

Non-citizen Soldiers deserve our highest respect

I want to share a story with you. It is the story of a young, courageous patriot, who came to the United States seeking opportunity and was so thankful for his freedoms, he chose to join the Army to help defend them. The Soldier's name was Sgt. Catalin Dima. He came to this country to work and start a new life. An Army Reservist with the 411th Engineer Brigade out of New Jersey, Dima felt compelled to join the service with a desire to give back. The 411th was mobilized to rotate into Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom II.

I met Dima's roommate and good friend, Sgt. Henry Chin-Hong, while visiting troops in Iraq on August 12 of this year. Dima, a specialist at the time, had asked his roommate to come see me to express some issues he was having getting his paperwork through the immigration process to become an American citizen. He was very anxious to be a U.S. citizen and hoped I could help. Chin-Hong told me the problems and in the weeks after, my staff worked with Immigration and Naturalization Services to help the process along.

On October 3, then Spc. Dima, along with numerous other Soldiers, were sworn in as American citizens in the very palace where Saddam Hussein used to live. Dima was overjoyed. His roommate tells how he walked into the trailer where they lived that day and wouldn't stop screaming "USA, USA."

Chin-Hong wrote to me shortly after the ceremony to tell me about Dima's great accomplishment. I was overjoyed and humbled that my assistance helped this American Soldier become a citizen of the United States. He deserved it. He was defending the very country and the people he was trying so hard to be a part of.

Dima was the type of individual who followed President Kennedy's famous phrase, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Chin-Hong told us of the late night stories by Dima and the hardships he suffered in his native Romania. Dima would talk about how as a Soldier in the Romanian Army, he would have to deliver pizzas at night and live in a basement with his family. Dima couldn't understand why natural-born Americans weren't just walking on air with all the opportunities they had available to them. Chin-Hong recalls Dima telling him that he loved President Bush and would vote for him forever if it were

possible because the President allowed him to become a member of the greatest society the world has ever known.

I received an email from Chin-Hong a few weeks ago. He wanted to inform me that Dima had been promoted to sergeant on November 11. He also wanted me to know that Dima died that same afternoon from wounds suffered in a mortar attack on his convoy. His best friend, Chin-Hong was injured as well but survived his wounds.

Dima left behind his wife Florika and three children, Christian, Angela and John. All are under six years of age.

He gave more in his 39 days of citizenship than most Americans give in their whole lives. He is an American hero. He deserves to be remembered and recognized with all the great heroes of this century. He lived the Soldiers Creed and the Warrior Ethos everyday. He always placed the mission first, never accepted defeat, never quit, and never left a fallen comrade. He was an expert and a professional. He was, an American Soldier.

Today, 14,921 of our Soldiers are not U.S. citizens. Many of them are working on their citizenship. Many of them are also in harm's way, serving alongside their 280,000 brothers and sisters in arms in more than 120 countries worldwide. These heroes have chosen to defend their adopted country against all enemies, foreign and domestic. They've committed to serving the people of the United States and living the Army values. They deserve our highest respect. Those of us lucky enough to be born under the stars and stripes can learn something from these great Soldiers.

For me, Sgt. Catalin Dima will forever be remembered and honored as a great American hero. I only wish I had been given the opportunity to meet him face-to-face to tell him so.

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File photo

SMA Preston



Courtesy photo

Sgt. Catalin Dima

