

Borne the Battle

Episode # 245

Air Force Veteran Josh Seefried, DADT Repeal Advocate

<https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/89808/borne-battle-245-air-force-veteran-josh-seefried-dadt-repeal-advocate/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] PSA:

Man: I served in Vietnam.

Woman: I served in Iraq.

Narrator: No matter where you served or when—

Man: VA has benefits for Veterans of every generation.

Narrator: To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit www.va.gov
[Link: va.gov].

[00:00:15] Music

[00:00:17] Opening Monologue:

(TI): Oh, let's get it. Monday, June 7th, 2021. Borne the Battle brought to you by the US Department of Veterans Affairs, the podcast that focuses on inspiring Veteran stories and puts a highly unimportant resources, offices, and benefits for our Veterans. I'm your host, Marine Corps Veteran Tanner Iskra. Wherever or however you listen to Borne the Battle today, be it on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, iTunes, iHeartRadio, the player inside the blog, hope you're having a good week outside of podcast land. Personally, last week, it was a short week. After Memorial Day weekend always puts me in a little time crunch, but we always manage. I also got to go back to where it all began for me. Back to the Defense Information School. Saw another Marine that I went to school with back in the day who is now instructing future uniform communicators in the military. Got to walk down memory lane a little bit. It was a good time. No new ratings. No new reviews on Apple Podcasts this week. We'd like to see more of those as that is my main communication with you. It lets me know if you're getting a good experience with this podcast and a five star ratings and reviews also help push your show, and this is your show, higher in the algorithms allowing more Veterans to listen to not only fantastic guests but the information provided in the news releases and in the benefits breakdown episodes. As for

comments, at the time of this recording, I did see one comment on the blog from last week's episode on blogs.va.gov [Link: blogs.va.gov]. At the bottom of the blog, Charles Edward Witte wrote, "I might not be proud of everything that I've done in my lifetime but serving my country while in the United States Army from 1968 to 1972 isn't among them. May God bless those of us, both men and women, past, present, and future a return home to enjoy a fruitful life." Amen to that brother. Got one news release this week. Well, actually two. One is VA Secretary Denis McDonough's statement on a budget that is proposed to Congress. If you want to read it, you can go to va.gov/opa/pressrel [Link: va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5676] and you can read it. I'm not going to wade too deep into it. I will point out that overall, the proposal is to increase the VA's budget to \$269.9 billion, which is about roughly a 10% increase. When a budget is passed through Congress, I will break down what the VA is getting in the budget. And we'll go—we'll dig into that a little deeper again once a budget is passed in Congress. All right. The second one says, "For immediate release: VA has been hosting public virtual listening sessions across the country since March to hear from Veterans on their thoughts about how to improve the care they receive from VA. The goal is to design a health care system of the future and grow services available to Veterans, reinforcing VA's role as a leader in the US healthcare system." There's going to be a bunch of different listening sessions you can register for. I'm just going to give you the rundown real quick. They're in different time zones to benefit different times. So, if I say Eastern, it's mainly that section's for the Eastern time zone. If I say Pacific, it's mainly for Pacific, etc., etc. First one's going to be a Spanish session on June 2nd, and that's going to run at 6:00 PM Eastern. So, a nice even time for everybody. Then on June 14, looks like we are going to be two sessions: a 7:00 PM Eastern and 8:00 PM Pacific, which would also be 5:00 PM Hawaii time. On June 15th, there's going to be a listening session that you can register for at 6:30 PM Central time. And on June 17th, there's going to be a listening session at 5:00 PM Mountain time. Feedback from the listening sessions will be used to develop the recommendations that VA will submit to the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission in January of 2022, otherwise known as the AIR Commission cause we all like acronyms. The AIR Commission is responsible for developing recommendations for the president and Congress on how to modernize VA care and realign a VA facilities across the country.

The commission will also conduct public hearings as part of their review of VA's recommendations before submitting its recommendations for review and approval in 2023. To register for any of these sessions, go to va.gov/healthpolicyplanning [Link: va.gov/HEALTHPOLICYPLANNING/listening.asp]. That's all one word. So it's a va.gov/healthpolicyplanning.asp. Alright, so June is Pride Month, and to commemorate, this week's guest is an Air Force Veteran that had to serve in the closet back in the days of Don't Ask Don't Tell. At the time he faced intense pressure, and even blackmail, which led him to form a secret Facebook group called OutServe that advocated for the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell. At this time he was also an in-closet advocate for the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, and he was featured on many news outlets. All this led him to be in the room when Don't Ask Don't Tell's repeal was signed into law. Since then he's been an outspoken LGBTQ advocate for Veterans and for the general population. After I conducted this interview, I also learned that our guest was also on Logan Paul's podcast, Impulsive. And anyone that gets that kid to apologize for anything in his life gets a thumbs up from me. And he's also a VA employee. He is Air Force Veteran Josh Seefried. Enjoy.

[00:06:12] Music

[00:06:19] Interview:

(TI): So, I think you're the first Air Force Academy grad that I've had on the show.

(JS): That's a big thing.

