Sgt. Christopher Abeyta comes home

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BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK Staff writer

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 those who loved him best, by those who, like him, swore to serve America and by those who found themselves touched by his death on March 15.

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 cavernous hangar, where some 60 Patriot Guard Riders wielding tall flags lined the walls, a few taking care to block the windows from curious onlookers and camera lenses. Midlothian'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 fire trucks in the first of the day's many tangible honors.

Paul Abeyta held his wife Barbara's hand tightly as they both cried at their only child's homecoming, Chris' muddy face smiling out on "Our Hero" T-shirts they both wore.

Jon Mireles, Chris' best friend, the one he enlisted with while still in high school, turned east at 115th Street to pass the Alsip home of Abeyta's paternal grandmother, Elvira.

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No words were spoken, save orders to salute at the sight of the casket, covered in an American flag, until it had disappeared, stripes first into the back of a hearse, at the gloved hands of seven Guardsmen.

'Hail Mary, full of grace'

An entourage of Midlothian police and fire vehicles, Abeyta's family and dozens of Patriot Guard Riders on gleaming motorcycles rode south on Cicero Avenue, turning east at 115th Street to pass the Alsip home of Abeyta's paternal grandmother, Elvira.

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A boy holds a shirt honoring Illinois National Guard Sgt. Christopher Abeyta during a procession Thursday on 147th Street in Midlothian. Abeyta died March 15 during combat in Afghanistan.

PHOTO GALLERY

Sgt. Chris Abeyta returns

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Her house stood out from the neighborhood, marked by giant flags on swiveling bases and crowds in T-shirts bearing Abeyta's grin.

Hundreds of Marist High School students in navy and khaki awaited the procession from the school's front lawn with tiny flags in their hands. The teenagers chatted and socialized the way young people do while they waited in the sunshine. Teachers tried to quiet the students ahead of time. Silence fell down the line at the first sight of flashing lights. Hands jumped to cover hearts.

Then, over and over, filling the long minutes 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'

Ladder trucks lent from Robbins, Homer Township and Orland Park crossed Pulaski Road, suspending flags down the center of the street, at intervals that shrank as Abeyta's homecoming neared Midlothian. Firefighters and police from each town the procession entered stood at attention in full uniforms. Along the 14-mile route, people waited to witness the passing procession.

Bremen High School, where Abeyta graduated in 2003, was a mob scene of flags and posters: "Hero," "Thank you Chris, a true Bremen hero," "RIP Christopher." Sixteen-year-old Lauren Boulden said her art class made one of the many banners: "In loving memory of Christopher Abeyta, the bravest of the Braves, Bremen High School honors you."

Stuck in the resulting traffic, one man shut off his SUV, got out and saluted.

Many of Abeyta's 15,000 neighbors wept on porches and sidewalks for a young man they'd never met. They tied yellow ribbons around trees, changed their business 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 ushered into Hickey Memorial Chapel with incredible solemnity and ceremony. She schlepped three of her four young children out to pay their respects and tell them, "Yes, those are real soldiers."

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

"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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A wake for Christopher Abeyta will be from 2 to 9 p.m. at Hickey Memorial Chapel, 4201 W. 147th Street. A funeral Mass will be at 10 a.m. Saturday at St. Christopher Catholic Church, followed by burial at Lincoln National Cemetery. At about 9:15 a.m., Abeyta's body will be walked across 147th street from the funeral home to the church.

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