

# McAllen, where have you been?

LET'S HONOR OUR  
HOMETOWN HERO TODAY



**CHRIS  
ARDIS**

COMMENTARY

Over the past several months, I have watched countless stories of fallen soldiers returning home — family members, friends and strangers waving American flags, lining the streets in their honor, flags throughout the town at half-staff.

When I first learned of McAllen's first fallen soldier, Staff Sgt. Juan Campos, I had no doubt he would receive the same homecoming.

We live in a city with more than 100,000 people, people who are

warm and inviting. We are home to the breathtaking Veteran's War Memorial and have a cemetery immediately outside of our airport where fallen soldiers from other wars are laid to rest.

The first ceremony to honor Staff Sgt. Campos was held Tuesday evening at his sister's McAllen home. There, America's Last Patrol raised an American flag and an Operation Iraqi Freedom Flag and spoke to his wife, son, mother and siblings.

State Rep. Veronica Gonzales

was there to present the family with a flag to honor their fallen soldier, as was Norma Brewster from U.S. Rep. Rubén Hinojosa's office. U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar and County Judge J.D. Salinas sent representatives to pay their respects to the family.

McAllen police officers were stationed at the end of the street to direct traffic.

Unfortunately, there was not much traffic to direct.

The baseball team of SSG Campos' young niece was there

in uniform, along with members of McAllen's Military Moms group, neighbors and an estimated 30 or 40 other people.

"Where is McAllen?" I was thinking.

This 27-year-old soldier — with a wife, an 8-year-old son and a baby due to be born in seven months — gave his life so we could go to our jobs, plan a BBQ, attend a baby shower and go to the beach.

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Others at the ceremony that night expressed their sadness and shared the grief of SSG Campos' older brothers, Alfonso and Joe, whom I lovingly remembered from their days at Brown Middle School when I was teaching there, and the rest of his family.

I thought of the stories my grandma told me when I was a young girl.

Her war years were very difficult years. Americans had rations and daily felt the consequences of a war fought in a distant land.

Today, it is much easier to forget that our country is at war. There are no rations. There are no visible reminders that our men and women are suffering in the deadly heat of Iraq and Afghanistan unless we follow the news.

Today, it is far too easy to forget.

Maybe people did not feel comfortable going to the home of SSG Campos' sister, I reasoned. Perhaps that seemed too personal, too private. Surely, the citizens of McAllen would be out in droves to honor our brave soldier as his motorcade arrives from San Antonio on Wednesday.

Thankfully, former McAllen police officer George Villarreal and his wife, Diana, made some phone calls. Their daughter, Krysteen, is a member of Rowe High School's Tiaras dance group. SSG Campos graduated from Rowe in 1998.

George and Diana called the Tiaras' sponsor, Gloria Garcia and her assistant,

Martina Zamora. They, along with Rowe teacher and Tiaras parent Mary Garza contacted the group of girls, and they went to Rivera Funeral Home to welcome our soldier home.

Had it not been for this group of young girls who were willing to stand in blistering heat for two hours, about 10 people would have been SSG Campos' welcoming committee in McAllen.

Rivera Funeral Home did a beautiful job of lining the grass all along their property with American flags, but at the police department directly across the street, the flag had not even been lowered to honor SSG Campos.

It seems that takes an order from the governor or the president. One would think this would be automatic, when any community in our nation loses a member of our military. Flags up and down our city streets also were at full staff.

Today at 1:30 p.m., a funeral procession for SSG Campos is set to leave Rivera Funeral Home for a 2 p.m. service at St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church. The Rio Grande Valley State Veterans' Cemetery in Mission will be his final resting place.

Citizens of McAllen and surrounding communities have this one last opportunity to line the streets of his procession as he is taken to his final rest.

I sincerely hope that, if we have any more fallen soldiers, no one will ever again have to ask, "Where are the people of McAllen?"

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