajc.com

Section: Atlanta & the World;

Length: 499 words

Byline: RON MARTZ

Body

Army Reserve Sgt. Jose Serna of Chamblee has spent much of the last three years on active duty serving in such diverse and occasionally dangerous locations as Fort Bragg, N.C., Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

Long absences from home and family and the prospect of being killed or wounded are sometimes expected of citizens in times of war.

But until Oct. 1, Serna was a noncitizen, one of an estimated 37,000 in the United States military who face the same sacrifices and hazards as citizens but without the same benefits.

AJC

On that Friday at Bagram Air Base outside the capital of Kabul, Serna raised his right hand and took the oath as an American citizen. He was among 17 citizens sworn in that day in the first overseas naturalization ceremony for members of the military.

Previously, service members could be naturalized only in the United States.

"It was very sentimental. It was like a dream. You're not sure that it's really happening." Serna, 28, a native of Mexico, said in a recent telephone call from Afghanistan.

Since that ceremony, officials of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services have conducted similar events for service members in Iraq, Germany, Japan and South Korea.

These new citizens are the beneficiaries of an executive order signed by President Bush on July 3, 2003, designed to speed up the often lengthy and frustrating naturalization process for members of the military.

Immigration officials say that as of Oct. 1, more than 18,000 service members have applied for citizenship under this order with about 9,000 approved.

The road from illegal immigrant to U.S. citizen has not been easy for Serna. He came to the States in 1993 looking for work and a better life.

"I didn't have a very stable family in Mexico," he said.

Mexican soldier gains citizenship; Rites are 1st outside U.S.

He worked construction, mostly as a roofer, and attended Chamblee High School. After graduating in 1997 he continued working a series of low-paying jobs before getting his green card in 2000 and joining the Army Reserves.

Now married, Serna and his wife, Rebecca, call Chamblee home, although he has not been there much of late.

He has been in Afghanistan since May and expects to be there for a few more months.

Serna said he applied for **citizenship** about eight months ago while serving at Fort Bragg with the 2125th Garrison Support Unit based in Decatur.

The call in early September that his application had been approved so quickly caught him by surprise.

"I have friends who applied and have been waiting a long time because they missed their appointments [with immigration officials] when they were overseas," Serna said.

He also thought that he would have to wait until he got home to become a citizen.

"But they said they could do it here and not affect my mission," said Serna, whose primary duty at Bagram is as a guard.

Once the ceremony was over, Serna said there was a short reception before he donned his helmet, flak jacket and rifle.

"I had to go back to work," he said.

Graphic

Photo: SGT. JOSE SERNA

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: **CITIZENSHIP** (92%); IMMIGRATION (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); NATURALIZATION (90%); US ARMY (89%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (77%); APPROVALS (77%); EXECUTIVE ORDERS (70%); EMPLOYMENT SEARCH (67%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (66%)

Company: US **CITIZENSHIP** & IMMIGRATION SERVICES (55%)

Organization: US **CITIZENSHIP** & IMMIGRATION SERVICES (55%)

Industry: US ARMY (89%)

Geographic: KABUL, AFGHANISTAN (79%); FAYETTEVILLE, NC, USA (79%); AFGHANISTAN (94%); **UNITED STATES** (94%); UZBEKISTAN (79%); KOREA, REPUBLIC OF (79%); JAPAN (79%); IRAQ (79%); GERMANY (79%)

Mexican soldier gains citizenship; Rites are 1st outside U.S.

Load-Date: October 27, 2004

End of Document