(TI): Fun fact, it is, it really is because—fun fact, one of fifth grade Tanner Iskra's favorite movies was Independence Day, and this is before I knew anything different between Marine Corps or Air Force or anything like that. I just saw F-18s fighting aliens, and I was like, “Yeah I want to do that. I'd want to do that.” So, really young in my life I wrote to the Air Force Academy, and they sent me back a big old package and they contacted my congressman. I got a big package from them. So, I do have some fond memories of the Air Force Academy from a fifth grade standpoint.

(JS): To all the kids listening, it is definitely the best academy out there. So, it's the only one you need to apply to. Don't bother applying to the other ones. Air Force Academy is the best one.

(TI): [Laughter]

(TI): There you go. I don't have a preference as a Marine. I mean, I know there's Naval Academy, but it's just, it's not—

(JS): [inaudible]

(TI): Exactly, exactly. Well, Josh, first question we always ask here on Borne the Battle is everyone has a point in time when they know that the military service is going to be the next step in their life. I say it in that way because sometimes, you know, with Vietnam Veterans, it could be a draft, you know, or it could be volunteer. When did you know that the military was going to be the next step in your life?

(JS): For me, I never really grew up in a military family. My parents sent me to Space Camp when I was in fifth grade, and I actually had to get permission to go as a younger kid. I went to Space Camp and you got to like go play in the woods. Then there's another program called Aviation Challenge. They went to the next year and they play like Top Gun, and you have to sit in the airplanes and shoot other planes down. And I remember coming home being like, "How do I do this?"

(TI): Is that like a simulator?

(JS): My parents were like—yeah, it's like they build these huge airplanes, and they literally just play like the Top Gun soundtrack over and over again. And then like when you get shot down, they let you go play out in the woods and they try to capture you in the woods. I remember coming home being like, "How do I do this?" They're like, "You go to the Air Force Academy." And to them it was just like free college because they don't have to pay for college at that point. To me, I went to the camp counselor the next day, not camp counselor, but school counselor, and they're like "Here's a little booklet about how to apply to the service academies." I remember taking that booklet and just going through it as a sixth grader and being obsessed. I mean I would take that cover of the Air Force Academy and like trace it on like all my books and stuff. I just became obsessed. The school librarian had a son that went to the Air Force Academy, and I became his friend. He like taught me everything about the academy. I remember when we moved to Colorado in seventh grade, the Air Force Academy had a program that you could mentor or like shadow a cadet, but you couldn't do it until like high school. I wrote to my congressman to get permission to do it as a middle schooler, and the academy let me do it just because I bugged them so much.

(TI): Wow.

(JS): I was just obsessed. The funny thing is I actually didn't get in the first time. I was rejected and like 15 days before I was set to go to a regular civilian college, I got a letter saying, "Hey, will you go to a prep school for a year, and if you do well, you'll get into the academy the following year." I actually didn't get in right away.

(TI): Gotcha, but you're like, "No problem. Absolutely. Let's do it."

(JS): Yeah, it was like the only sight I had. Like it was just, you know, this is what I saw as a kid. This is what I wanted to do, and that's all I ever wanted to do.

(TI): I think that's great that you, kind of sounds like you got the same packet I did. You just kept going with it. That's pretty awesome.

(JS): Yeah, yeah.

(TI): It's pretty awesome. So, what year did you enter the academy?

(JS): I entered the academy in 2005.

(TI): Okay, and you commissioned in what year?

(JS): 2009

(TI): Okay, 2009. So, at the time you were a gay man that was serving under Don't Ask Don't Tell, and I'm only bringing that up because this was a large part of your military story, right? You were actually blackmailed for this at the time.

(JS): Yeah, more than once at the Air Force Academy, and then—

(TI): More than once?

(JS): Yes.

(TI): Wow. You mind going into some of that?

(JS): Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the Air Force Academy was the first time, you know, I started a network of LGBT cadets. You know, it's a very lonely time when you're there and you don't really have any other gay people to meet. You're kind of there pretending and kind of—college is a time you find out who you are as a person. You know, I was dating someone at the time and after we broke up, I was kind of alone. There was an instructor who found out I was gay, and, you know, was harassing me. And at that point I just tried to find other cadets. At some point, he tried to take over—

(TI): Harassing you in what way?

(JS): You know, asking, like sexually harassing, you know. After he found other cadets too, he tried to take advantage of that situation, and tried to expose us, you know. It's not uncommon, or it wasn't at the time to be like, "Hey, you know, if you, you know, don't do sexual favors, I'll expose you for being gay and get kicked out and—"

(TI): Wow.

(JS): You know, even if you're just a cadet at the time, those threats to you, even if hollow, really scared you.

(TI): Yeah, sure.

(JS): At that time, I saw it as an opportunity to kind of just find as many other cadets as possible. You know, I look back at the time now, it's kind of a funny thing. We like met down at the tunnels. The Air Force Academy has this like cool tunnel complex underneath it, and we met underneath there, you know. We had a really cool community, we'd go down to Denver, and really had a sense of community there. That kind of took off to the other service academies as well. West Point had their own community. The Naval Academy did, and that, you know, that went to other bases. It started to take off on the internet, MySpace, you know, we had a—

(TI): That old MySpace.

