Sgt. Christopher Abeyta comes home

HOME OF THE BRAVE
From Midway to Middletown, thousands honor fallen soldier

When a small jet carrying National Guard Sgt. Christopher Abeyta’s body touched down at Miami Airport, his parents were escorted from a private room inside the National Guard building into a cavernous hangar.

Some 60 Patriot Guard Riders waving tall flags lined the walk, a few taking care to block the windows from curious onlook- ers and camera lenses. Middletown’s police, firefighters and veterans from World War II through Desert Storm grouped together, still unable to fill the room’s palpable emptiness.

The plane approached the hangar, streams of water blasted over it out of Chicago’s fireworks in the first of the day’s many tangible honors for Abeyta, who died while serving in Afghanistan.

Paul Abeyta told his wife Barbara hand by hand as they both cried at their only child’s homecoming. Chris nervously fiddled with his cap as his father Paul Abeyta, Chris’ best friend, one he celebrated with while still in high school, held onto his wife, Nick, and sobbed.

So moved was one officer, save orders to salute at the sight of the casket, covered in an American flag, until he had dampened, stripped itself, into the back of a hearse at the gloved hands of seven Guardians.

‘Hail Mary, full of grace’

An entourage of Middletown police and fire volunteers, Abeyta’s family and dozens of Patriot Guard Riders on gleaming motorcycle clubs rode south on Centre Avenue, turning east at 115th Street to pass the Abeyta home of Abeyta’s paternal grandmother, Elva. Her home stood out from the neighborhood marked by giant fans on swirling bases and crowns to T-shirts bearing Abeyta’s grin.

Hundreds of Middletown High School students in navy and khaki created the procession from the school front lawn with tiny flags in their hands. The teenagers chatted and socialized the way young people do while they waited in the sunlince. Teachers tried to get the students ahead of time. Silence fell down the line as the first sight of flash- ing lights. Hands jumped to cover hearts.

Then, over and over, filling the long min- utes it took the procession to pass, came the voices in unison. “Now and at the hour of our death, amen. Hail Mary, full of grace."

The Lord is with you…”

‘In loving memory’

Ladle trucks from Robbins, Homer Township and Odell Park crossed Polkota Road, suspending flags down the center of the street, at intervals that shrank as Abeyta’s homecoming neared Middletown. Firefighters and police from each from the procession entered stood at attention as full uniforms. Along the 14-mile route, people wait- ed to witness the passing casket.

Bremen High School, where Abeyta graduated in 2005, was a melange of flags and protesters. “Here,” said the banner. “Thank you Chris, a true Bre- men hero.”

Sixteen-year-old Lan- cion Brown and his art class made one of the many bun- nies, “In loving memory of Christopher Abeyta, hero of the Bremen, Bremen High School honors you.”

Locked in the rolling traffic, one man shut off his SUV, got out and saluted.

Many of Abeyta’s 15,000 neighborhood went on porches and sidewalks for a young man they’d never met. They lined in ribbons around trees, changed their lemon signs to mark his long trip home. clung to flags and gathered up their kids to bear witness. Bells at St. Christopher Church clanged and clanged.

Nicole Cardinal stood in the middle of 147th Street to watch Christopher be sal- uted into Bremen Memorial Chapel with incredible solemnity and ceremony. She climbed three of her four young children out to pay their respects and tell him, “Yes, those are real soldiers.”

And she cried with her community for one of their own.

“Anyone who gives his life for our coun- try’s freedom deserves our respect,” she said “Middletown… has a lot of pride in people who come from here.”

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Bremen High School students wave flags Thursday as the hearse carrying the body of Sgt. Christopher Abeyta passes by the school during a procession through Middletown, Abeyta’s hometown. The 22-year-old died during combat in Afghanistan.

ABOVE: Barbara and Paul Abeyta, Sgt. Christopher Abeyta’s parents, lead family and friends in the procession. BELOW: One man gets emotional during the procession.

PHOTOS BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK — SOUTH TOWN STAR