'Thank you, Chris' - Hero's welcome for soldier killed in Afghan war

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Sgt. Christopher Abeyta came home to a hero's greeting Thursday.

As his flag-draped casket made its way from Midway Airport to Midlothian, the 23-year-old lost to the war in Afghanistan was surrounded by loved ones and others touched by his March 15 death.

When a small jet carrying the National Guard sergeant's body touched down, Abeyta's parents were escorted from a private room inside the National Guard building into a hangar, where about 60 Patriot Guard Riders wielding tall flags lined the walls.

Paul Abeyta held wife Barbara's hand as they both cried at their only child's homecoming.

An entourage of Midlothian police and fire vehicles, Abeyta's family and dozens of Patriot Guard Riders on motorcycles rode south on Cicero Avenue.

Bremen High School, where Abeyta graduated in 2003, was a mob scene of flags and posters: "Thank you Chris, a true Bremen hero." "RIP Christopher."

Some of Abeyta's 15,000 neighbors wept on porches. Some tied yellow ribbons around trees, and some clung to flags. Bells at St. Christopher Church clanged. Nicole Cardinal watched as Abeyta was ushered into Hickey Memorial Chapel.

"Anyone who gives his life for our country's freedom deserves our respect," she said. "Midlothian . . . has a lot of pride in people who come from here."

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Caption: Photo: Joseph P. Meier, Southtownstar / Members of the Illinois Honor Guard carry Sgt. Christopher Abeyta's casket into a Midlothian chapel Thursday. ; Photo: National Guard Sgt. Christopher Abeyta was killed March 15 while on duty in Afghanistan. ;