(JS): Yeah.

(TI): [Laughter]

(JS): We had a hidden social net group, network, on MySpace, and we'll get into how this transformed into Facebook later, because—

(TI): Sure.

(JS): It started, really, on MySpace. After I graduated from the Air Force Academy, I was sent to Biloxi, Mississippi where I was in finance school. Within the first two days, I was still building this network at the time throughout the Air Force. One of the first people I found was my finance instructor, and he immediately started asking for sexual favors to help for, you know, to change my test scores. I was like, "No." I actually failed my first finance exam, and it was like a little bubble tron. After we, after he graded the test, he handed them back to me, and I slid it to my neighbor, who was a friend of mine, and all of mine were marked correct but you could see that they were wrong. My neighbor was like, "What happened?" And I

explained it to him, “This is what's going on.” The next time, the exact opposite happened. I was all right, but he had failed me. And I slid it to my neighbor again. It just kept going on like that. Then the instructor started showing up to my hotel room. At that point, you know, one of the best allies we actually had in the military was the Chaplain Corps. I went to the chaplain, and the chaplain helped me actually file a complaint, which I did. I turned the instructor in, and at that point, the instructor turned around and outed me. I was put under investigation. I had my CAC card taken away. My commander removed me from my job. I literally was moved to the chaplain's office. And I was like, I could not—at one point, I was like helping clean out the basement, moving Bibles around. I mean, but the chaplain was the nicest person in the world, like a great support system, but like—you know, I was put under investigation for this kind of stuff even though I was a victim of this crime.

(TI): Guilty until proven innocent almost.

(JS): The investigation came back, and the guy not only turned out to be doing this to me but students in past classes to male and female. I mean, it came, the investigation came back that he was doing this to multiple students.

(TI): Just a bad dude, just a bad dude all around.

(JS): Yep.

(TI): Wow.

(JS): Ultimately, during this time is when I got so fed up with the system that I ended up just being like, “I'm going to organize as much as I can.” This little small group of 150 people in the military turned into a couple hundred at that point.

(TI): Wow.

(JS): That's my time in activism where I started to really organize.

(TI): I—you know, I really, you know, talking about being a little kid, all you want to do, you know, go in the Air Force Academy and then having that happen, I can only imagine like, okay yeah, the fear is there to not lose something that you've been looking forward to since like sixth grade, right? Absolutely. So, how did OutServe start? For those that don't use the antiquated social media like MySpace and Facebook—this was a Facebook group at the time, or MySpace group? How did it all start?

(JS): It started as a MySpace group but then after I became active duty, we started as a Facebook group. Facebook, right at this time, right after I graduated, created—they seem like a big thing now, but Facebook groups were brand new in 2009. We created a hidden Facebook group that people could not see, and we called in OutServe. We started adding people, and you had to know someone else to get added to the group, and two other people had to vouch for you to get into the group.

(TI): Got you.

(JS): We just kept adding more and more people to it.

(TI): What was the purpose behind the group? What was the reason for it?

(JS): It was to just simply find other people. You know, if you could go to another base, you could simply find a friend, and this thing really too off. I mean, and people like—people for the first time were meeting other people, especially in deployed zones. In Afghanistan, people were meeting weekly at the Green Bean, to just, you know, meet and like get to know each other. That had never happened before. Even if I moved from, you know, McGuire Air Force Base to MacDill, I could find someone and actually get to know those people. That's what, you know, was really happening. This one Facebook group then split off to all these other chapters around the country, and that was just the social aspect.

(TI): Yeah, it was like more of a support network type of thing than anything else.

(JS): Yeah, and then we turned it more into an activist when President Obama announced that he was going to tackle, repeal, Don't Ask Don't Tell. We saw an opportunity, then, to turn it into an activist network as well that—

(TI): You talked about—

(JS): —back to the whole turn.

(TI): Got you, yeah—you know, you talked about your own personal blackmail and you're talking about, you know, it seems that through this group, many people, you know, especially around that time, even Pentagon officials, found out about many detrimental things, scenarios, that nobody had even thought of that were exacerbated by Don't Ask Don't Tell. How did you find, personally, how did you find the courage to be not only an administrator of this Facebook

group going by the mysterious name of JD Smith, but even represent this community in interviews where you had to hide your face?

(JS): At that point I just had reached—I was just so fed up, right? At some point, you know, when I was, you know—I can vividly remember being pulled into my commander's office, being like what is going on with this instructor in this blackmail situation.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): She was like if you do not tell me what's going on right now, you're being removed from this unit. I kid you not, she took me from the office and dragged me over to JAG. I cannot—I'll never forget that trauma. I was so upset. I remember like calling like one or two people at the time and just like breaking down, and just being like, like what is like, "What is happening?" At that point you've just got like nothing to lose, and, you know, you—either I'm going to be thrown out of the military or something. At that point you just want to do something, and at that point I was just like I've got to organize.

(TI): Yeah, if I'm going out, I'm going out swinging.

(JS): Yeah, and exactly. And I'd rather help people at that point.

