

# NCO, Army help family through difficult time

**M**aster Sgt. Sammy Marquez has lived in Roswell, N.M., most of his life.

You tend to see a lot of the same people around, which can make Marquez's duty as a casualty assistance officer especially hard.

With a population of just under 50,000, Roswell is similar to other small American cities, except for a downtown that stays active on the sales of little green men souvenirs and books about the purported 1947 UFO crash just outside of the city.

Marquez, operations sergeant and NCOIC for the 717th Brigade Support Battalion in the New Mexico National Guard, has served as a casualty notification officer once and as an assistance officer twice. He said he often bumps into the families he has served.

"Each one of them has been different, and they're very emotional because you get involved with the family and you feel their pain and suffering," Marquez said. "It's hard because you get very close to them, and they become your family as well."

Marquez is currently serving as the CAO for the parents of Pfc. Antonio Stiggins, who was killed by an improvised explosive device on April 22 in Numaniyah, Iraq. Stiggins had enlisted in the Army in January 2010 and left on his first deployment in September 2010.

His father, Luke Stiggins, talked about the day he and Antonio's mother, Angel Mayes, found out their son had been killed. Luke and his wife, Debra Stiggins, were at her dad's house at the time.

"Our neighbor called and said that there were two guys in uniform," Luke Stiggins said. "They talked to Debra because I had gone to the store. So she told me I had to go home, but she wouldn't tell me why. When I pulled into the driveway ... you know. I knew what they were going to say."



Pfc. Antonio Stiggins

"She (Angel Mayes) lives out in the county, so they didn't have a physical address. They asked, after they had done their notification, if I could give them directions. I said, 'It's easier if we just go.' I called her to let her know we were coming out. I didn't want to tell her why, but pretty much you know when they drive up and step out in uniform."

Once those Soldiers stepped out in uniform, Luke Stiggins said, his voice breaking, "The world changes."

## A JOKESTER

Everybody who knew Antonio Stiggins describes him the same way: a comedian, a jokester. No matter how bad things got, Mayes said, her son found a way to joke about it.

"There was never a bad situation for him," Mayes said. "If it was bad, it bounced right off him. He went on, no matter what we threw at him."

Luke Stiggins describes his son as someone who couldn't quite figure out what he wanted out of life — until he found the Army.

In the past, he had talked about being a firefighter or an emergency medical technician. He eventually decided to become an electrical engineer and was only four classes away from getting his bachelor's degree to work in fiber optics. But he wasn't satisfied.

"He was wanting to find a place — I guess is the best way to put it — and he never could find it, until he joined the Army," Luke Stiggins said. "And then that was his niche."

So at the age of 25, he deployed with F Troop, 2nd Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment based at Fort Hood, Texas. In November 2010, he made a trip back to Roswell to bury his grandmother.

"He came home during Veterans Day," Luke Stiggins said. "He was so proud. I couldn't get him out of his fatigues. That cover came on, and it had to be straight. He'd stop anywhere he could find a reflection to make sure he was top notch."

## ASSISTANCE

The day after the notification team visited Stiggins and Mayes, Marquez arrived to help them through the difficult days ahead.

First was a trip to Dover Air Force Base, Del., to witness the dignified transfer of Antonio Stiggins' remains. There is no viewing or access to the bodies of the fallen Soldiers at Dover. It is not a ceremony, but a way to show respect as the Soldier is transported from the aircraft to the mortuary at Dover. The Army will pay for the primary next of kin to attend



Master Sgt. Marquez



U.S. Air Force photo

A U.S. Army carry team transfers the remains of Pfc. Antonio G. Stiggins on April 25 at Dover Air Force Base, Del. Stiggins' parents, Luke Stiggins and Angel Mayes, traveled to Dover for the dignified transfer of Antonio Stiggins from the aircraft to the base mortuary.

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Luke Stiggins said he wanted to bear witness to the transfer.

"I wanted to meet him when he touched soil," Stiggins said. "It's rough. It's hard to see."

Stiggins said Marquez made sure the trip was as smooth as possible.

"The Army does it right," Stiggins said. "I was treated with the utmost respect. Any hiccup that happened — if we had airline delays, ticket foul-ups — we would be getting agitated. Master Sgt. Marquez would take care of it — every detail.

"It was human," Stiggins said. "Not a body sitting there doing a duty. But a human, feeling for you, talking with you, always asking, 'What do you need?'"

Once back in Roswell, Marquez helped the family prepare for Antonio Stiggins' services. The community rallied around the family, as well.

"It kind of changed the atmosphere and the community," Luke Stiggins said. "It surprised me the turnout when he

returned."

"We got cards and letters from people all over the country who we do not know," Mayes said. "It's been amazing. I couldn't read them anymore because every time, it was like a knife stuck in me. There were so many. It was just amazing."

Through all the pain, through all the grief, Marquez was by the family's side. He was still there when Antonio Stiggins' personal belongings arrived a month later from Dover.

"I still don't understand a lot of it because I have no idea what I'm going to do with 14 pairs of socks and seven pairs of [uniforms]," Luke Stiggins said. "But I really appreciate the care and concern."

Both Stiggins and Mayes said it would have been difficult to get by without the help Marquez and the Army provided.

"As far as these fine folks (CNOs and CAOs): praise," Stiggins said. "They are special people. It takes a special, special person to fill those shoes, I guarantee you. I don't know how they can go through it.

People need to know what these guys do and how well they do it."

Marquez said helping the family of a fallen Soldier is an honor.

"Knowing the Soldier died for our country and for our freedom, that's the most rewarding thing you can do for this Soldier and their family," Marquez said.

"You may not know him, but this guy was your brother in arms, so you try to provide the absolute best service the country can give to the family. That is rewarding."

"We truly feel like he's our hero," Mayes said of Marquez. In the end, though, no amount of assistance can get rid of the pain.

"That was good to get us through that first six weeks or so, which were really rough," Mayes said. "But after all that is done and the activity has settled down, you're still waiting for that phone call from your child that ain't coming. His troop just got home. We're supposed to be at Fort Hood bringing him home, and we're not."