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GARY SINISE
SERVING HONOR AND NEED



gary SINISE

by pam windsor

In the 1994 blockbuster film "Forrest Gump," when his platoon gets caught in a firefight in Vietnam, Forrest (played by Tom Hanks) pulls his fellow injured soldiers to safety, one by one. His commanding officer, Lt. Dan Taylor (played by Gary Sinise), is among the injured, losing both legs in the battle. As Forrest drags him away from the fighting and saves his life, Lt. Dan screams in anger and later, physically and emotionally shattered, says, "I should have died out there with my men. But now, I'm nothing but a (expletive) cripple."

His portrayal of Lt. Dan garnered Sinise an Academy Award nomination. And while he's gone on to play many memorable roles since, from President Harry Truman to his nine-year stint as Detective Mac Taylor on "CSI: New York," Sinise remains best known for his role as the injured Vietnam vet.

Some actors might have tried to distance themselves

from being so closely identified with a single role, but Sinise has embraced it. He's found playing Lt. Dan has allowed him to connect with members of the military who have, in real life, been severely injured while fighting for their country. In fact, Sinise has become so committed to helping veterans he's put his acting career on hold for a little while.

Sinise, who grew up in Illinois, began acting in high school. As a teenager, he played in a band and admits he wasn't a very good student. Then, one day at Highland Park High School, while standing with members of his rock group in the hallway, fate intervened in the form of the drama teacher who walked by and asked them to audition for "West Side Story."

"She said we looked like we'd make good gang members," he says, laughing. He and another guy decided to check it out. Sinise ended up getting cast as one of the

Sharks, a street gang in the play.

"I just fell in love with everybody in the play and being in the show and from that point on, I just wanted to be in plays and musicals. I played in my band and then I did theater."

After high school, Sinise and some friends started a small community theater in Chicago. What began in a church basement went on to become the renowned Stepwolf Theatre.

"When you go to Chicago and see this giant building we built, I think we own four buildings on this one block, two of them were built from the ground up and the other two we bought. When you think back that all of that started with teenagers, it's really kind of a pretty neat American theater story."

Sinise says his attitude has always been "If you can think it, you can do it." He's always believed if you work hard and want to achieve, you will.



SINISE'S MOST MEMORABLE ROLE WAS AS LT. DAN IN THE 1994 MOVIE "FORREST GUMP." His performance earned him a number of "Best Supporting Actor" nominations.

PHOTO: PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Even in the early days of his acting career, Sinise felt a need to help veterans. At Steppenwolf, Sinise began thinking of using the theater to help those who'd recently returned from the Vietnam War. They started offering something called "Vets Night."

"I was directing a play about Vietnam veterans and wanted to make it available to them to come and see the show for free," Sinise explains. "It was a very difficult time for our Vietnam veterans. All of a sudden, every Tuesday night would just be filled with veterans experiencing the play and staying around afterwards to talk to the actors and it turned into kind of a healing moment. It was very cathartic."

Thirty years later, thanks to Sinise, Steppenwolf and now the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles continue to offer free performances and free dinners to veterans.

Following his success as both a director and an actor at Steppenwolf, Sinise began moving into film. His first movie role came in the 1992 movie "A Midnight Clear." That same year, he starred in and directed a film version of John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men."

Then, the chance to play Lt. Dan came along, something very meaningful for Sinise after his experience with the veterans at Steppenwolf.

