

# Immigrant Ph.D. candidate rocked by sudden U.S. Army discharge

By Martha Mendoza and  
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The Associated Press

**S**AN FRANCISCO — Growing up in eastern China, Panshu Zhao fell in love with America. He read the bible his parents gave him, watched Hollywood movies, and studied the ideals of democracy. He jumped at the chance to attend graduate school at Texas A&M University.

In 2016, Zhao enlisted in the U.S. Army as part of a special recruitment program offering immigrants in the country legally a path to citizenship.

The future, he said, was bright.

Now, he is one of the dozens of immigrant recruits and reservists struggling with abrupt, often unexplained military discharges and cancelled contracts. They traded being willing to risk their lives for the prospect of U.S. citizenship, a timeworn exchange that's drawn linguists, medical specialists, and thousands of other immigrants to the military since the Revolutionary War.

"It's just like you're dropped from heaven to hell," Zhao told The Associated Press.

It is unclear how many men and women who enlisted through the special recruitment program have been ousted from the Army, but immigration attorneys told The AP that they know of more than 40 recruits who recently have been discharged or whose status has become questionable.

Some recruits say they were given no reason for their discharge. Others said the Army informed them they'd been labelled as security risks because they have relatives abroad or because the Defense Department had not completed background checks on them.

The Pentagon said there has been no policy change since last year, when defense secretary Jim Mattis said no one could enter basic training without completion of a background investigation.

And Army spokeswoman Cynthia O. Smith said that any enlistee entering the military undergoes security screenings.

"Each recruit undergoes an individualized suitability review and the length



of time for the review is dependent upon each individual's unique background," Smith said.

Zhao, 31, said his "ship out" date to basic training was delayed for two years as he underwent background checks, counterintelligence interviews, and rigorous reviews added as requirements for immigrant enlistees.

He continued to pursue his Ph.D. in geography at Texas A&M, but also hit the gym, prepping for boot camp. And he trained — in uniform — with his unit. He had military identification and healthcare, he said.

In April, Zhao visited Washington, D.C., for the first time, touring the White House and visiting the Republican National Committee.

That same month, he got word from his unit commander: He was being discharged. He was told simply that his discharge was "uncharacterized," he said.

"I'm not a national threat," Zhao said. "On the contrast, I'm a national merit because people like me with higher education and critical skills, we want to serve this great U.S. Army. I'm a good scientist no matter what."

The Pentagon announced last October that in order to apply for citizenship,

immigrant recruits were required to have gone through basic training and served honorably for either 180 days or a year, depending on their Army classification. But that requirement has been challenged in court.

Some discharged service members whose basic training was delayed cannot start the naturalization process. Others who started the process have had their applications put on hold.

Immigration attorneys told The AP that many immigrants let go in recent weeks received an "uncharacterized discharge," which is neither dishonorable nor honorable.

A Brazilian reservist, Lucas Calixto, filed a lawsuit in Washington, D.C. contending that he was booted without the Defense Department giving him a chance to defend himself or appeal.

President George W. Bush ordered "expedited naturalization" for immigrant soldiers in 2002 in an effort to swell military ranks. Seven years later, the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest program, known as MAVNI, became an official recruiting program.

The program came under fire from conservatives when President Barack Obama added DACA recipients — young

**CANCELLED CONTRACT.** This photo provided by Panshu Zhao shows Zhao in uniform on February 11, 2018 at a U.S. Army Reserve installation in Houston, Texas. Zhao is one of dozens, if not more, of devastated immigrant military recruits and reservists struggling with abrupt and often inexplicable discharges and cancelled contracts. They enlisted with a promised path to citizenship in exchange for being willing to risk their lives, a timeworn exchange since the Revolutionary War. (Panshu Zhao via AP)

immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally — to the list of eligible enlistees. In response, the military layered on additional security clearances for recruits to pass before heading to boot camp.

Donald Trump's administration added even more hurdles, creating a backlog within the Defense Department. Last fall, hundreds of recruits still in the enlistment process had their contracts cancelled. A few months later, the military suspended MAVNI.

