

GARY SINISE'S REMARKS AT THE AMERICAN VETERANS DISABLED FOR LIFE MEMORIAL DEDICATION

Thank you.

And thank you Secretary Jewell for that kind introduction. Welcome everyone, and a special thank you to all our past and present military personnel here today. It is an honor to be in your presence.

First, I'd like to congratulate, Art and Lois and the Foundation Board of Directors who, after a 16-year effort, have brought this memorial to reality, a magnificent tribute to the most honored guests of all today, our injured veterans. And also a special acknowledgment to the late Jesse Brown.

I'm sure he is smiling today.

In his farewell address to the nation in 1988 Ronald Reagan said that, "All great change in America begins at the dinner table". It is clear what president Reagan meant. It is at these gatherings, often with family members that one respects and admires, who have experienced and sacrificed much in life, that one can have the meaningful conversations that stir our convictions, inspire us to action, and bring us to an understanding of what life is really all about.

In the late 1970's and early 80's, as a young man, I sat at that dinner table with the Vietnam veteran side of my wife's family and I began to receive an education of what they experienced during the war, how bravely they fought, and how they felt at the shameful way they were treated when they returned home. Imagine it being a risk to wear the uniform in public, as was the case for many returning from Vietnam. I'm sure some here today remember all too well.

My brother in law Jack Treese, a combat medic, passed away this

past Wednesday of cancer at age 68. He was like a brother to me and told me once how after his tour in Vietnam, upon arrival back in the States, he went into a stall in the airport bathroom to remove his uniform to change into his civilian clothes to keep from being stared at, or shouted at, or possibly spit on.

I will miss Jack dearly, and learned much from him. Listening to his stories, and the stories of the Vietnam veterans in my family, was an epiphany for me... it made me think hard about the precious gift of my own freedom and the price paid to secure it and I felt a strong sense of guilt, for being so oblivious as a young teenager to what our Vietnam veterans, many just slightly older than I, were going through. But it was out of this guilt and shame that a new mission began, a need to take action to do something to try to make a difference in the lives of those who serve.

In 1993, as I continued on my journey in theatre and film acting... good things came my way, and I was fortunate to have the opportunity to play wounded Vietnam veteran double amputee, Lt. Dan Taylor in the film Forrest Gump. That role led me to what is now a 20-year association with the Disabled American Veterans organization, and for the past 8 years the great privilege of acting as National Spokesperson for the American Veterans Disabled For Life Memorial Foundation, and this extraordinary tribute to our wounded that we dedicate today. (pause)

It was President Abraham Lincoln who said, "Any nation that does not honor its heroes, will not long endure." Today, and from this day forward, with the opening of this national monument, we honor millions of our heroes living with the wounds of war, with a place of healing, remembrance, and gratitude for all they have given, and by so doing, we help to ensure that our nation will endure for generations to come.

For if we do not remember our defenders, our heroes, how can we expect future generations to step up to serve? Certainly what happened post Vietnam, when we forgot our returning veterans, weakened our nation, and we must never EVER, let that happen

again. Remembering and honoring our veterans is paramount to our national security. This places a critical importance on always taking care of our military service members and their families *before, during,* and *after* the battle. The dangers of the 21st century are clear, with no doubt that this century will be equally, if not more dangerous than the previous one. The United States must maintain a strong defense, impossible to do, without strong defenders. And for all they've done, for all they have sacrificed, they ask so little in return. Knowing they are honored, that they will get the care they need when they need it, that they are not forgotten, and that their sacrifice is appreciated, can make a world of difference.

13 years ago, on that terrible September morning, little did we know that the coming years would bring us thousands of Gold Star families and an entire new generation of real life LT Dan's. We now have upwards of 4 million living with their injuries, wounded in America's wars, supported and looked after by our unsung heroes, America's caregivers. We cannot give these wounded veterans back their arms and legs. We cannot give them back their eyes, their ears, the pieces of themselves that have been lost, or the minds that have been altered. But we can give them – and we must give them – our respect, our everlasting thanks, and our support.

One of our great military leaders, retired Admiral William H. McRaven, a US Navy SEAL, gave the commencement speech last spring at his alma mater, the University of Texas.

Their motto at UT is...

“What starts here changes the world.”

And he gave lessons from what he learned in his SEAL training that the students could implement to change and influence the world around them as they graduated and went forth into society. One of those lessons was about having to swim under a ship at night and find the keel—the centerline and the deepest part of the ship. This is the darkest part of the ship—where you cannot see your hand in front of your face, where the noise from the ship's machinery is deafening and where it is easy for even a well-trained Navy SEAL to get

disoriented and fail. Admiral McRaven said,
"Every SEAL knows that under the keel, at the darkest moment of the mission—is the time when you must be the most calm and composed—when all your tactical skills, your physical power and all your inner strength must be brought to bear.

If you want to change the world, you must be your very best...in the darkest moment."

(pause)

We can never do enough for our nations freedom providers, our heroes, but we can always show them we appreciate what they have fought and sacrificed for, by doing a little bit more to give something back to them.

And as all Americans benefit from the freedom and security provided by our military community, very simply, if every citizen in every neighborhood in every community in every town and city in every state, would make it a priority to seek out and serve the needs of the veterans and military families within those communities, to have the courage to take determined action to walk with our veterans...many of whom have lived through the darkest moments of life in combat or have come home physically or mentally injured and may face many dark moments ahead ... if we, the people, will show our appreciation with a willingness to serve above self to help them move forward, just as LT Dan Taylor was able to do...then we will be at our very best, in someone else's darkest moment.

Thank you for allowing me to speak at this important dedication ceremony for the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. I am proud to have played some small role in supporting this effort. Thank you to all those brave warriors in attendance today for everything you have done for our country. May God bless all those still serving in harms way, our military families, and may God Bless, and watch over, our America and help us to continue to honor our heroes, so that we may long endure.

Thank you.