

## Sinise on Patrol: One helping thousands

By Brendan Conway



You may know him as the gritty Detective Mac Taylor in “CSI: New York” or as Lieutenant Dan in the 1994 Academy Award-winning film *Forrest Gump*. But an increasing number of military think of Gary Sinise as one of their own. The Emmy

Award-winning actor and director has built a reputation as an advocate for the wounded and a spokesman for veterans issues. The reason: Sinise understands the mindset of those who serve. It’s why, in December, President George W. Bush awarded him the Presidential Citizens Medal, the highest honor the U.S. government bestows on private citizens other than the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

“I think most of the country is not focused on what our military is doing,” Sinise said recently when asked about the challenges facing wounded warriors and veterans. “If it’s off the front page, they’re not thinking about it. Unless you have somebody who is in the military, or personally connected to somebody who is serving, your life goes on, and you don’t really realize who is out there, and it seems to have nothing to do with you.... They are the guards at the gate. They are the ones who are going to be constantly called upon to guard against those who would do us harm. We need to always keep them in mind.”

Judging by the full schedule he keeps in between shoots for “CSI: New York,” Sinise certainly keeps them in mind. TV viewers may have caught the Fox video diary “On the Road in Iraq With Our Troops and Gary Sinise” in January, which pulled back the curtain on one of the actor’s several trips to Iraq and Afghanistan. In the seven-day, 2,000 mile trek through Kuwait and Iraq including stops in Baghdad, Al Asad, and Ramadi, Sinise figures he shook hands with as many as 5,000 troops.

The band, named after the double amputee Vietnam vet Sinise played in *Forrest Gump*, is almost always on the road as well. Since 2003, the Lt. Dan Band has performed at military bases in Diego Garcia, South Korea, Germany, the United Kingdom, and at dozens of U.S. bases from Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama to Twentynine Palms in California. Appearing at no fewer than 60 on-base and benefit concerts since 2003, the group has helped the USO, Fisher House, the Wounded Warrior Project, Operation Support Our Troops Illinois, Operation Iraqi Children, Disabled American Veterans, and the Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, among others.

But that's only the entertainment side of Sinise. As co-founder of Operation Iraqi Children, Sinise also helps oversee an organization that provides young Iraqis with school supplies delivered by the U.S. military. From a North Kansas City, Missouri, warehouse that collects public donations from across the country, the group estimates it has disbursed nearly a quarter million school supply kits, half a million toys, and more than 50 pallets of sporting equipment across Iraq.

Then there is Sinise's work as spokesman for the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. He raises public awareness through speaking appearances and also raises money for a monument to pay tribute to the disabled. Once complete, the monument will stand in Washington, D.C., near the National Mall. "There are many memorials that honor our war dead, but none that honor the service members and families that have endured the multiple scars of battle like so many of our wounded veterans," Sinise said of the project.

Sinise has become such a frequent visitor at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, and other military treatment hospitals that "I think they know by now, and certainly the hospital staff knows, that I am not just there for a one-time photo opportunity." The visits, though, are often bittersweet. "When I go into the hospitals and see somebody who's missing his legs, they say, 'Hey Lt. Dan, Hey look at me! I'm like you!' It's the gallows humor thing. They're trying to make the best of the situation."

On one occasion, the visit was more farcical. "I was with Wayne Newton on one of my trips," Sinise remembered. "We were walking through a hospital at Camp Anaconda in Iraq, visiting some of our wounded and there was a surgery going on. An Iraqi man had been wounded. We looked in the door and while the surgery was going on, the doctor saw my face and Wayne Newton's through the window, and he stopped the surgery. He opened the door and just dropped what he was doing and said, 'Hey, Wayne Newton!' I said to him: 'Aren't you in the middle of surgery?' The surgeon responded, 'Just one quick picture.' So we posed for a picture and he went right back to the surgery. It wasn't a life-threatening injury.... It was exactly like MASH."

Some actors recoil from the roles that made them famous. Not Sinise, who relishes the associations "Lt. Dan" has brought.

Those associations weren't lost on the Disabled American Veterans, who gave him an

award for the portrayal. His theatrical interest in veterans predates *Forrest Gump* by more than a decade—back to 1983 at the Steppenwolf Theater he co-founded in Chicago. “The play was ‘Tracers,’ and it was actually written by a group of Vietnam veterans,” Sinise said. “[I] got involved with local vets groups to better understand what they had been through so that I could be a better director for the play and to direct my actors more truthfully.” Trips to the VA and to local veterans meeting groups helped the cast understand what it meant to be a Vietnam veteran eight years after the war’s end.

