Sacrifice of the Few
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Sgt. Mike Krause remembers the time, not too long ago, when he came home on a brief leave from Iraq. He was walking through an airport, in uniform, and other passengers, spotting him, began to applaud.

“It was awesome,” he said. “They were cheering and clapping. It was great. But you know what? I said to myself, ‘That guy’s flying to Toledo on a business trip. This lady over here is flying off on vacation. Their lives are normal. But soon I’ll be getting on a plane to go back to the most abnormal place on earth.’ ”

Just how abnormal is made explicit when the sergeant, just 24 years old, describes the worst task he had to perform in Iraq. He spoke hesitantly. “You’ll excuse me,” he said. “This is not easy to talk about. Part of our job, our duty, was that we loaded, you know, bodies. We were in charge of the airfield, and we would load these heroes into the aircraft.

“My platoon sergeant had a policy. He didn’t want lower-ranking soldiers involved. He told us, ‘I don’t want privates doing this. You guys are going to carry this with you, whether you realize it or not, for the rest of your lives. If I can protect the privates, I will.’

“I don’t know if I could ever explain what that was really like. I loaded those guys — and I know all their names — onto a plane. And you don’t know how heavy a guy in a body bag can be. It’s not just his weight. He may be 180 pounds, but it’s a lot more than just a 180-pound guy. You’re loading his entire life.”

Sergeant Krause, who served with the Army’s 101st Airborne Division, lives in a quiet middle-class subdivision not far from Fort Campbell, which is on the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Sprawled in his living room in jeans and a polo shirt, he seems happy. He’s safely home after serving three nerve-racking combat tours — one in Afghanistan and two yearlong tours in Iraq. He’s engaged to be married and will receive a degree soon from nearby Austin Peay State University. His commitment to the military, which he made while still in high school in Huntsville, Ala., will end in a few months.
But there is a definite edge in his voice, an undercurrent of bitterness, when he talks about the tiny percentage of the American population that is shouldering the burden of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “We’re nowhere close to sharing the sacrifice,” he said. “And it should be shared, because it’s only in that sharing that society will truly care about what’s going on over there.

“Right now it’s such a small minority of families who have a stake in all of this. I hear people say things like, ‘We lost a lot of good people over there.’ I sort of snap around and say, ‘We? You didn’t lose anybody.’ You know what I mean?”

While most Americans are free to go about their daily business, unaffected by the wars in any way, scores of thousands of troops have been sent off on repeat tours into the combat zones. According to the support group Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, two-thirds of the 92,000 Army troops deployed since the beginning of this year are on at least their second deployment.

Many soldiers, like Sergeant Krause, have served three or four tours. There is no way for a nation as big and as rich and as healthy as the U.S. to justify the imposition of such a tragic and heavy load on the backs of so few.

Sergeant Krause showed me a photo of a soldier who he thought would become his brother-in-law, a 23-year-old West Point graduate named Dennis Zilinski. He was killed last November, along with four other American soldiers in a roadside bomb attack near Bayji, Iraq.

Sergeant Krause said that witnessing the profound grief of Lt. Zilinski’s mother and fiancée “drove home” the real meaning of wartime sacrifice.

Sergeant Krause is proud of his service and still loves the military. “But we’re a nation at war,” he said, “and we should all be in this together.”

He said that if he could wave a magic wand, he would make some form of public service compulsory. “You wouldn’t have to join the military,” he said. “But there are many other ways to serve. You could work for AmeriCorps, or the Red Cross, or Homeland Security. You could do something. It’s about social responsibility. Especially in a time of war.”