

WAR IN THE GULF: HOMELAND: Slain soldiers earn U.S. status

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Body

Washington --- When Diego Rincon is memorialized Thursday in Conyers, the Army private first class will be hailed as a hero who gave his life for his adopted country. And, his family has just learned, he also will be honored as a **United States** citizen.

The outgoing Colombian-born 19-year-old had enlisted in the armed services after he grew incensed over the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, friends and family have said.
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Rincon, who was killed by a suicide bomber as he guarded a checkpoint in Iraq March 29, was one of at least seven immigrant **soldiers** who were not yet citizens when they were killed in Iraq. All will be granted citizenship, said officials with the federal Bureau for Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Non-citizen **soldiers** have long played an important role in the nation's military. Today, more than 37,000 --- or nearly 3 percent --- of the active military services are immigrants who are not yet naturalized.

President Bush last July ordered that active duty personnel could begin applying for citizenship immediately, instead of waiting the customary three years for members of the military. Applications have since soared, from 450 last November to 1,320 in February.

Diego Rincon's family had just returned from picking up his cremated remains when they got a telephone call Tuesday from the Atlanta office for immigration services.

"We were surprised, shocked, happy, everything," George Rincon, the **soldier's** father, said in a telephone interview. "I feel much better because citizenship was my son's dream. His whole life he wanted to become a citizen."

Diego Rincon's older brother Fabian, 20, said it is appropriate since his brother gave his life for this country. "I want to suggest to my father to engrave that in his urn --- Diego Rincon, **U.S.** citizen."

Last Thursday, Georgia's two **U.S.** senators introduced a bill that would award citizenship to any non-citizen **soldier** who dies in combat for the **United States**. The bill will be considered by the Senate Judiciary Committee, whose immigration subcommittee is chaired by Georgia Republican Saxby Chambliss.

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"I think the fact that they are willing to put their lives in harm's way for the sake of freedom and democracy says that they really do want to be a part of American life," Chambliss said. "That's why it's important that citizenship be granted."

The senators, who had been rushing to push the bill through before Diego Rincon's service on Thursday, were pleased the immigration service had beat them to the finish line.

"Diego Rincon was so loyal to his adopted nation and he made the ultimate sacrifice so that we might continue to enjoy freedom," said Sen. Zell Miller, a Georgia Democrat.

Georgia Republican Rep. Johnny Isakson is sponsoring a companion bill in the House.

Diego Rincon's memorial service will be 2 p.m. Thursday at the Conyers Seventh-day Adventist Church. A fund has been set up to help the family financially. Donors may contribute to the Diego Rincon Memorial Fund at any Bank of America branch.

Staff writer Mia Taylor contributed to this article from Atlanta.

Graphic

Photo: Pfc. Diego Rincon, who was killed in Iraq, was granted posthumous U.S. citizenship.

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