Republican congressman Andy Harris of Maryland, who has supported legislation to limit the program, told The AP that MAVNI was established by executive order.

"Our military must prioritize enlisting American citizens, and restore the MAVNI program to its specialized, limited scope," he said.

According to Air Force Maj. Carla Gleason, a Pentagon spokeswoman, the "overwhelming majority" of MAVNI candidates are from Asia and Africa because those are the critical language skills needed in the military.

As of April, 1,100 immigrant recruits were awaiting basic training while undergoing security reviews, the Pentagon said.

Eligible recruits are required to have legal status in the U.S., such as a student visa, before enlisting. More than 5,000 immigrants were recruited into the program in 2016, and an estimated 10,000 are currently serving. Most go into the Army, but some also go to the other military branches.

Zhao is now rethinking his future, but said he wishes he had a chance to appeal.

"I need justice," he said. "This is America. This is not China. This is not the Middle East. This is not a dictatorship. And that's why I love America."

Associated Press writer Lolita C. Baldor in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.



**ANNUAL EATING CONTEST.** Reigning champion Miki Sudo downed 37 franks to win her fifth straight title in the women's competition of the annual Nathan's Famous July Fourth hot dog eating contest at Coney Island in New York. Thousands of attendees braved 83° temperatures and a heat index of 91° to witness the annual competition on the Coney Island boardwalk. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

## Miki Sudo downs 37 dogs to win fifth women's title

By Rebecca Gibian  
The Associated Press

**N**EW YORK — Miki Sudo (MIHK'-ee SOO'-doh) downed 37 franks to win her fifth straight title in the women's competition of the annual Nathan's Famous July Fourth hot dog eating contest.

The Las Vegas competitor fell short of the 41 hot dogs she consumed last year, but still beat out second-place finisher Michelle Lesco of Tucson, Arizona. Lesco chowed down 28 wieners and buns.

Thousands of attendees braved 83° temperatures and a heat index of 91° to witness the annual July Fourth competition on the Coney Island boardwalk.

Joey "Jaws" Chestnut confronted 20 other men during the men's competition to take home the coveted Mustard Belt.

Sudo was a fan favorite, drawing big cheers from the crowd during her performance, which was slightly delayed after she requested new water to soak her buns.

## Japan midfielder Inui gets embassy introduction

**TOKYO (AP)** — Japan midfielder Takashi Inui was introduced by La Liga team Real Betis at the Spanish Embassy in Tokyo after impressing at the World Cup.

The 30-year-old Inui, who played for Spanish club Eibar for three seasons, said he has a three-year contract with Betis.

"Betis' football last season was very attractive for me," Inui said. "I had a strong feeling that I wanted to be a part of the team."

Inui scored two goals for Japan at the World Cup in Russia, and played a major role in helping his team reach the round of 16.

Inui scored in Japan's 2-2 draw with Senegal in the group stage of the World Cup. He got a second goal in his team's 2-3 loss against Belgium in the knockout stage.

## Chinese find suggests human relatives left Africa earlier

By Emiliano Rodriguez Mega  
The Associated Press

**N**EW YORK — An excavation in China provides evidence that our evolutionary cousins left Africa earlier than we thought.

Stone tools suggest some unidentified relative of humans lived in China as long as 2.1 million years ago. That's about 250,000 years earlier than the previous record for a presence of human relatives



**NEW CONTRACT.** Takashi Inui of Japan wears his Real Betis jersey at the Spanish embassy in Tokyo. Inui has signed a contract with the Seville-based club through 2021. (Kyodo News via AP)

Real Betis says Inui will keep the No. 14 shirt he wore for the Japanese national team.

outside Africa.

Until now, the oldest evidence of human-like creatures outside Africa came from 1.8-million-year-old artifacts and skulls found in the Georgian town of Dmanisi.

The new findings were published in the journal *Nature*.

The discovery, however, does not answer the longstanding question of when our own species — *Homo sapiens* — first emerged from Africa.