(TI): Gotcha.

(JS): That's what I saw, that as the only option.

(TI): I mean, when you went on these interviews, you know, you went on—you know, some national, you know, syndicate—I mean, you went on ABC News, Fox, MSNBC, CNN. A lot of these didn't even change your voice, I noticed.

(JS): Yeah.

(TI): Did you ever worry about getting outed before you could legally do so?

(JS): Yeah, so, one of the people that I reached out to first was a really good friend of mine. His name was Ty Walrod, and he was like my civilian counter—the co-founder the whole time. I—he was a friend I had met actually randomly in Vegas, and he was like one of the very first people I was like, "This is what's going on, you've got to help me." He was the person that would be the, you know, face a lot as a civilian person when I couldn't be out there. He helped organize everything—

(TI): Okay.

(JS): —when I couldn't, but then—

(TI): Were there many others—were there many other Veterans or civilians in the group at the time?

(JS): No, he was about the only one at the very start.

(TI): Got you.

(JS): He was the person that would start dealing with the White House, the Pentagon, at the beginning. Then we saw the opportunity, you know, let's just, let's just play this out. Like you said, as I went on to Rachel Maddow or go, you know, Bob Woodward would interview me. They would be like, "Do you want to change your voice," and I'd be like, "No." And they're like, they would ask me why? I was like because it's creepy, like, you know, the biggest thing—

(TI): So that was your choice.

(JS): Yeah. It was funny because there were co-workers that heard some of these interviews, and they would like forward the interviews. Other co-workers would be like is this Lieutenant Seefried? They wouldn't say anything but, like, it definitely was, you know. They wouldn't ask me, but yeah, it was definitely my choice because the whole campaign was making LGBT people sound like human because everyone else didn't think we were humanized. It was definitely my choice to always try to sound as human as possible.

(TI): If it happened to come out that it was you, you were just like ready for it?

(JS): Yeah, but we also knew that it couldn't always be me in shadow. That's why I reached out to other Veterans. A woman by the name of Katie Miller, who was a West Point grad, who didn't want to stay in anymore because Don't Ask Don't Tell wasn't, you know, part of her, you know, ethics anymore. She resigned. She was in the top ten at West Point. So, she reached out to me and we helped to resign. You know, at that point I don't remember in this story, but Lady Gaga got really involved in Don't Ask Don't Tell.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): She was Lady Gaga's date. We'd find people like Katie Miller to go do these things with like Lady Gaga, or Jonathan Hopkins, who was an Iraqi translator. We'd find these Vets that were very high profile, and then do things like this because it was all about visibility at that

point. The more we could humanize everyone and put in the press, that's what was going to help and that's what I saw OutServe's role as is that we weren't the people that were gonna help the legislation necessarily but we knew how to pull press and do everything like that.

(TI): Very good, very good. You became a shadowed but a very public figure in the fight to repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell. Do you remember the day it was repealed? Weren't you, when, didn't you say you were in like in the chamber?

(JS): Yeah. So, what's weird is that there's actually two dates that it technically got repealed. When the legislation actually got passed, there was then a time period in which it had to have a study and then it actually got implemented. President Obama signed the legislation in December, which I was in the chamber for, but technically, it wasn't repealed yet. I actually sat behind Valerie Jarrett and a couple of other president's advisors, and I got snuck in kind of because the press couldn't take my picture. Even though other advocates didn't know, technically, who I was. They still just knew me as JD Smith. Valerie Jarrett knew who I was because, you know, because I was going into the White House, going into the Pentagon, and you can't go into those places as JD Smith. The White House and Pentagon knew who I was, and I'll never forget, like, as President Obama signed legislation, Valerie Jarrett just gave me a big old hug and smile. It was amazing. It was an amazing feeling. One of the things a lot of people don't remember is that there was still an eight-month period after that legislation was signed that I was still in the closet because we had to wait until the DOD said that everyone was ready for repeal to actually take effect.

(TI): Got you. There's the day of the signing and then the day of implementation.

(JS): Correct. So, I went home and, you know, spent another eight months in the closet. We did a lot in those eight months to get ready for repeal to actually help change the culture of the military, and I think during those eight months are some of the biggest impacts we actually helped with the DOD.

(TI): What were some of the things that had to change?

(JS): I mean, some of the biggest things, or the arguments these people said that were going to hurt the DOD were like, you know, "It's going to hurt readiness." You know, when repeal happens we're

gonna have, you know, all this chaos so we wanted to make sure that when this happened nothing changed. We wanted again, you know, basically rip off the band-aid as much as possible. A couple of things that we did was we got a magazine circulating on bases before repeal. This actually was one of the funniest things because the Pentagon really was scared about this, which proved our point. AAFES, which is, you know, what runs the stores on bases, runs on a completely different distribution system than the BX and stuff like that. One of my good friends at the time, actually good friend now, Jonathan Mills, reached out to AAFES and published his whole magazine, and then got AAFES to distribute it about 90 up days before repeal happened. It was on the front page of CNN.com for, you know, two whole days. I won't forget the call from the Pentagon being like, "What are you guys doing? Like repeal hasn't happened yet?" We're like, "We're not doing anything, like it's just a magazine." Then, three days later, that freak out ends. So. it proved our point. It's like there's this big scary magazine, and then it's over a week later and we're showing that there's nothing wrong.