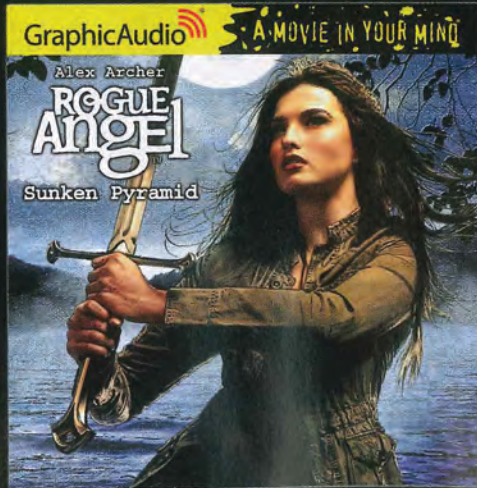
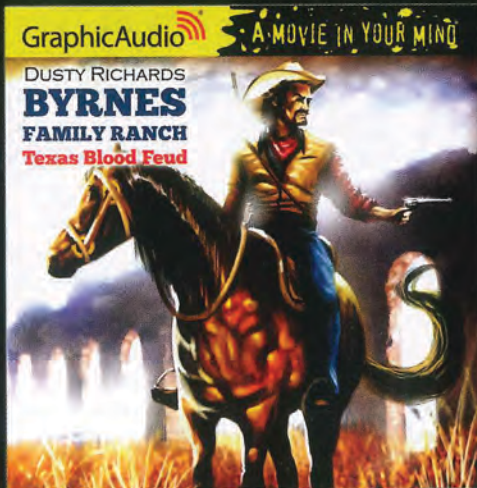
"I very much wanted the part and was lucky to get it." Shortly after the movie hit theaters, the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) invited Sinise to their annual convention to honor him for playing the wounded veteran.

"I was just bowled over by the whole experience and meeting all of these wounded veterans from World War II and Korea, Vietnam and even Desert Storm. I ended up supporting the DAV for a number of years," he says.

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Then, in 2001, terrorists hijacked four American planes, crashing two into the World Trade Center, a third into the Pentagon, and a fourth in a field in Pennsylvania. "I just needed to do something after Sept. 11," he recalls. "It was a painful time and I wanted to support our military and I didn't want our active-duty Afghanistan and Iraq vets to come home to the kind of reception our Vietnam vets had when they came home."

He began doing USO handshake tours, initially on his own. Later, he began taking a group of musician friends along. At the time, they were part of a "jam group" that got together once in a while, but they soon became the The Lt. Dan Band, with the sole purpose of entertaining the troops. The dynamic, high-energy cover band features Sinise on bass guitar. Over the past 10 years, Sinise has appeared at nearly 200 USO shows at bases in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Korea and other parts of the world, as well as all over the U.S.

Marine Staff Sgt. Jason Klinger recalls seeing Sinise in Iraq. He notes that while other artists often leave right after the show, Sinise took time to shake hands and sign autographs.

"The difference between him and the other guys was he actually stayed to meet everyone. While everybody else just kind of left the stage, he stayed until everyone else



THE GARY SINISE FOUNDATION HAS HELPED THOUSANDS OF VETERANS AND FIRST RESPONDERS by supporting numerous programs that "entertain, educate, inspire, strengthen, and build communities."

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE GARY SINISE FOUNDATION

was gone. It was totally different than anything I've ever seen before."

For Sinise, the initial goal behind the USO tours was to let the troops know that someone cares about what they're doing. His ability to do that took on new meaning after a visit to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, the hospital where those severely injured in places like Iraq and Afghanistan are transported and stabilized before they can be sent back to the United States.

His hospital stop capped a three-month USO tour through Iraq, Italy and Germany.

"This is back in 2003 and I was a little apprehensive thinking how I was going to react to seeing wounded soldiers," he recalls. He walked into the hospital and saw a group lined up, waiting for medical attention. These were soldiers whose injuries were less severe, and they would likely be treated and sent back to the war zone. He described some of them as having the "thousand-mile stare."

"They were looking kind of sad and I started introducing myself to them," he explains. "And you could see their faces start to light up. They didn't know my name but

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GARY SINISE FOUNDATION PROGRAMS

R.I.S.E. (Restoring Independence & Supporting Empowerment)

R.I.S.E. provides wounded heroes and their families with the necessary resources to overcome their new life challenges, including home modifications, adapted vehicles, wheelchairs/track chairs or constructing custom Smart Homes.

Gary Sinise & the Lt. Dan Band

Every performance for this ultimate cover band is dedicated to honoring our country's service men and women.

Relief & Resiliency Outreach

Provides support to those recovering from trauma and loss by building communities of support and friendship.

Gary Sinise Foundation Ambassadors Council

Chosen by Sinise, council members

represent the Gary Sinise Foundation's mission through speaking engagements, public appearances, and leadership opportunities around the world.

Serving Heroes

This program serves meals to service men and women during their layovers at Los Angeles International Airport, Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport and Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas.

