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RIO HONDO -- Relatives of U.S. Marine Private First Class Leroy Sandoval Jr. are traveling to Houston to honor the fallen soldier.

Sandoval was killed in action in Iraq on Friday.

The 21-year-old died during a battle in Fallujah. He was the first fatality for the Marine infantry battalion which arrived in Iraq over two weeks ago.

Though Sandoval was from Houston, he had many relatives in Rio Hondo and an aunt in Mercedes. Now they are making their way to be with Sandoval's parents and the rest of their family.

"A lot of our family is already in Houston. They took time off from work... and they're all spending their time up there with the family," said Rebecca Cañas, a relative of Sandoval. She added more family members are planning to make the trip later this week.

Cañas said the last time she saw Sandoval was when he attended her wedding a few years ago, but she said her brother frequently went to Houston to fish with Sandoval.

She said he enjoyed coming to the Valley. "When he was down here, when he was a younger boy, he loved fishing and hunting," said Cañas, and she recalled a picture of Sandoval holding up a fish when he was five-years-old.

"He loved the outdoors, so he loved the Valley, simply because his uncles would take him out (fishing and hunting)," she said.

Cañas said she and her family have a lot of happy memories of Sandoval.

Like Cañas, many people are sharing their fond memories of him.

His high school in Pasadena, the Harvest Christian Academy, has created a web site with a message board where family members, friends, and acquaintances can share memories of Sandoval and offer condolences to his family.

Sandoval graduated from the academy in 2000.

Dozens of posts recall fond memories of Sandoval, or "Little Leroy" as he was called, making silly faces at church, trying to stay

up to watch movies, and eating yellow cakes.

One woman wrote just last week at a rodeo, she wore the cowboy hat Sandoval gave her.

Many people wrote how they'll always remember his smile and his ability to make them laugh.

Other writers leave messages giving their condolences and prayers.

San Benito is one of the many places the posts originate from. Messages on [heasaints.com](http://heasaints.com) also come from Houston, San Antonio, Louisiana, Wisconsin, and Costa Rica.

The posts are written by teachers, friends, a parent of his roommate at Camp Pendleton, a coworker from Waterworld, family members, classmates, and the brother of a soldier who fought by Sandoval the day he died.

Along with a Leroy Sandoval, Jr. Memorial Scholarship Fund, the academy has planned a memorial service for Sandoval on Wednesday night at the campus chapel.

Cañas said there has no immediate plans for a memorial in the Rio Grande Valley, since the majority of the family has traveled to Houston.

She said the family anticipates Sandoval's body to arrive in Houston on Thursday or Friday, but she doesn't know the details of the funeral arrangements.

Sandoval's family has been gathering photos of the marine to submit to a Houston television station, which created a slideshow about him.

In Iraq, his fellow Marines honored their fallen soldier with a short ceremony Sunday. Sandoval was the only Marine who died during Friday's gun battle, but others were injured in the skirmish.

Though Sandoval was not from the Valley, his relatives in Rio Hondo are mourning his loss. His death occurred almost one year after the first Valley soldier was killed in Iraq, PFC Juan Garza Jr.



**SANDOVAL**