

Earning American Citizenship the Hard Way

Many of today's veterans served this country even before becoming a citizen, and the VFW magazine looks at three men who served in the military and, as a result, became US citizens

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From the Revolutionary War to today's military conflicts overseas, immigrants and noncitizens have been serving honorably in America's military.

Many foreigners who come to the U.S. work for years to receive citizenship. But, this country has always placed noncitizens who serve in the U.S. military in a special category — oftentimes allowing for an expedited path to citizenship for those service men and women.

A Department of Justice document from October 1948 shows that more than 300,000 immigrants served during World War II. Interestingly, of the 109,000 noncitizens who served, almost 92 percent, or more than 100,000, received citizenship while serving during the war.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, 31,000 immigrants who served during the Korean War became U.S. citizens while in the service.

As of 2015, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services had naturalized 109,321 service members since October 2001. Of those men and women, 11,069 troops were naturalized in ceremonies at overseas locations.

For some, military service means more than serving our country — it's about becoming a part of it. While immigrants who serve come from different backgrounds and ethnicities, all have one goal in mind — obtaining U.S. citizenship.

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South Sudan

For a refugee born in Panrieng, South Sudan, serving in the military meant protecting his new country from an all-too-familiar enemy.

Daw Dekon, formerly known as Anderia Mayom, fled from his home in what is known today as South Sudan during Sudan's civil war in the 1980s.

"When the war started, things changed," Dekon said. "There were no hospitals, there were no schools and many people were getting killed."

Dekon said the war started when the Sudanese government decided to implement sharia, or Islamic religious, law. The act was a violation of an agreement between the northern Islamic region and the Christian south. Soldiers from the north attacked the people of South Sudan in 1983.

"If you were a male, you were killed, and if you were a female, they took you to the north," Dekon said. "That is why I went to Ethiopia in 1989."

His parents died during the war — his mother when he was 2 years old and his father when he was 8 years old —leaving Dekon as an orphan.

After their villages were destroyed, many of South Sudan's children, including Dekon, ran away and sought refuge in neighboring countries. Dekon found himself in a camp in Ethiopia with many other boys from South Sudan. He said they all spoke a different dialect or language, so there was a lot of confusion when talking with others.

At the time, the Ethiopian government accepted Sudanese refugees, but that soon changed. The Ethiopian government was overthrown in 1991, and the new government didn't want refugees in the country from South Sudan — siding with the government of northern Sudan.

Dekon, 12 years old at the time, learned that he couldn't stay in the country.

"So, now, we had to move — again," Dekon said.

JOURNEY TO KENYA

Thousands of displaced and orphaned boys, including Dekon, needed to move to a refugee camp in Kenya — more than 1,000 miles away. But there was no transportation — and many didn't have shoes. So, the "Lost Boys" walked across eastern Africa to seek safety.

The perilous journey took more than two months.

Many of the boys died along the way due to diseases and encounters with wild animals. Crocodile attacks were common, Dekon said.

Dekon spent eight years at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. There, he learned to speak English and Arabic, two languages that proved useful in his future. Dekon also applied for permanent residence and a chance to earn citizenship in the United States.

IN PURSUIT OF ‘HAPPINESS’

At 21 years old, Dekon was granted refugee status in America. In 2001, he traveled from Kenya to Belgium, then to New York City, before traveling to Kansas City, Mo., where he would live. A Catholic organization provided him and other refugees a home for three months, which helped the refugees start a new life in America.

“Everything was shocking,” Dekon said. “It took time to know how to get along and get around in Kansas City. All the people here were great to us.”

Once situated in the heart of America, Dekon said he never had any intentions of moving back home.

“Maybe to visit,” he said. “When I was given an application (for refugee status), the United States was my new home. It’s important to go back to South Sudan and visit, but this is home now.”

Dekon said he thought of his new home in America as the place where he was going to “pursue happiness.”

After talking to his new U.S. friends, Dekon decided to visit an Army recruiting office to join the Reserves.

‘LOST BOY’ FINDS PURPOSE IN NEW COUNTRY

In 2006, Dekon enlisted in the Army. Soon after, Dekon was encouraged to pursue his Army career as a linguist because of knowledge of his native languages — Dinka and Swahili — as well as Arabic. Dekon then attended the Defense Institute of Language in San Antonio, Texas. After he graduated in August 2006, he was transferred to active-duty service.

Prior to that, in 2005, Dekon had started the five-year process of becoming a citizen before joining the Army. However, Dekon said the military “recalled” his application while he was on active duty so he could become a citizen sooner.

While attached to the 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, Dekon deployed to Iraq in 2007. On Sept. 9, 2007, Dekon became a U.S. citizen during a ceremony at Balad Air Force Base, Iraq.

Dekon served seven years of active duty service and three in the Army Reserves. He said a

major reason for joining was because of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

“Osama Bin Laden was in Sudan all those years during the civil war,” Dekon said. “Because of what happened there, I wanted to protect my new country. My motivation was to stop the person who caused a lot of what happened to me in Sudan and also attacked my new home.”

After serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, Dekon left active duty service in 2010, but was reactivated in 2013 with orders to Jordan. When he left the Army in 2015, Dekon attended classes at Park University, in Parkville, Mo., but left college to take a job as a civilian contractor with the military as a linguist.

Dekon, a life member of VFW Post 7356 in Parkville, Mo., said he is glad that he joined the Army.

“Where I came from got me to where I’m at now,” Dekon said. “I believe that where I came from and the motivation that I have in me helped me get to America. It’s been a dream come true.”

GUY POUVESLE

France

Born 100 miles southwest of Paris in the French town of Herbilly, Guy Pouvesle, a U.S. veteran of the Marine Corps and Army, had the opportunity to move to America in August 1966 when he was 17 years old after his mother married an American soldier.

