

PERRY WATKINS

b. August 20, 1948

d. March 17, 1996

PIONEERING MILITARY ACTIVIST

“For 16 years the Army said being homosexual wasn’t detrimental to my job. Then, after the fact, they said it was. Logic is a lost art in the Army.”

He won a landmark lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of his military discharge due to his homosexuality.

Perry J. Watkins was an African-American soldier who won a landmark lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of his military discharge due to his homosexuality.

Born in Joplin, Missouri, Watkins was raised by a single mother who always encouraged his honesty. He was open about his homosexuality in high school, at a time when both gay and black Americans were stigmatized.

At age 19, Watkins was drafted during the Vietnam War. He did not hide his sexuality on his pre-induction paperwork and served openly, even though U.S. policy barred homosexuals from the military.

In the 1970s, while serving in Korea, Watkins volunteered to entertain the troops. He performed in drag, using the stage name Simone. Off duty, he took his show to Army clubs in Europe.

The Army accepted Watkins’s reenlistment three times following honorable discharges. Each time he responded candidly to inquiries about his “homosexual tendencies.” Several times the military conducted investigations into Watkins’s sexual conduct. All of them ended due to insufficient evidence.

In 1975 the military sought to discharge Watkins for being gay, despite his excellent record. His commanding officer testified that Watkins did “a fantastic job” and insisted his homosexuality had no impact on his performance. Watkins retained his enlistment and in 1977 was granted a security clearance. It was revoked two years later, due again to his sexual orientation. Represented by the ACLU, Watkins filed a lawsuit to challenge the revocation. In response, the army filed discharge proceedings.

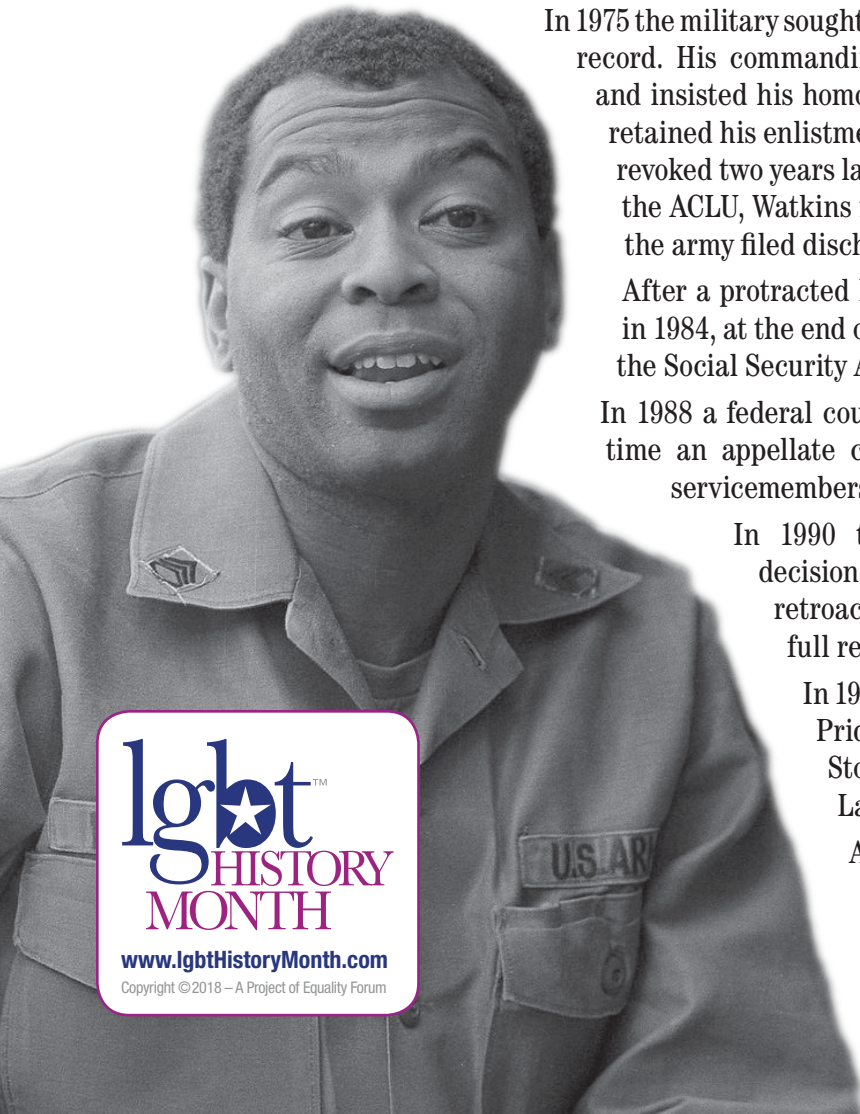
After a protracted legal battle, the Army dismissed Watkins permanently in 1984, at the end of his enlistment period. Thereafter, Watkins worked for the Social Security Administration while he fought the discharge.

In 1988 a federal court of appeals ruled in Watkins’s favor. It was the first time an appellate court ruled against the military ban on homosexual servicemembers. The Bush Administration appealed the decision.

In 1990 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the lower court’s decision and ordered Watkins’s reinstatement. He settled for a retroactive promotion, an honorable discharge, back pay and full retirement benefits.

In 1993 Watkins served as grand marshal of the New York City Pride Parade. The documentary “SIS: The Perry Watkins Story” was released in 1994. The University of Michigan Law School awards an annual fellowship in his memory.

At age 47 Watkins died of AIDS-related complications. The New York Times published his obituary.



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