Mr. President, 2 months ago, I traveled to Afghanistan,

Pakistan, Kuwait, and Jordan. I also traveled to Iraq with my colleague

Senator Casey of Pennsylvania. We went to talk to and listen to our top

generals and diplomats but, equally important, the soldiers and marines

on the front lines of this war.

This was the third time for me visiting Iraq, the first time for

Senator Casey. Two impressions really struck me. More than either of my

earlier visits, I felt overwhelmed by the tragedy that has been created

in that country for Iraq, for its neighbors, for America's image around

the world, and, sadly, for our troops.

I was also awed and deeply moved by the skill and bravery of our

troops and their love for this Nation. In a time when sacrifice seems

outdated to some people, our troops are willing to endure almost

inconceivable hardship and risk everything to protect us and our

Nation.

When I visited Iraq, it was 120 degrees. Soldiers wore heavy body

armor and backpacks and carried their ammunition, their weapons, had

helmets on, drinking water every chance they had to try to stay

hydrated and not suffer from heat exhaustion which had claimed the life

of one of our soldiers just the day before.

Soldiers who knew who I was asked me occasionally when the

politicians in Washington were going to start voting so they could come

home. Despite the unbearable heat, the constant danger, longings for

home, not one soldier I met in Iraq ever complained about walking point

for America--not one.

We went 10 miles south of Baghdad to a place called Patrol Base

Murray. I ate lunch with some Illinois soldiers from the 3rd Infantry

Division out of Chicago, Aurora, Jacksonville, and Elmhurst. Most were

on their first deployments. One was on his third. Half were married

with kids. They try to keep in touch with things back home through e-

mails, but it is tough.

They were laughing at me as I fumbled around trying to open up my

MRE, a can of chicken and noodles with a built-in heater. I never quite

got it right. I am glad I gave them some comic relief there, at least

for a few minutes.

On August 11, after I came back home, 1 week after I visited this

patrol base, two Illinois soldiers stationed there died in a roadside

bomb explosion, along with two other soldiers, in a place called Arab

Jabour. All four soldiers were assigned to the 3rd Infantry Division

based in Fort Stewart, GA.

The Illinois soldiers lost were SPC Justin Penrod, 24 years old, of

Mahomet; and SGT Andrew Lancaster, 23, of Stockton. They are 2 of the

146 sons and daughters of Illinois who have died so far in this

conflict.

The same day they died, a fifth soldier from the 3rd ID died in Arab

Jabour in a separate incident, while a sixth was killed in an IED blast

in Afghanistan. Six soldiers dead in 1 day. Sadly, such grim numbers

don't even make the big headlines anymore. After losing 3,800, I guess

somebody who runs these newspapers and television stations decides it

is not big news. For some people, the daily toll of soldiers killed and

wounded in Iraq seems to have just become another statistic, like the

weather, but not to the devastated families of these fallen soldiers,

not to the children who will grow up never knowing their fathers or

mothers who have died in this war, and not to the men and women with

whom they served.

A week after SGT Andrew Lancaster died in Iraq, his platoon

commander, 1LT Benjamin Kim, wrote me a letter about a man he

considered a gifted leader and a brother. I have never met Lieutenant

Kim. I can't imagine why he sent this to me, other than to share deep

feelings that he just couldn't leave inside. He wanted someone else to

read them. I really trust, based on what that letter contained, that he

would not mind if I read his words into the record about his fallen

comrade. The letter is dated August 18, 2007.

The lieutenant went on to say:

He goes on to write:

SGT Andrew Lancaster of Stockton, IL, enlisted in the Army with a

friend in 2002 to protect America after September 11. Before Iraq, he

served as a paratrooper in Afghanistan with the Army's 173rd Airborne

Brigade.

In Stockton, IL, a small town with a population of about 1,800,

Sergeant Lancaster was known as Andy, the kid everybody loved, and his

death really hit the folks in that community hard.

At Freeport High School, where he graduated in 2002, where he stood

out in football, basketball, and choir, his teachers and coaches recall

Andy Lancaster as an outgoing and responsible young man who had a way

of making everyone around him happy.

When the news of his death reached that town, the high school

football team posted a tribute to Sergeant Lancaster's family on its

message board. Messages of support were also posted at the local ice

cream shop where Sergeant Lancaster's young widow Tabby once worked.

In addition to a town and a wife who loved him, Sergeant Lancaster

leaves behind his mom and his stepfather, Donna and Steve Vanderheyden;

his father Harlan Lancaster; a brother, two step-sisters, and his

grandparents.

He and Tabby married just before Sergeant Lancaster left for

Afghanistan, and they planned to start a family when he came home.

Instead, last month, Tabby Lancaster attended a ceremony at Fort

Stewart at which 10 trees were planted in honor of her husband and nine

other members of the 3rd Infantry Division who died recently in Iraq.

Since 2003, a total of 369 trees have been planted along the base's

memorial walk.

Mr. President, I regret I never had a chance to meet Andy Lancaster,

but I have met so many soldiers just like him. They are natural leaders

who probably succeed at whatever they choose to do in life. They

certainly could have made a lot more money and lived far more

comfortably, but they chose to enlist to defend our country.

Those are the kind of people we are losing every day in these wars in

Iraq and Afghanistan. Like Andy Lancaster, each of them leaves a hole

in the hearts of those who loved them and in the heart of our Nation.

We honor their sacrifice and grieve their loss.

In a few minutes, Mr. President, we will start debating the Defense

appropriations bill. It is a critically important bill. As a member of

the Appropriations Committee, I know a lot of the discussion about this

bill will be about numbers. This little statement that I have made on

the floor, reading into the record the letter of Lieutenant Kim about

his fallen sergeant, really takes this discussion and debate way beyond

numbers. It reminds us of 3,800 brave soldiers, such as Andy Lancaster,

who have given their lives for America, soldiers whose lives continue

to be lost every single day that we continue this war.

I stand today in tribute not just to Sergeant Lancaster but to all

the men and women who continue to serve us with such honor and dignity.

I hope all of us who value and cherish the contributions they make will

remember them in our hearts and our prayers and our votes.

Mr. President, I yield back morning business time.