While living in Shreveport, La., Pouvesle held a green card. This grants a U.S. residency to live and work for up to 10 years. In 1969, Pouvesle was drafted into the Marine Corps. At the time, he was teaching French in a Catholic school but was eager to join.

“For me, I wanted to serve for what America did in support of my family in France,” Pouvesle said. “America has a special spot in my heart from the beginning of my life.”

Pouvesle’s father was a prisoner of war in Germany during World War II. Pouvesle said that, during the war, Germans shot down an American plane that crashed into his grandparents’ house. He said it killed many of his family members.

“But, the Americans were there to help my family during the war,” Pouvesle said. “I joined and served to pay back America.”

Pouvesle, who served with Bravo Co., 1st Bn., 7th Marines, was stationed in Camp

Pendleton, Calif., and sent to Vietnam in 1969. There, Pouvesle received a letter from the French government — he had been drafted to serve in the French army and was to report to Metz, France, to begin his duty.

“I sent them a letter and told them I was in Vietnam serving with the U.S. Marine Corps,” Pouvesle said. “I told them I would come if my chain of command released me and France paid my way there.”

Shortly after, he was sent another letter telling him that he needed to pay his own way back to France to serve.

“I replied with a few acquired Marine choice words that they could stick it where the light didn’t shine,” Pouvesle said.

BECOMING AN AMERICAN

After returning stateside, Pouvesle became a citizen on Oct. 7, 1971, shortly before his active-duty discharge from the Marine Corps. He became a citizen during a ceremony with other immigrants in San Diego.

“Back then, it would normally take five years to become a citizen,” Pouvesle said. “It only took me two months. I wanted to become an American citizen, because not only was I given the opportunity to live in the U.S., I was given the opportunity to serve and protect this country.”

Pouvesle served in the Marine Corps Reserves for four years until he decided to enlist in the Army in 1975. While stationed at Fort Carson, Colo., Pouvesle received another letter from the French government stating that he was sentenced to one year of incarceration for failing to report for French military duty. Pouvesle, now a citizen of both America and France, ignored the letter.

The next year, Pouvesle served in Panama, then received orders to Germany. Pouvesle, a wanted fugitive of France, feared that he would be caught in Germany and sent back to France for being a draft dodger.

“France and Germany had an extradition treaty,” Pouvesle said. “If caught, I could have been sent to France.”

A CHANCE TO REDEEM HIMSELF

Pouvesle said he told his commander about his situation, but nevertheless was sent to Germany in December 1976. There, Pouvesle read a Stars and Stripes article about an officer who was in the same situation. Pouvesle contacted the officer and followed his instructions to file for a dissolution of the charge against him with the French Military Tribunal board in Paris.

About a year later, the French government resolved this issue and told Pouvesle that his time in the Marine Corps was recognized as time served.

Pouvesle served in the Army until he retired in 1992 as a master sergeant — spending 23 years in the military. He now resides in Gentry, Ark., and is a life member of VFW Post 9834 in Decatur, Ark. He said if he could live his life “all over again” — he wouldn’t change a thing.

“I have no regrets of becoming a soldier or Marine,” Pouvesle said. “I am proud to be an American. This is the greatest country, and I have been all over the world. I wouldn’t trade my citizenship for anything.”

ROOP SHARMA

India

Born in 1942 and raised in a village near New Delhi, India, Roop Sharma left his home country at 22 years old to be an airplane technician in America. As a student at an aeronautical engineering college, Sharma was selected in 1964 to move to New York City to work for Pan Am Airlines.

“When I got to New York, I thought, ‘Wow, this is America,’” Sharma said. “Then the next year, I was drafted.”

Like many other immigrants with a green card, Sharma was drafted into the Army in September 1965 during the Vietnam War.

“I always wanted to be a soldier,” Sharma said. “My parents would not let me go into the military academy in India, so I was very happy to be drafted. I thought, ‘Now, I can finally be a soldier.’”

‘DEEPLY IMPRESSED’ WITH AMERICANS

While in Vietnam from December 1968 to July 1970, Sharma served as a CH-47 Chinook helicopter technician at Camp Eagle with B Co., 159th Assault Helicopter Bn., 101st Airborne Div. Sharma said there were a few small obstacles he had to overcome along the way.

“In India, I was taught British English,” Sharma said. “It was hard to understand some of the slang used by everyone. Also, I was a strict vegetarian, but the mess sergeant there, luckily, worked at an embassy in India, so he understood.”

Sharma said he was “deeply impressed” with the men he served with in Vietnam.

“They were the only people in the world who loved to laugh at themselves,” Sharma said. “Those guys were really out of this world.”

Sharma also said he was impressed by how “rich” the men were, by the world’s standards, but didn’t act as if they were.

“They could have bought a whole Vietnamese village with the money they earned,” Sharma said. “But they were happy and didn’t care about the way they lived while serving in Vietnam.”

‘PROUDEST DAY OF MY LIFE’

After coming back home, Sharma continued to serve in the Army at Fort Mead, Md., and Fort Eustis, Va. In 1971, he became a U.S. citizen when the opportunity was offered. He became a citizen on Aug. 18, 1971, during a ceremony in Norfolk, Va.

“That day was the proudest day of my life,” Sharma said. “The whole process took less than six months.”

Sharma retired from the Army as a command sergeant major in January 1992 after 27 years of service. He resides in Hanover, Md., and is a member of VFW Post 160 in Glen Burnie, Md.

“I enjoyed serving this country,” Sharma said. “I still have dreams that I’m back in the Army. I am very proud of my time as an American soldier.”

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