“There were people suffering from post-traumatic stress, injured people. Those were difficult times for Vietnam vets,” Sinise recalls. “After that, I ended up staying in touch with a lot of those local Vietnam veterans groups.”

Sinise’s portrayal of Lt. Dan has stuck with many service members and veterans. “It just portrayed many of the guys I know, or have known,” says retired Army Sgt. Michael G. Bailey of West Columbia, South Carolina, whose company consulted on *Forrest Gump*.

Sinise himself seems to have the measure of patience with the eternal life of the role. “Lieutenant Dan, you got your legs back!” Sinise has heard this famous Tom Hanks’ *Forrest Gump* line, oh, a gazillion times. Ex-contractor Leanne Miller credits Sinise on one particular stop at the U.S. Naval Recreation Facility Carney Park in Naples, Italy, when he heard the line “a few dozen times.” The actor was gracious and “quite patient” about it, signing hundreds of autographs and posing for pictures.

The worry that the country would re-enact the treatment of Vietnam veterans all over again spurred Sinise into action after September 11, 2001. “After we started to deploy out troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, I wanted to make sure—we all remember what happened to our Vietnam vets when they came home—I wanted to make sure we didn’t let that happen to our service members again. I wanted to show them as much support as I could,” Sinise said of his support. He credits his tireless efforts to help to the many troops he’s met along the way.

“I remember one of the first hospital visits I made. I saw a young man who had lost an arm and two legs. He was about 20 years old. He was from Micronesia. And he wanted to be an American, and went into the recruiter’s office in Guam. He signed up. He became an American Soldier. He was one of the first triple amputees that we had in the Iraq war. An amazing kid. I remember his dad being very courageous and supportive of his son. But that’s just one story.... They all stand out to me, the[se] folks are courageous individuals.”

Sinise’s inspiration to do more comes directly from servicemen and women he meets on the road. “I landed on the Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier, and went up on the bridge. This is a massive ship out in the middle of the Persian Gulf, with 5,000 sailors and Marines on board, driving around the Persian Gulf. And so the captain takes me over to the kid steering the ship—and it is a kid. It’s a 19-year-old steering the ship. ‘What are your friends doing back home while you’re here steering the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan?’ I asked.

‘They’re playing video games and just hanging out’ was the answer. So we have a 19-year-old kid steering the Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier around the Persian Gulf.”

Those who know Sinise see the awe and inspiration he has for the military firsthand. “Gary notices everything,” said Sloan Gibson, president of the USO. “His mind is always thinking of ways that he and others can do more to support our military no matter where in the world they are deployed. He watches how the military works together and understands the people who represent us. He really sets an example for all Americans to follow, not only through his words, but more important, through his actions.”

On a trip to Afghanistan, Sinise remembers being on the flightline watching a landing, “We have U-2 spy planes that go up for 10 hours with one person piloting it 70,000 feet in the air. The pilot has to wear a space suit because the plane is up so high.... So they roll the stairs up to the door [of the plane], and out walks the pilot in a space suit. Wayne Newton, myself, Chris Isaac, and a bunch of Dallas Cowboy’s cheerleaders are right here. The pilot walks by, takes off the helmet and—it’s a 27-year-old woman, piloting a U-2 spy plane up by herself up there. We have amazing, amazing people serving in our military doing incredible things that nobody ever even hears about. It’s a real motivator for me.”

Sinise’s motivation to support the military is not lost on service members—from generals to newly enlisted. At a Lt. Dan Band concert at the Pentagon last year, which was broadcast to bases around the world, it was the military paying tribute to Sinise.

“The opportunity to reach out and make a difference, just for a few minutes if for nothing else, in the lives of our Soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen deployed all around the world is something that is very special and a great opportunity,” said Marine Gen. James E. Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during his introduction of Sinise and the band. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Rene Rubiella, who played air guitar with the actor and musician at the concert, said of Sinise, “It’s people like Gary that... make us feel that we are appreciated and that we are loved and that there is a commitment from our nation that we are not forgotten. I am so grateful that people take the time to commit, to volunteer their time, and put on these events for our entertainment... It just means the world to you. It reaches your heart.” And Gary Sinise is all heart.— *Brendan Conway is a free-lance writer in New York City.*