

IMMIGRATION WATCH

Deported veteran is now a citizen

The former soldier, pardoned for a gun felony, returns to the country he served.



HECTOR BARAJAS, center, attends a ceremony Friday in Tijuana before traveling north to become a U.S. citizen. “I want to apologize once more for what got me deported,” the Army veteran said of a prior felony. (Alejandro Tamayo San Diego Union Tribune)

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SAN DIEGO — Hector Barajas, who became the voice for hundreds of deported U.S. military veterans around the world, returned Friday to the country he served and became a citizen.

Barajas began raising awareness about deported veterans after his own removal from the U.S. and in 2013 founded the [Deported Veterans Support House](#), known as “the Bunker,” in Tijuana. He applied for citizenship with aid from a coalition of supporters called [Honorably Discharged, Dishonorably Deported](#), which launched in 2016. After a [pardon](#) from Gov. Jerry Brown for the offense that got him deported, he was [approved](#) last month.

“I believe in this country,” Barajas said shortly after his naturalization ceremony. “I believe we can make things right.”

In the Bunker on Friday, Barajas — whose family moved to Los Angeles in 1984 when he was 7 years old — donned his military uniform for the journey north.

Barajas grew up as a green card holder. After high school, he joined the Army and was part of the 82nd Airborne Division from 1995 to 2001. In 2002, he took a plea deal for a charge of shooting at an occupied car. The government took away his green card and deported him after he finished a prison sentence.

“I want to apologize once more for what got me deported,” Barajas said after taking the oath of citizenship. “I’m not proud of it, but I am proud of what I have done since then.”

Though his actions cost him dearly, Barajas said, “I believe I am no less of an American because of the mistakes that I made.

“We must ensure our ‘leave no man behind’ motto is not left on the battlefield.”

Noncitizens generally must be green card holders to serve in the military. Because they served, they don’t have to wait the three to five years required for other noncitizens to naturalize, but U.S. citizenship doesn’t happen automatically. They still have to pass the same tests and go through the screening process. Like any green card holder, noncitizens who serve or have served in the military can be deported if they are convicted of certain crimes.

The American Civil Liberties Union has documented at least 239 cases of deported veterans living in 34 countries.

Yolanda Varona, the founder of Dreamers Moms who works alongside Barajas at the Bunker, fought to contain her emotions as she rushed around quietly Friday making sure everything was ready for his trip.

“Hector is realizing the dream that all of those deported have,” Varona said.

She was happy for Barajas, she said, but sad that she would no longer see him every day.

“Everything will change in my life, in the group dynamics,” Varona said. “But we have to keep pushing forward. We have the ability to win more with what we’re doing.”

Barajas plans to continue to run the Bunker for another year and then hand off the program to Joaquin Aviles, a Marine Corps veteran who was deported in 2001 for a firearm possession conviction.

Aviles said he's going to try to carry on what Barajas started.

"I know what he does. I see him," Aviles said. "I just don't know if I'll be able to take that whole role. He's committed to this every minute, every hour, every day of his life."

After a prayer at the Bunker and countless hugs, Barajas led a caravan of cars to the border.

When he reached the front of the line into the port of entry, he waited for officials to escort him to the secondary inspection area.

"I'll see you guys on the other side," he said with a salute to his supporters.

After spending an hour at the border answering officials' questions that took a conference call with his attorney to resolve, Barajas arrived at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in downtown San Diego for a private citizenship ceremony attended by his parents and 11-year-old daughter, Liliana.

When he emerged as a U.S. citizen, veterans in and out of uniform cheered.

Norma Chávez Peterson, executive director of the ACLU in San Diego, reminded the crowd that Barajas is one of many facing similar circumstances and urged more Americans to support those she called "abandoned" veterans.

"This is an American issue," Chávez Peterson said. "It's not a partisan issue."

Rep. Mark Takano (D-Riverside) who has championed the cause of deported veterans, called on Congress to pass reforms that would protect those who serve in the military from deportation and bring back veterans who were already deported.

"They were loyal to us," he said. "We need to be loyal back."

The wait at the border was the only time on Friday that Barajas said made him nervous. On his way to a celebratory barbecue, he was still processing the reality of his new life.

He will spend a few days with his family in Los Angeles, where he said he hopes to hang out with his daughter and do normal things like go to the store or park. After he finishes his commitment at the Bunker, he plans to find a job in the U.S. that allows him to keep pushing for deported veterans to come back home.

"I'm just happy to finally be with my daughter," Barajas said. "Being able for her to have that comfort that Dad is not going to leave."

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