

## Iraq Veterans Help New Immigrants

Bullets whizzed past as "Sarah" translated for U.S. soldiers in Iraq. Shrapnel from a roadside blast hit her protective vest. In her off hours, she worried about retribution for helping the Americans. A sign reading "traitor" was posted on her family's door."

I survived by chance," she said.

Now, she is in the United States under a visa program for Iraqis who have aided the U.S. military, and she is being helped by a network of Iraq veterans who try to make sure those new immigrants make a soft landing in this country.

Mathew Tully, an Albany-area lawyer who served in Iraq as a National Guard major, volunteered along with his wife to take in Sarah until she gets settled in a new culture and carves out a new life.

He didn't know Sarah in Iraq, but he feels a sense of duty.

"There's nobody else out there to help Sarah," Tully said. "When you're confronted with the fact that there's somebody a half a world away who has no place to go when they get off the plane at JFK, I don't know how as a good American, as a good Christian, I could turn her away."

Sarah translated for soldiers patrolling violence-torn areas of Baghdad for four years. For the safety of relatives still in Iraq, she still goes by Sarah, the nickname soldiers called her. They would call and say "Sarah, be ready in five minutes," and she would slip out carefully to make sure militia members weren't following her. Out on raids and patrols, she dressed like a soldier in camouflage and faced the same risks.

Sarah, 28, said she did it to help her country, even though she knew it placed her family in danger. Every trip outside her home for errands became nerve wracking, every stranger a potential threat.

"Every time I go to the market I look at their eyes and think `Please don't kill me,'" she said.

The federal government in 2006 created Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqi and Afghan translators who worked with the military. The program initially accepted 50 immigrants a year but legislation sponsored by Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., will boost the number to 5,000 this year.

Overall, an estimated 2 million Iraqi refugees have fled their country since the war began. The new immigrants face challenges in this country. Arabic translators are not in high demand. And even though they helped the United States in Iraq, they can have trouble finding jobs because people who think in stereotypes fear they are a threat.

The federal government provides the immigrants with training and assistance available to refugees. But Charisse Espy Glassman of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants in Washington said the benefits were not available until recently and many of the Iraqi

immigrants might not know about them.

Tully is providing what one aid worker calls a "temporary anchor" for Sarah during the difficult transition. He volunteered after a call from Lt. Col. Robert Milmore, who knew him through the National Guard.

Milmore, through the Baghdad Roundtable of the Knights of Columbus, works to get the paperwork filed for the visas and helps the immigrants after they arrive. An interpreter who worked for him in Baghdad lives in his Hudson Valley home. On March 22, Sarah became the third Iraqi translator helped by the network. A fourth is expected soon and 63 more are in the pipeline, Milmore said.

Sarah still jumps at loud noises and thinks often of her mother. But she is eager to get out on her own.

Tully and Milmore recently escorted her on rounds to service agencies in the Albany area as she tried to arrange basics like medical insurance and a Social Security card. Sarah — dressing American in a black hoodie, jeans and white sneakers — speaks English well, but let the two men do most of the talking.

Tully said Sarah will have a job in his law office as an assistant as soon as she gets a Social Security card.

"One thing Americans have to realize is that she's done more for the country than a lot of Americans," Milmore said.