

## **Blog; The 48th Goes To War: Latest dispatches from Iraq; Foreign-born GIs join fight in Iraq**

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

September 20, 2005 Tuesday, Online Edition

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
ajc.com

**Section:** NEWS; Pg. 0

**Length:** 1184 words

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### **Body**

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Tuesday, September 20, 2005, 10:41 PM

Camp Taji, **Iraq** --- After Pfc. Diego Rincon of Conyers died in **Iraq** in March 2003, he received a special honor at his funeral. An immigration officer was there to present the fallen soldier from Colombia a certificate of U.S. citizenship.

More than 37,000 immigrants from 200 nations are serving in the U.S. military, according to the Department of Defense. At least 80 of them have died in **Iraq**, **fighting** for the country they call home, and been naturalized posthumously.

America's immigrant soldiers remain unique in their individual identities but undeterred in their allegiance to their adopted homeland. They say they have the ultimate proof of their love of America: They are willing to die for the freedoms and opportunities the United States has afforded them.

Periodically, **foreign-born** soldiers from various nations hold up their right hands and take the oath of U.S. citizenship at ceremonies at al-Faw Palace at Camp Liberty near the Baghdad airport.

The Georgia Army National Guard's **48th** Brigade Combat Team has several soldiers who dream of being there one day.

One is Spc. Svetlin Gueorguiev, a lanky, laid-back 23-year-old who stores letters from his grandmother, written in Bulgarian, in his footlocker. She writes to him frequently from his native Pleven, a small city in the east European nation.

Gueorguiev, who serves in the 1st Battalion, 118th Field Artillery Regiment, thinks about the life he had. His mother, Ivana, was an opera singer and a teacher.

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His family could not have foreseen that Gueorguiev would move to the United States with his mother and American stepfather and, at the age of 22, travel back across the Atlantic to a war zone in Iraq as a Bulgarian citizen wearing a U.S. Army uniform.

Gueorguiev, known as "Geo" to his fellow soldiers who can't pronounce his name, admits his Bulgarian background and Bohemian inclinations, he's an art major at Savannah's Armstrong Atlantic State University, put him outside the Army stereotype.

But his resolve is as steely as the rest of the men in his battalion, many of whom were raised in patriotic small towns across Georgia.

"I believe in what I am doing," said Gueorguiev, who spends his days on the gun line at Camp Taji. The 118th's Alpha Battery has three Paladin 155 mm howitzers parked there, ready to counter incoming insurgent fire.

"As I see it, he is one of us," said Pfc. Matthew Simmons, a platoon mate. "He is fighting for something he lives in right now."

When Gueorguiev finally does make it to the citizenship ceremony, he will have to swear to bear arms for the United States of America when necessary.

As far as Army officials are concerned, Georgia's immigrant soldiers have already proved their mettle with their military service.

"I believe that speaks volumes for their commitment to the ideals of freedom and democracy," said Maj. Michael Shavers, a Pentagon spokesman.

Since the American Revolution, the nation has relied on foreign-born troops to help wage war, according to the Immigration Policy Center.

About 500,000 non-citizens fought in the Union Army during the Civil War. Nearly 175,000 soldiers in World War I, World War II and the Korean War were immigrants who were naturalized.

Filling gaps in the ranks

Dwindling recruitment numbers have made immigrants even more important in keeping the ranks filled for the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2002, President Bush signed an executive order, partly to boost recruitment, allowing non-citizens on active duty starting Sept. 21, 2001, to apply for citizenship with no further residency requirements.

That means any legal resident who joins the military can immediately petition for citizenship rather than wait the normal five years required for civilians to begin the process. Bush also waived petitioning and fingerprinting fees for service members.

Immigrant soldiers in the 48th Brigade said they enlisted mostly to learn new skills, to pay for their higher education and to expedite their U.S. citizenship.

"The Army has been good to me," said Frederick Kipkemboi, 24, who was born in Eldama Ravine, Kenya, and emigrated to Massachusetts when he was 14.

