

Returning Troops Left High and Dry

Ross Werland - The Chicago Tribune

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Suppose your employer sends you away from your wife and kids to a dirty, dangerous job location for a year but is willing to give you a couple of weeks off. The catch is that the office won't pay your way home, so it's up to you to bankroll your own ticket back to Chicago out of the whopping \$1,500 a month you're getting for this assignment. What's more, you'll buy this ticket on short notice, so you could end up spending a big chunk of that month's salary.

Then you find out some executives in your organization have spent \$124 million on your employer's tab during a two-year period flying first class or business class when they were supposed to be flying economy.

Welcome to the U.S. military.

Only recently has any federal accommodation been made to help troops serving in Iraq get all the way home for a breather, when Congress approved \$55 million for the purpose. But that money won't be available for weeks, according to the office of Rep. C.A. Ruppertsberger (D-Md.), who devised a stopgap called Operation Hero Miles, in which people can donate their frequent-flier miles to the cause.

And if Pentagon muckety-mucks could zip through \$124 million in a couple of years of cushy airline seats and ample booze, how long can we expect that \$55 million to last?

Soldiers coming home for a couple of weeks of rest are dropped off at one of three locations in this country: Baltimore, Dallas or Atlanta. The rest of the trip is their problem. Welcome home, boys and girls! Thanks for disrupting your families and risking your lives. A grateful nation awaits.

By the way, one of those Pentagon officials said he needed to fly first class because he had a medical need to stretch his legs. Apparently they'd get all crampy on him. He must not know what shrapnel feels like.

"Senior officials, some of them presidential appointees, are taking advantage of their position and wasting taxpayer dollars, flying premium class in violation of the rules," U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**

(D-Ill.) told her colleagues in arguing for the \$55 million. "At the same time, enlisted military personnel returning from Iraq during their brief two-week break from the war have had to pay their own transportation within the U.S."

Schakowsky was among three members of Congress who asked for and received the names of those Pentagon offenders from the General Accounting Office, which produced the original report.

Ruppersberger declined the invitation to comment on the Pentagon's gilded wings, saying he prefers to concentrate on maintaining a bipartisan effort to help the soldiers get home. "If I were to criticize anyone at this point," he said, "that doesn't help the troops."

But if all that isn't enough for one recruiting poster, there's more. The news media have been prevented from filming the return of caskets carrying fallen soldiers from the war zones--one way American soldiers get to come home free. That can only mean that this is viewed by the brass as a public-relations issue, not as a deeply moving ceremonial return worthy of all our attention.

If my son were coming home in a box because he died for this country, I'd want the whole nation to take notice. It should be mandatory. But with the blackout, only the loved ones have to notice. Brilliant! They already know the cost.

This is not to say all war is unnecessary, just that we should know the price tag. Funny, though, how much of the cost falls on those in economy class.