(TI): Right.

(JS): Then, during this time we were, you know, organizing a conference that would take place three days after repeal happened. And then three days later, we had a conference of over 200 active duty service members in Vegas to bring together repeal that also had international service members that were LGBT at the time too.

(TI): Interesting. Yeah, I remember that time. I was in DC at the time, and I remember you talked about the big scary thing, three days, things like that. I remember I was in the chamber for all the service chiefs when they had to testify in front of Congress over this. I remember thinking I was like, you know, we do hearings all the time, and I was in a lot of hearings at the time. And it was like we do hearings on how many weapons we're gonna buy for the next 10 years, how many airplanes, ships, guns, water on Camp Lejeune, all kinds of stuff. There'd be no press there, and there would be like half of the committee, you know, in Congress or Senate would show up. For that one, for the repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell, for that testimony, is like everybody was there on the panel. There was so much media that I couldn't even hardly get my camera in to where I normally—I had to like shove some elbows because like, "Okay, this is where I'm at. I'm here every week, guys." But you know, it was amazing to me to see that much attention on that one issue when there's so many other tensions in the military that's like you

need to pay just as much attention on everything else as well. This is, you know, important, but it's like, it was just amazing to see the dichotomy of what people would cover and what people wouldn't just based on public perception.

(JS): One of the things we were most scared about was that, you know, if we didn't have a lot of military members come out on day one, we then have a story about here's a gay military member here on day 20, here's one day, you know, 45. By doing, we in the magazine, we had over 100 people come out on day one, and that was the story. Here's a hundred service members that came out that are doing their job on day one, nothing's changed.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): There was no trickle of all these service members coming out. It was just business as normal.

(TI): You know—

(JS): Nothing really changed the whole storyline.

(TI): You're talking about how nothing changed in the military. What changed for the service members that were able to come out?

(JS): I mean, everything changed, you know, like I mean there they got to breathe a sigh of relief. I mean, and, and they got to go in and, you know, not have that stretch, not have that, you know?

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): It just feels like the whole burden is off you. Like, I mean it's one of the things that like you don't know whether or not—I go back to the time, I draw this parallel to myself because when I was back at the Air Force Academy, I had to make the decision whether or not I wanted to be a pilot or not. I chose not to become a pilot because there was that 11-year commitment. I, at that point, I was like, “I don't think I could live in the closet that long.” And so I chose to not become a pilot because of that. You know, now I look back at those kids who are now at the Air Force Academy who can now, you know, bring a same-sex couple to a date or, you know, ring dance and things like that, but they don't have to live with that choice anymore. They can now serve a whole career. Back then, it's like, you know, that's what's changed for these people, is that they don't have to make those kind of career decisions that I did and that other people had to live with.

(TI): Outstanding. That's so, saying, it's not even a career decision anymore. It's not even a thought.

(JS): Yeah.

(TI): That's awesome. I can personally remember that, not the day, but the year, I had a fellow sergeant that was fabulous and gay and nobody cared. We all loved him. He did, however, come into the boss's office, you know, a couple months before, it was May, it was signed, I don't know. Maybe that's the reason he did it. She didn't care either, but he announced it at that point. He's like, you know, I remember, and I remember us just saying, "Dude, you're going to be able to say this out loud soon enough. Like, hold tight," you know. No—I can definitely—it's cool that, like you said, those career decisions, you don't even have to make those anymore. Very good. While you were in, give either a best friend or your greatest mentor.

(JS): My best friend was definitely my co-founder of the organization, Ty Walrod. You know, he was the one that helped me through that whole process. He was the first person I called when I was blackmailed, and he's the one that helped me found this whole organization. And he's someone that I call to this day when we bounce business ideas off of each other. You know, he's founded a few companies. I founded a few companies, and we bounce ideas off left and right. He's definitely my best friend, you know, left and right. I have a few mentors. I definitely have some bit, like best advice I've had—I definitely don't have like one or two best mentors, but I definitely have been given some of the best advice in my life by a few people. Cleve Jones, who is a big person to Harvey Milk, has given me some of the best advice I ever had, and you can see it probably from the interview done just now is, you know, when trying to create change, press is one of the most important things that—it's all about visibility and showing people that you're there. That's gonna change people's minds. That's what drove us to do the things like the 100 people on day one. His advice about, you know, showing press that you're not the scary monster is what's gonna, you know, win people's minds over—

(TI): —the heart, the hearts and minds.

(JS): Yeah, the hearts and minds.

(TI): No worries. When and why did you eventually leave active duty?

(JS): You know, at some point it's, you know, I think a lot of it was that, you know, activism is a really hard thing to do. I think, you know, it

really did burn me out, and I think that definitely did tie into my whole active service.

(TI): I didn't even ask you, what was your MOS during the entire time that you were in.

(Both): [Laughter]

(JS): Activism.

