

Photo by JO1 Robert Benson

SW3 Kennard Caldeira, assigned to Seabee Unit 422, proudly displays the flag of his native Guyana. With only four months to go to get his citizenship, Caldeira looks forward to expanded opportunities. "I waited for the new program," he said. "Now my paperwork will process faster."

When **Personnelman 3rd Class Manuel Flores** stepped off a plane at then-National Airport in 1987, his view of America was what he'd seen on TV: "Dukes of Hazzard," "Dallas" and the evening news. Fortunately, the news showed Flores that America was more than dirt roads and cowboy hats, but it never explained how he could become a citizen, and he hadn't the slightest idea.

Now, 13 years and two tries later, Flores is extremely excited about the military's new program to expedite citizenship paperwork for its members. Introduced in January, the program has encouraged the Anacostia Annex Sailor to try again.

Flores was born in Usulután, El Salvador, in April 1975. At age 12, he knew his country was embroiled in civil war because guerrilla warfare made traveling from city to city unsafe. His family wasn't as poor as many, but poverty and unemployment were swelling.

"My mom went to the states before me, making preparations for me to

come," he said. "It was hard to see things happening to El Salvador."

Flores enlisted in the Navy in 1994.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do, and the Navy seemed like it was in my face all the time, so I joined," he said with a chuckle. "I questioned my decision in the beginning, but now that I'm on shore duty, I think back to all the travel and experience I've gotten."

He first applied for citizenship while stationed with VFA-34 at NAS Jacksonville, Fla.

"It was impossible, such a long waiting period," he said. "It was a real hassle." Then, he transferred to Anacostia Annex, Washington, D.C. "I wasn't going to travel from Washington, D.C., to Florida and try to deal with all the paperwork too," he said. He quickly lost track of the status.

Late last year, he refiled in Baltimore. Then he found out about the military's new citizenship program, a streamlined initiative for the sea services announced by the Secretary of the Navy. It reduces waiting time for active-duty members to three or four months from a normal

waiting period of 20 to 24 months or more. He plans to forget about the paperwork he filed in Baltimore.

"The Navy's so much faster," he said. "It's much better than what civilians have to do, and the wait I was expecting. It came to me as a benefit for serving in the military."

Most of the reasons Flores wants citizenship — job opportunities, rate changes within the Navy, security clearances — are echoed by **Steelworker 3rd Class Kennard Caldeira**, a native of Guyana, who works with Seabee Unit 422, Naval District Washington.

"You can't even work at the post office without U.S. citizenship," Caldeira said. Caldeira isn't focused now on changing rates or leaving the Navy, but he doesn't rule it out down the road.

"The way the Navy changes, you have to be ready to change too," he said.

Like Flores, Navy relocation disrupted earlier chances for Caldeira to complete citizenship paperwork. In Caldeira's case, six-month deployments overseas with Seabee battalions made tracking immigration paperwork as unreal to him as the New York snow he saw when he first flew from tropical Guyana.

He's now using the military program to run his paperwork through the newly established Central Military Processing Unit in Lincoln, Neb., a division of the Immigration Naturalization Service.

"I've been getting help at the Navy Yard from Michael Cole — he's pretty helpful!" Caldeira said.

Paralegal Specialist Michael Cole, along with CDR Ann DeLaney, director for the Legal Assistance Division, spearhead Navywide immigration assistance from

Navy Sails Around Sea of

Story by JO1(SW/AW)
Wayne Eternicka

Red Tap

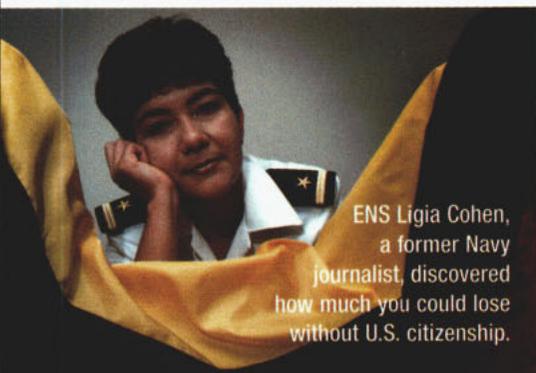
the Navy Office of the Judge Advocate General, Washington Navy Yard, Washington D.C.

"We're trying to educate," DeLaney said. "We try to get the word out to JAGs, family service centers, command career counselors and on web sites. Ideally, local commands can help individuals on a personal basis. If they have a problem, they can call or e-mail us. It's often career counselors who come into contact with Sailors who need immigration help because Sailors approach them wanting a rate change or officer program."

