

A NATION AT WAR: IMMIGRANT MARINES; Latinos Gave Their Lives To New Land

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Byline: By TIM WEINER

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Body

Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez, 27, was among the first to die, in a tank battle outside Umm Qasr on March 21.

Cpl. Jose Angel Garibay, 21, fell in combat near Nasiriya. Pfc. Francisco Martinez Flores drowned when his tank plunged into the Euphrates River. Lance Cpl. Jesus Suarez del Solar, 20, was killed on Saturday fighting with the First Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion.

They had this in common: they were marines, and they were not Americans. They died for a country not entirely theirs.

Corporal Gutierrez was an illegal immigrant from Guatemala, an orphan who made his way through Mexico to the promised land of California and into the Marines. His 3 fellow marines were Mexican by birth and citizenship, 3 among roughly 36,000 soldiers in the United States military but not of the United States -- green card holders and other legal residents who hope for full legal status as American citizens.

Corporal Gutierrez's only survivor, his sister, Engracia Cirin, lives in a shack without a telephone on the edge of Guatemala City. "It makes me sad," she told a local reporter in Guatemala, "because he fought for something that wasn't his."

Corporal Gutierrez and Corporal Garibay will receive citizenship posthumously, military officials said today.

The parents of Private Martinez and Corporal Suarez are unsure of their sons' status as Americans. Private Martinez had filed for citizenship but his application was not complete, military officials said. As for Corporal Suarez, his father, Fernando, who brought him to California six years ago, when he was 14, said he thought his son would remain a Mexican in death.

Although public opinion in Mexico is running strongly against the war in Iraq, dozens of Mexicans have been telephoning, e-mailing and walking up to the American Embassy and its consular offices daily, asking about becoming Americans by becoming soldiers. They are being turned away.

"Unless you are a U.S. citizen or a permanent legal resident, which is what most are interested in becoming, you can't join up," said Jim Dickmeyer, an embassy spokesman.

Hispanics, including those who have obtained legal residency and those who already are citizens, represent about 9 percent of the uniformed military and about 13 percent of the overall population of the United States. Among enlistees in the all-volunteer army, roughly 5 percent have legal residency but not American citizenship.

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President Bush signed an executive order in July putting green card holders who enlist in the military on a fast track to becoming Americans. The order eliminated a three-year wait, let the soldiers seek citizenship immediately and applied to anyone on active duty as of Sept. 11, 2001.

There are restrictions for soldiers who are not citizens: they cannot serve in most intelligence units, nor in elite groups the like Green Berets. Nor can they become commanders.

In Mexico and Central America, the story of Corporal Gutierrez has resonated strongly. He was orphaned with his sister as a child, and worked as a laborer, before being taken in by Casa Alianza, which works with street children in Guatemala. Casa Alianza's files show he studied architecture before leaving for the United States, apparently on foot and by hopping trains, in 1997.

He was arrested by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service in 1997, records show, but might have lied about his age, claiming he was 16, to win his release. An adoptive family in Lomita, Calif., took him in. He joined the **Marines** last year and was one of the first two **marines** killed in combat, on March 21.

"We join Guatemalans in remembering Lance Corporal Gutierrez, who **gave** the ultimate sacrifice in service to his adopted country," said John R. Hamilton, the United States ambassador to Guatemala.

Corporal Garibay was born in Guadalajara. He enlisted as a **marine** three years ago, at 18, and was killed on March 23. "Though he felt Mexican, he also loved the United States, and that's why he enlisted, that's why he went to **war**," said his sister, Azucena Barragan, in Costa Mesa, Calif. "He said he was coming back a hero."

Private Flores, also born in Guadalajara, came to the United States in 1985, aged 3. He died in combat March 25, apparently after his tank became lost in a sandstorm and overturned into the Euphrates River. His mother, Martha Flores of Duarte, Calif., said he thought his citizenship was coming through in a few weeks. She added, "I only want all this anguish of the mothers of the soldiers to end, to stop the suffering of broken families."

Corporal Suarez, born in Tijuana, came to California in 1997 and died somewhere in Iraq on March 27. "I was a military man in Mexico, and I'm proud of him," said his father, Fernando, of Escondido, Calif. "Hopefully his death was in a good cause and not in a **war** for oil."

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Graphic

Photos: From left, Pfc. Francisco Martinez Flores, Cpl. Jose Angel Garibay, Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez and Lance Cpl. Jesus Suarez del Solar. The four, all in the **Marines**, died in separate events in the opening days of the **war** in Iraq. Corporal Gutierrez was from Guatemala, the other three from Mexico. (Photographs by Associated Press)

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