(Both): [Laughter]

(JS): I mean, I really did have a very different military career than everyone else. And I think that's what, you know, really probably was part of the reason I had to leave. You know, because this did become my life during my active, and it was gonna follow me everywhere. I was very young when this all happened. You know, I was, you know, 22 when this started, you know?

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): You know, yeah that, you know, rising to that type of leadership so young really burned me out, and I had to take a break from all that. After I left the Air Force, I started travel startups that was about sailing. You know, I took the time to like go—

(TI): You went out man. You went for a boat ride.

(Both): [Laughter]

(JS): I really did, I worked in the travel industry for four years and focused on travel startups, and, you know, I've travelled around the world from Cambodia to Thailand to Sweden. I took the time to really just reflect, but also build some awesome startups. I've learned a lot during that time. I've really gained some great entrepreneurial skills that I'm also excited just to bring back to the government too. I also just was excited to step away from, you know, the military because it was my time.

(TI): The military, did you full, did you totally, you know, go off activism dude? Were you just like, hey, entrepreneurial, decompress, a little bit, a little bit?

(JS): You can never get away from activism.

(JS): [Laughter]

(JS): Like once you're in it, you're in it. I'll give you a plain example. In the sailing industry when I was in it, I found the same thing with Don't

Ask Don't Tell there, you know. I was back into classes where you had to get some certifications. I remember being in the classroom, and it's the same kind of thing. You're kind of like the only out gay person there, and I was like, "Oh, this is interesting." As you're starting to go out with all these people, you know, I was, it was weird to be out and it was kind of like, "Oh, this is, you're kind of closeted again." I was like this isn't cool. So, I, you know, was out again. There's a really big TV show Below Deck, everyone's probably, a lot of people probably—

(TI): My wife loves it, my wife loves it.

(JS): [Laughter]

(JS): You know, you become friends with some of those people and then, you know, you talk to them and then they start bringing on gay cast members, and it starts, you know, changing that culture. You know, you start getting the activism on there, and so like we, some of the startups I worked on, we did a big LGBT race team. We made a big thing, a big deal about how we're going to be the first LGBT racing team in an international regatta, which we did down in the British Virgin Islands. If you look down at some of the press on that, it was a huge international press poll that we did this big LGBT racing thing down there. It's—you never get away from the activism angle.

(TI): Yeah, until there's hopefully that for no need of the activism, until it's just a normal—

(JS): —exactly—

(TI): —thing.

(JS): Well, it goes back to that, you know, that visibility thing. Things like Below Deck are doing some great activism. Just because the visibility, right? You're seeing a great lesbian captain in the yachting industry just by visibility. That's it. It pushes barriers. So, yeah, you can never get away from activism no matter what you do.

(TI): Gotcha, very good. Well, hopefully, again, hopefully there comes a day where you don't need the activism. It just becomes a thing, right? It's just not even a thing, it's just, it's just normal life.

(JS): Yeah.

(TI): What brought you back to government, to VA, after all this?

(JS): I always told myself there'd be two agencies I would come work for—the first one would be VA because I just love, you know, Veterans

are great. The second one would be National Park Service because I, you know, I'm Leslie Knope at heart. I want to work for the park service, you know.

(TI): Yeah, yeah, yeah.

(JS): I mean there's so much work to be done still with Veterans, especially in the LGBTQ space. You know, the secretary has already announced that we're doing a big review of the policies here, you know. There's a lot of do in the space. I'm looking forward to what we do and being a part of that.

(TI): You are being a part of that. Yeah, I hear, you know, we've talked about it. What are some things that you're seeing that, that do need to change?

(JS): Well, I mean, the first thing that I think what we need to do is just review everything, what the secretary's already put out there. The secretary's doing a great job of saying, "Hey, we're going to review all the policies and see exactly what needs to change." And he's got a great idea of we need to just treat everyone with respect and make sure that we're doing what the president has laid out exactly and see what we need to do to change.

(TI): That's great that they're getting your experience in on that board, and, you know, who will look forward to see what changes, if anything. I do know that you're in our meeting in our office at least once a week. I still had to look up what you did, honestly, I was doing my research. Strategic communications for OIT, for IT. For people who don't know, that's the office of, you know, IT here for the VA. Why does VA IT need external strategic communications?

(JS): [Laughter]

(JS): Well, we're one of those—

(TI): Just a question man.

(Both): [Laughter]

(JS): Well, we're one of the largest IT infrastructures in the world and that means that we have to have an external communications team. That's just not with media, but that's also with Congress.

(TI): Okay.

(JS): You know, speaking engagements and getting out there, and that means we need it for a couple of reasons. First, we need to be able to attract a great workforce, right?

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): We're such a big tech team. We need to be attractive to take people from the Airbnbs, the Apples. To be able to do that, we need to have that external communication to say, "Hey, come work for us." We also need to let the general public know what we're doing in the IT space. If we're not telling Veterans what we're doing to get them their benefits, to get them the best care, and showing them that we're in that cutting edge, then we're not doing our job to tell them what we're doing to be the best in the cutting edge health care space, and things like that. We need to be able to communicate that stuff. And especially when IT is where everything's being created and changing right now, we definitely need all that communication going to Congress, and things like that, directly, and that's why it needs its own little arm.