"My life is so different now," said Kipkemboi, a mechanic in Bravo Company, 148th Support Battalion. "In Kenya, I never even played sports in school. Then I went to another country and joined the Army. My friends back home would be shocked."

Spc. Miguel Alves, 32, an infantryman in a Rhode Island unit attached to the 118th, left his native Lisbon, Portugal, in 1992 when his family moved to America to seek a better life.

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At 25, he found himself floundering, and he enlisted in the Army to get his life back on track.

He is hoping his deployment to Iraq will help him acquire citizenship. He has tried before, even showing up at the Immigration and Naturalization Office in Providence in his Army uniform.

But two previous attempts ended nowhere; one of them was vetoed because of a DUI charge, he said.

Alves said he has paid his dues to America and deserves to become a citizen.

"We are putting our lives on the line for the United States," he said. "We deserve a break."

Dmitri and Pavel Rybakov are hoping that break will come soon.

The two Russian brothers, who restarted their lives when their mother married an American and moved to Dexter, would have faced mandatory conscription in the country they left behind.

### Brotherhood of brothers

In their new homeland, they volunteered for military service. They are both gunners on Bradley fighting vehicles in the 2nd Battalion, 121st Infantry Regiment.

On a blistering afternoon, Dmitri, 21, got into the gunner's seat, ready to go out on another security patrol in southwest Baghdad.

At the last minute, he yelled to his brother in Russian. He had forgotten his Kevlar helmet and wanted to borrow Pavel's.

The brothers often communicate with each other in their native tongue.

"English is still a foreign language for us," said Pavel, 26, the quieter of the two. "It takes a split second more to understand."

They are glad they have each other in the war zone.

When the brothers joined the Army, they didn't give much thought to the possibility of the United States going to war with countries of the former Soviet Union, once its staunchest Cold War foe.

"In all honesty, I wouldn't want to go and start killing Russian people," Dmitri said, even though neither brother thinks of himself as a Russian citizen anymore.

"I believe the Army has policies where in such a case, you can stay in the rear," he said.

The Rybakovs said their family and friends in Russia are proud of their service, even though many Russians are opposed to U.S. involvement in Iraq.

Pavel said he had not expected to be fighting in Iraq. He initially opposed the U.S. invasion but said he will do his part because America has to follow through on what it started.

Sgt. 1st Class Louis Audain, a medic in Charlie Company, 148th Support Battalion, who was born in Trinidad, said nationality makes little difference in the Army.

In Iraq, he said, everyone is an American soldier first.

"We duck like the rest of them when things go boom," he said.

## Graphic

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Blog; The 48th Goes To War: Latest dispatches from Iraq; Foreign-born GIs join fight in Iraq

Photo: BITA HONARVAR / AJCBulgaria native Spc. Svetlin Gueorguiev shares the dream of many **foreign-born GIs** --- becoming a U.S. citizen.

Photo: BITA HONARVAR / AJCSgt. Frederick Kipkemboi, a native of Kenya, has lived in Massachusetts since age 14.

Photo: BITA HONARVAR / AJCBrothers Dmitri (left) and Pavel Rybakov are Russians who moved to Dexter, Ga., when their mother married an American.

Photo: BITA HONARVAR / AJCSpc. Miguel Alves wants U.S. citizenship.

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Document-Type:** **Blog**

**Publication-Type:** Newspapers

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (90%); CITIZENSHIP (89%); ARTILLERY & ORDNANCE (89%); US ARMY (89%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (77%); NATURALIZATION (77%); MILITARY WEAPONS (76%); **WAR** & CONFLICT (72%); SINGERS & MUSICIANS (50%); STEPPARENTS (50%)

**Industry:** ARTILLERY & ORDNANCE (89%); US ARMY (89%); MILITARY WEAPONS (76%); SINGERS & MUSICIANS (50%)

**Geographic:** BAGHDAD, **IRAQ** (58%); GEORGIA, USA (93%); ATLANTIC OCEAN (54%); UNITED STATES (97%); **IRAQ** (94%); BULGARIA (89%); EUROPE (79%)

**Load-Date:** January 30, 2007