

Joseph



I love the military. I respect the military. I've got weapons on the walls of my home. I feel proud that I was in the U.S. Army. But having to live with threats to your life is a terrible way to serve our country. And my bones, they tell that story.



I'm the type of person who always has to be the best at what I do. That's how I managed to have a career in engineering and chemistry with only a high school diploma. I only stopped working because my health forced me to retire at 53. Every month that I get tax-free checks from social security and the military, I win a battle that I never intended to fight.

A psychologist put me at 100 percent individual unemployability, or "IU." They found a 90 percent military connection for my injuries. I was also given a 70 percent PTSD rating – post-traumatic stress disorder. I've been told that's typical of people who served in Vietnam for two or three tours of duty. But, I never saw combat.

I joined the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers right after high school. There were hardly any minorities in those units, and I ended up being roomed with five white supremacists. Every night before I'd go to bed they would threaten that I wasn't going to wake up. I slept with a pillow between my legs, another over my head, and an open knife in my hand for a year and a half.

A Buck Sergeant particularly disliked me because I was dating a Caucasian girl. He made some threats and I publically challenged him to a fight, but he refused. As a non-commission officer with three stripes, hitting an



enlisted man would mean jail time at Leavenworth. A few months later he came and found me when I was sleeping in a room alone, and he punched me in the face. Unfortunately for him, I was a very good wrestler. I was able to get him in a half nelson, which is a hold where you can break somebody's neck. He started turning purple before I released him.

After that I couldn't sleep, so I got dressed and went out for a couple of beers. Next thing I know, I'm on the ground looking at my molar with saliva and blood on it. I was being kicked and stomped on by fifteen soldiers, including my sergeant. They were saying, "This is what happens when you date our women."

The beating that you take from a bunch of guys wearing military boots is really something. The results are that I have a fourth and fifth lumbar that are out of place, I have Arthritis in my shoulders, my joints, and my ankles, and I have bone spurs. I also have what are called "nerve bumps" from the stress I felt during my tour of duty.

When my captain asked me if I would be interested in reenlisting I said, "No, sir." I came back to San Bernardino and found a job in the chemical blending industry. I was hired because the guy saw my work ethic while I was employed at a gas station. And, he didn't realize that I was Hispanic - he thought that I was Italian.

I did my best to show that I was the type of person the company could count on for advancement. I became so efficient at the blending techniques that I even surpassed their inventor. But I was passed up for promotion again and again, at two companies.

One boss told me, "They're not ready to have a Hispanic lead the laboratory." A friend of mine just laughed and said, "They don't hire beaners for those kinds of positions." When I had been in the business twenty years and the job of plant manager went to a guy with far less, I let loose. I told my boss, "There are nothing but white supremacists running this company." Soon after that, they found a way to suspend me, and then to terminate me.

That was also about the time I started to not feel well. I was turning really gray. I went to the doctor and after a few preliminary tests he told me to get a lawyer. Seven doctors agreed that I was 86.6 percent chemically damaged. I had been unknowingly inhaling chlorine, sulfur dioxide, and ammonia all of those years blending chemicals, without a respirator provided. Now I take 105 pills a week.

I had to fight for my disability checks. Two years in court with the gas company, and the Department of Veterans Affairs - the VA - originally told me that I didn't have any medical records. They had been sealed, and the only reason I got them was someone took pity on me. Without those, I wouldn't be getting a dime.

When people ask me what I think of myself as, I say American. I don't let what's happened to me take that away.



"Wanting to leave Germany in a hurry after thirty-two and a half months of dealing with beatings, death threats, and prejudices, I didn't even bother asking for any ribbons or sleeve hash marks."



The dress greens Joseph wore home from his service in the U.S. military.