(TI): Gotcha. Yeah, I think I said, I think I saw in a news release or something, like over two billion dollars is going to VA IT, so it's in order to keep that kind of funding you kind of got to let Congress know what they're doing with that two billion. Yeah, I understand that. Help compete against the Apples and Silicon Valley. Got that. Okay, very good. What is one thing that you learned during your time in the military that you apply to what you do today?

(JS): Taking care of the people, you know, I think that's one of the things I learned in the military that I definitely apply now especially being an officer in the military, watching the airmen especially. I go back to the story about when the CAC card was taken away from me and remembering that trauma being taken over and dragged to the JAG. I never want to be treated like that because I remember that kind of trauma, and I think about some of the instances that I've saw other commanders treat other people and I never want to be treated like that. That's something that I really care about now, coming into the workplace and, you know, you're all going to make mistakes as leaders somewhere down the line. I've definitely made mistakes the past few years and how you know you treat people and stuff. Nowadays, I always try to treat people with respect and put people first, because that's what matters. Do you treat people with respect? They're going to want to work for you no matter what.

I always try to put that as the forefront, as people first and, you know, the job comes second because that's what matters.

(TI): Well, if you take care of the people, the job will get taken care of.

(JS): Exactly.

(TI): People will run through brick walls if you're an effective leader and you take care of your people. Your people will run through brick walls for you.

(JS): Exactly.

(TI): That's been shown through time and time again, in any kind of leadership scenario, especially in the military.

(JS): Exactly.

(TI): Okay, very good. Josh, is there anything else that I may have missed or haven't asked that you think is important to share?

(JS): No, I think you nailed everything that we could talk about.

(TI): How about a parting shot for anybody that might be listening to this and they're thinking about VA services or a professional transition or—

(JS): I think, you kind of joked about like why did I come back to the government and I would, if you would've ask me about 10 years ago, 20 years ago, or even like three years ago if I were to ever come back to work for the federal government, I would have told you no way. You know, now that I'm back, even just for the past six months, I can't tell you how much I love it, you know. It's—it really is a great place to work and actually change and affect people's lives, especially in the civilian workforce. I think people need to really look at it, because, and I have two younger brothers, and I've encouraged them to really look at this, and I think people should.

(TI): I was right there with you man. When I first got out, I was like, I don't want anything to do with the government and then you look back, and you look back and go okay, being a civilian government worker is a little different than being in the military.

(JS): I think Veterans, especially, have that, you know, that outlook because it's—maybe you've experienced bad leaders in the military and maybe you're scarred in some kind of way, and you're like I want to run away so much. I definitely was one of those people. You just, maybe you need to talk to some people in the civilian

service to be like hey, make that transition and think about that maybe it's a fit for you because it definitely was for me.

[00:42:50] Music

[00:42:51] PSA:

Man: The VA does a very good job on the medical side. I don't know of anybody that has any complaints. My primary care doctor's probably the best doctor I've ever had in my life.

Woman: I listen to my friend, a good patient of mine, he only comes once a week, but I enjoy him.

Man: She comes in special, early in the morning.

Woman: Yes, I do. Early in the morning—

Man: —Just for me. That's exactly why I choose VA.

Narrator: Choose VA today. Visit va.gov [Link: va.gov].

[0:43:22] Music

[0:43:37] Closing Monologue:

(TI): I want to thank Josh for spending time with us here on Borne the Battle. For more information on what Josh is doing with VA, you can go to [oit.va.gov](https://www.oit.va.gov) [Link: <https://www.oit.va.gov>]. This week's Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week is from our VA Veteran of the Day program. Every day, our Digital Media Team highlights a Veteran on all of our social media platforms and with a blog on blogs.va.gov [Link: blogs.va.gov/VAntage/category/veteran]. You can nominate a Veteran yourself by emailing in a couple of photos and a short writeup to newmedia@va.gov. In October of 2005, Melissa Margain entered the Army after basic training. Margain trained as a dental specialist. She was stationed in Fort Gordon, Georgia, and Fort Hood, Texas. She later deployed to Iraq twice as part of the 502nd Dental Company, 1st Medical Brigade during Operation Iraqi Freedom. During her second tour in 2009, she was at Balad Air Base and worked as the non-commissioned officer in charge of the Balad Dental Clinic's Dental Lab and Radiology department. A mortar attack on the base injured Margain, and she sustained a traumatic brain injury. She later was also diagnosed with a seizure disorder and PTSD. Due to the severity of her injuries, Margain returned to the US and went through speech and cognitive therapy to help with regaining memory and speech function upon discharge. She worked at a dental clinic in Pleasant Hill, California, but