Arts & Entertainment Outreach

Initiated at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, which was co-founded by Sinise nearly 30 years ago, the Veteran's Night program offers veterans and active duty service men and women the opportunity to join the foundation for dinner and a dress rehearsal performance by some of the top theater groups at playhouses around the country.

they started to recognize me from 'Forrest Gump' as Lt. Dan. They started calling me Lt. Dan, talking about the movie and making jokes, and their whole demeanor, everything changed."

Something also changed for Sinise.

"I realized right there that playing the character was more than just a part or job in a movie. It had this relationship to a portion of our population and could be used in a positive way to help people."

He began spending more time visiting injured troops in military hospitals, at the same time playing USO shows on weekends, while shooting "CSI: New York" during the week.

Over the years, Sinise and his Lt. Dan Band have raised money for countless military charities and projects. His work and involvement grew so big that in 2011 he created the Gary Sinise Foundation to pool resources, create joint partnerships and do even more for veterans. One of the biggest projects (in partnership with the Stephen Stiller Tunnels to Towers Foundation) includes building "smart homes" for those who've lost multiple limbs, like Army Master Sgt. John Masson, a Special Forces medical sergeant with the 20th Special Forces Group who was injured while serving in Afghanistan in October of 2010.

Masson stepped on an improvised explosive device (IED) and lost both legs and part of his left arm (he's left-handed) while clearing a village south of Kandahar.

"I never really lost consciousness during the blast," he remembers. "The pain was insane and you can hear the urgency in their voices and I felt for sure I was going to die. And it was a matter of going through a process of OK, don't let me die here on this ground, let me speak to my family again or let me see them one more time and then I can go."

He focused on staying alive and trying to make it to the hospital.

"I pretty much knew there were limbs missing and I just wanted to be able to wake up again. And three days later I did."

Retired and living in North Carolina with his family, Masson says "life is good." And now, he looks forward to moving into his new home, being built with the help of the Gary Sinise Foundation.

"Smart homes," which can cost in excess of \$500,000, allow injured vets to live independent lives. Masson explains how the houses are custom-made to fit the needs of the veterans and their specific injuries.

Masson's home will be fully wired, so he can control appliances via iPad, and will have kitchen cabinets lower to his level with a push of a button.

"I'm missing my dominant left hand, so the way they're going to place the bars in the bathroom, it's all going to be conducive to

me. My sink in the bathroom is going to be built so I can get my wheelchair under it."

Masson says he's extremely grateful to the organizations helping fund his new home and to Sinise.

"Gary's just a wonderful, wonderful man. He dedicates so much of his time to veterans," he says. "He's just non-stop and I wonder where the energy comes from. We asked him why one day, thinking he was going to go into it a little bit, and he just pointed to myself and another service member and said, 'Because of you guys.'"

For now, Sinise has put his acting career on the back burner as he works to build awareness for the foundation. He says that due to the successful run of "CSI: New York," he can take some time off to do it.

"Having a successful show cuts me some slack for a while. I'm able to devote full-time to seeing that the foundation is strong. There will be a time when I'll go back to work and get back to acting and at that point my goal is to make sure it can operate without being dependent on my full-time involvement."

His foundation continues to fund a steady stream of new projects, such as the recent "Hollywood Salutes Heroes" event where, in partnership with American Airlines and the USO, 60 wounded veterans

were flown to California to spend a day at Disneyland and Paramount Pictures.

"Getting them out of hospitals and showing them they can have a good time and people care can be so important to their mental attitude about their own rehabilitation," Sinise says.

And there are other outings and events, such as Invincible Spirit Festivals, to let not only the vets but also the families know they are not alone. Sinise says he's been fortunate with a successful acting career and his strong family with wife Moira and children Sophia, Mac and Ella. He believes his work to support veterans matters and he is happy to rely on his role of Lt. Dan and the way the story plays out to set a real-life example.

"That story is a positive story for our wounded. [Lt. Dan] goes through all of the anger and despair and confusion of what he's going to do after he gets injured, and by the end of the story he's standing up again and he's rich and successful, he's a business guy, and he's moving on with his life. It's a story we want for all our veterans." (TV)

To learn more about the work of the Gary Sinise Foundation or how you can help, go to www.garysinisefoundation.org.

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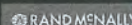
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