According to the Chief of Naval Operations message issued in March, each local command should designate one command representative to assist in the application process. *The Navy Guide to Naturalization Applications*, can be downloaded on-line at:

bupers.navy.mil/pers33/natur.htm

DeLaney and Cole said if individuals are confused about where their application stands after submission, they can



ENS Ligia Cohen, a former Navy journalist, discovered how much you could lose without U.S. citizenship.

Photo by PH2 Shane McCoy

always call them at the Navy Yard.

"It's the greatest thrill when we can help someone," Cole said. "It's not always good news, but at least they know where they fall in the queue." He also knows many horror stories resulting from incorrectly filed paperwork.

"In the past, service members would get forms at home, either through the

mail or from the Internet," Cole said. "They'd send them in, and if they were filled out incorrectly, they were asked to resubmit and told, 'Oh, by the way, you'll have to wait an additional 365-400 days.'"

With an estimated 12,500 active-duty Sailors who are not U.S. citizens, a large percentage of them might have been transferred to their next duty station while waiting under the old process.

"It doesn't matter if you're here, in Japan, or in Spain with the new process," Cole said. "Your paperwork is in one place, and you can always reference it."

Former **JO2 Ligia Cohen** is an example of a Sailor who struggled before the new process was erected. Though she's a success story, she came face-to-face with disappointment and was so frustrated she considered leaving the Navy before she gained citizenship.

The Columbia-native joined the U.S. Navy in 1995 under a waiver for citizenship.

"Nobody told me my waiver had an expiration date or was good through only a certain pay grade," she said.

After earning the requisite score for advancement to JO1, she was told she couldn't advance to first class without a secret clearance. That required citizenship, and she didn't have it.

Her command peers were frocked that June 1999. She attended — as an observer.

"It felt totally unfair," she said. "I earned the promotion, but wasn't getting it. I was really upset and going to get out [of the Navy]."

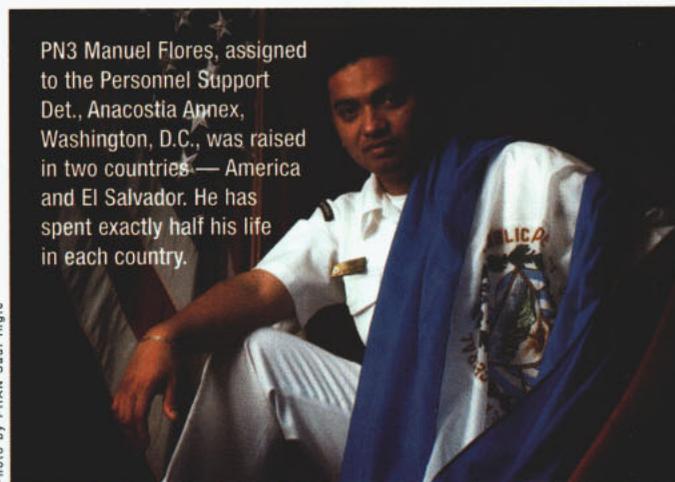
Fortunately, Cohen received her citizenship after four months and some frustration, just three days before the end

of the advancement cycle at which point she would have lost her chance to advance.

"There was no regular process through the Navy to get paperwork expedited," she said.

Cohen's expedited wait of four months is what the Navy is now offering through its new program to all Sailors who have served three years active-duty service.

"We all have naval citizenship," Cohen said. "We should be in the same position with the same opportunities." Subsequent to Cohen's advancement to E-6 in 1997,



PNL3 Manuel Flores, assigned to the Personnel Support Det., Anacostia Annex, Washington, D.C., was raised in two countries — America and El Salvador. He has spent exactly half his life in each country.

Photo by PHAN Saul Ingie

she submitted an application to an officer program and now works at Naval Medical Center, Portsmouth, as ENS Ligia Cohen.

"It makes things so much easier when you're not held back because you don't have citizenship," Cohen said. Flores and Caldeira are now focused on gaining the stability that comes with citizenship. Soon, they won't live the American dream through syndicated television and news. These Sailors, who have come from foreign countries, yet maintain the freedom of the American people, are finally only a short step from citizenship. ☑

Eternicka is a journalist assigned to All Hands.

Forms for U.S. citizenship are available from the INS website at: ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/formsfee/index.htm If you require additional help, contact Mr. Michael Cole at: colems@jag.navy.mil

e **Gaining Citizenship Becomes Easier for Active-Duty Sailors**