struggled to transition into civilian life. She joined VA as a health benefits advisor. Working with other Veterans helped her realize that she wanted to advocate for Veterans like herself. After receiving a bachelor's degree in cognitive science from American Military University, Margain then became a field representative for Contra Costa County's supervisor. She was active in Veterans organizations, such as Alpha Gamma Xi Military sorority and the California Women Veterans Leadership Council. She also became certified as a domestic violence counselor. In March of 2020, Margain became the Seattle program director of the Minority Veterans of America branch in Seattle, Washington. Minority Veterans of America seeks to advocate for fair treatment of minorities, such as female and LGBTQ Veterans. In addition to her work with Minority Veterans, Margain serves as the junior vice commander for the Veterans of Foreign Wars and remains active in both local and national Veteran's organizations. Army Veteran, Melissa Margain. Thank you for your service. That's it for this week's episode. If you yourself would like to nominate a future Borne the Battle Veteran of the week, you can. Just send an email to podcast@va.gov. Include a short writeup and let us know why you'd like to see him or her as the Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week. And if you liked this podcast episode, hit the subscribe button. We're on iTunes, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcast, iHeartRadio, etc., etc. Pretty much any podcasting app known to phone, computer, tablet, or man. For more stories on Veterans and Veteran benefits, check out our website blogs.va.gov [Link: blogs.va.gov]. And follow the VA on social media: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube—which there is a whole playlist of Born the Battle on there—RallyPoint, LinkedIn, Pinterest. DPTVetAffairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs, no matter the social media, you can always find us with that blue check mark. And, as always, I'm reminded by people smarter than me to remind you that the Department of Veterans Affairs does not endorse or officially sanction any entities that may be discussed in this podcast nor any media products or services they may provide. I say that because the song you're hearing now is called "Machine gunner," which is courtesy of the non-profit Operations Song. And it was written by Marine Veteran Mick McElhenny, Nashville songwriter Jason Sever, and Mykal Duncan. Have a great day. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you right here next week. Take care.

[0:47:23] Music

[0:48:20] Bonus

(JS): So, we go back to like November or October of 2019. I'm starting to do my own business by myself, again, running weddings and corporate travel on. I'm sailing yachts. And these are smaller yachts, not what you see on like the low jacks. You can fit about 12 to 14 people on each one, but you do multiple boats. So, if you're getting married, you'll maybe rent like four of these boats and we go somewhere like the British Virgin Islands or whatnot. And so, doing a couple of these trips back to back. I'm about to go work for another big rental agency that runs a bunch of these boats worldwide. And as we'll start to work with them at the end of February, but I had to finish up all my clients. So, I had to finish all my trips on my old business. So, down the British Virgin Islands in February, doing a wedding for a gay couple who was amazing, had a blast. And then I had to do my last trip with an old friend of mine, actually, who used to work for me, on the magazine team at OutServe. And it was just mostly a fun trip with come over friends. And it was like, it was the last week for me before I started to work for this lab, this new company. And COVID was just starting, like, it was just starting to hit the US, and you're kind of, at that point, you know, it was still kind of a joke, right? Like, "Oh, make sure you're washing your hands," you know? And after that trip ended, I was flying back to the United States, and I remember seeing masks for the first time. And then, I got the call the following week being like, you know, we're not gonna be able to hire you anymore, like this is done. And at that point, you know, I had already kind of started a full up my business because I was, you know, gonna start to work from this, other folks and—

(TI): You're transitioning.

(JS): I'm transitioning at this point. So, I'm like, what am I gonna do? And so, you know, for me an interesting point, and this goes, I was like, "Oh, well, there's, you know, this wine store across the street" that I had been doing. Some part-time work or because I was doing my sommelier at the time, like I was doing some if you go work for this wine store, they'll give you the classes to do your sommelier at the same time and they give you 30% off. So, I was like, "That's great."

(TI): A bonus.

(JS): "Can I do some more work for you?" And I was like, they're like, "Yeah. Great." But it was amazing because at that point I got to watch COVID unfold. You know, when it started to be like, "Oh, here's—everyone's starting to wear masks. Here's everyone's

starting to wear gloves and like here's, everyone's starting to like, come in for wine constantly.” And it was like the Hunger Games, people coming in for a lot of wine and stuff. But, you know, it was also amazing because, you also started to feel humbling because you started to see people lose their jobs and come in and ask for jobs. And that for me, you know, was a humbling experience but also was a big leadership training for me because I started to work in that atmosphere. And you started to have to learn to deal with that, watch that, and then work in that atmosphere. And it was one of the most challenging times to do that, to work in that atmosphere over a few months period and to see that all unwind because you're working with people that—I remember working over there for a few months, and there's other people that just have their masters and they're like trying to assign another job to transition to. And you know, that shouldn't be working, you know, in you know, this type of job, but they're just trying to like survive and transition to, and it was sad. But it was also, you know—it was also fun to kind of see the creativity of that kind of stuff, where you saw like, like curbside things, be creative. I got to help, you know, a big corporation create a whole new curbside process. And I mean, it was exciting. Big leadership options. But also it was just, it was a humbling time too. So, but then, you know, I was applying to government, and you know, this option, they came up and that's how I kind of transitioned here. But that's how I went from, you know, doing a big sailing adventure, but that kind of industry died during COVID. Still is kind of dying too now here. So that's a lot.

(TI): That's a wide swing from sailing yachts to coming to work for IT communications.

(JS): Yeah.

(Text Transcript Ends)