Swift Road for U.S. Citizen Soldiers Already Fighting in Iraq

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Body

For Specialist James Garrovillas, enlisting in the Army meant more than just joining the military.

It meant joining the United States.

In a 50-minute ceremony in late July, Specialist Garrovillas and 142 other service members took the oath of citizenship inside one of Saddam Hussein'**s** palaces here, now part of the headquarters of the American command in western Baghdad. Between white marble walls, a brass band struck up "God Bless America."

Before the Sept. 11 attacks, American naturalization ceremonies had taken place on foreign soil only twice -- during the Korean War and in the 1990'**s**, with Filipino veterans of World War II. But since last year, teams of immigration officers have been jetting to military bases around the world to do interviews and carry out naturalization ceremonies.

The event here was the biggest of the ***Iraq*** war so far. The troops came from 46 countries -- many from Mexico, but also some from Jamaica, Nigeria, Turkey and Vietnam. Until now, all had been risking their lives ***fighting*** for a nation that had not counted them among its ***citizens***.

"I think it'**s** awesome," Specialist Garrovillas, 28, of San Diego, said with a wide grin as he held a certificate in one hand and a tightly folded American flag in the other. "I've waited for years to get it. It'**s** nice having it in a palace in ***Iraq***. It beats having it in the United States."

Specialist Garrovillas is among 20,000 military service members who have become American ***citizens*** since July 2002, many of whom applied under a fast-track process approved by President Bush in 2003 and enacted in October 2004. Under the new rules, people in the military can become ***citizens*** without paying the customary $320 application fee or having to be in the United States for an interview with immigration officials and naturalization proceedings.

The president also made thousands of service members immediately eligible for citizenship by not requiring them to meet a minimum residency threshold, as civilians applying to be ***citizens*** must do, although they must still be legal residents of the United States.

The new citizenship laws have offered a powerful tool to recruiters at a time when the military is struggling to meet its monthly enlistment quotas. The armed forces now have at least 27,000 members who do not have United States citizenship.

Some military outfits around the world have long relied on the same lure. The French Foreign Legion, for instance, grants French citizenship to its members, and consequently attracts many Eastern Europeans. Some joke that the privilege of citizenship comes more easily now to American troops than sex or alcohol, both banned in a war zone.

"Before they were ***citizens***, they were willing to ***fight*** for it, to risk everything for it," Lt. Gen. John R. Vines, the commander of combat operations in ***Iraq***, said as he presided over the ceremony here. "They know the risks that face America. They know the risks that face the world."

Of the changes pushed through by Mr. Bush, the one that gives military service members the biggest advantage over civilians in applying for citizenship is the waiving of any residency requirement. But most military applicants do not need that waiver, because they have lived in the United States or served in the armed forces long enough anyway, said Kendra Shyne, an immigration officer based in Frankfurt, who flew to ***Iraq*** with two colleagues to conduct citizenship interviews in the three days before the naturalization ceremony on July 25.

Specialist Garrovillas, for example, was born in the Philippines but lived in the United States for 23 years, growing up in Southern California. He joined the Army three years ago and decided to apply for citizenship before his ***Iraq*** deployment to get higher security clearances and other job-related benefits, he said.

"Having the passport is also nice," said Specialist Garrovillas, of the 44th Corps Support Battalion. "I'm the fourth person in my family to get it. My older brother was a marine, and he became a ***citizen*** back in '92."

Another new ***citizen***, Cpl. Mario Rivera, 23, originally from Honduras, said, "I applied when they told me it was going to be free."

Asked what benefits he believed came with citizenship, the corporal replied, "Not a lot."

"You can apply for federal jobs," he said. "That's about it."

Standing next to him, Specialist Kerryann Simpson, 21, from Jamaica, had a less blase take.

"It was wonderful," she said of the ceremony. "It's an experience meeting people from different countries."

"I wanted to apply for citizenship for a better job," she added.

Military life was all Specialist Simpson knew of the adult world. She said she joined the Army right after finishing high school in Windsor, Conn. She had grown up in Jamaica and moved to the United States seven years ago.

Those applying for the citizenship ceremony in ***Iraq*** first filled out applications that took about six to eight weeks to process, including background checks. Then Ms. Shyne and two other women from the Citizenship and Immigration Services, once known as the Immigration and Naturalization Service, flew from Europe to conduct brief interviews here. The applicants came to Camp Victory from military bases scattered across ***Iraq***; no one was rejected for citizenship.

In the course of doing the interviews, the immigration officials discovered that seven applicants ***already*** were ***citizens*** -- they were under 18 when their parents had become ***citizens***, and so they had automatically been granted citizenship. But the seven were still included in the ceremony, for the sake of pomp.

"It was pretty sad because my whole family was ***U.S. citizens***, and I'm the only one who wasn't a ***U.S. citizen***," said Specialist Jobert Floresca, 24, who was born in the Philippines. "I didn't find out until today that I'm a ***U.S. citizen***."

Graphic

Photo: One hundred and forty-three troops from 46 nations took the oath of citizenship in a former Hussein palace. (Photo by Johan Spanner/Polaris, for The New York Times)

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