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Opinion - Immigrants contribute greatly to our military

By Brett Hunt

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"I'm a Cuban refugee who came to this country when I was 10 years old and flunked the sixth grade because I couldn't speak English." That's a quote that won't surprise many Americans on both sides of the immigration debate.

In fact, many opposed to immigration reform would point to it as proof that giving a path to citizenship for immigrants in this country right now would only serve to somehow lower the quality of people inside our borders.

They would be wrong. The quote above is from Army Brig. Gen. Bernardo Negrete, a former special-operations officer with four combat tours of duty, who rose up to become one of the few Hispanic generals in American history.

General Negrete is a shining example of what immigrants have to contribute to our country - living proof of the American Dream. In today's flawed immigration system, we don't know how many future military leaders live in the shadows due to their immigration status.

What we do know, however, is that by perpetuating a flawed system that forces those immigrants to lay low, we're keeping scores of them from the pride and honor of military service. Today's military offers a leg up to all young people and particularly to immigrants who are attracted to the guarantee of education, a living wage, health care and pensions.

Our Armed Forces are fighting two tough wars in distant lands, and the tragedy in Haiti reminds us that our military is also required for duties other than fighting wars.

Currently, soldiers and Marines, in particular, are forced to go on their fifth and sixth tours in Iraq and Afghanistan with little rest, leading to a military that is stretched to the breaking point.

By creating an accountable, fair and realistic path to citizenship, we could potentially add tens of thousands of new service members, thus providing relief to our men and women in uniform.

During my time as an Army officer, the units I served in benefited directly from the diversity they reflected. I served with soldiers from Kenya, Honduras, Mexico, Vietnam and the Ukraine, and they were some of the most dedicated and patriotic troops I came in contact with.

Immigrant soldiers were on the green at Lexington, on the sunken road at Shilo, at Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima and Da Nang. Right now, in fact, immigrant troops are holding the line in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan.

Our leaders have a solemn vow to honor this history of sacrifice in the name of liberty by doing what is right. Comprehensive immigration reform is what is right for our Armed Forces, for our nation's security and for America's fighting men and women and their families.