Gary Sinise, the bassist for the Lt. Dan Band, joins in the jam at Kunsan Air Base, South Korea. U.S. Air Force photo / Senior Airman Jonathan Steffen

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Sinise Unplugged

Actor Gary Sinise supports troops with his Lt. Dan Band

By Tara Puckey

Many actors try to distance themselves from the roles that made them famous, afraid of being typecast or looked over for other roles. But Gary Sinise embraces the bitter, self-destructive Vietnam veteran he portrayed so memorably in Forrest Gump, using the role and its recognition to build his reputation as a spokesperson for veterans and an advocate for wounded service members well before President George W. Bush awarded Sinise the Presidential Citizens Medal in 2008.

And it's a reputation he takes to heart.

"It's a dangerous world we live in, so it just seems a good thing to try and help keep these people strong because I'm not (out there) doing it," Sinise said. "I'm not out there living in a hole trying to chase bad guys around the dust of Afghanistan, but maybe I can play some music for their families while they're away or visit the wounded guys in the hospital and help them out. It's a good feeling to be able to do that."

Sinise volunteered for "handshake" tours with the USO shortly after 9/11, which took him to military bases to sign autographs and take photos with the troops.

"When I started visiting troops way early on in the war, I just found it to be almost a calling," said Sinise.

The Fox video diary, "On the Road in Iraq with our Troops and Gary Sinise," followed the actor on one of his several visits to Iraq and Afghanistan in Jan. of 2009. But there was more he could do, and he wasn't going to do it alone.

Since 2003, The Lt. Dan Band has played more then 70 shows at military bases around the world. Named after the Vietnam veteran Sinise played in the 1994 Academy Award-winning film Forrest Gump, the Lt. Dan Band was formed when Sinise met Kimo Williams during a production at The Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago.

"Kimo and I struck up a friendship," Sinise said. "He found out that I used to play a lot and so we got together at his house and we just started jamming."

Those jam sessions laid the groundwork for what would become a partnership with the USO as entertainers, and in Feb. 2004, the band traveled to Korea, Singapore and Diego Garcia. Domestic tours followed, with the band playing to packed venues of soldiers, sailors, airman and Marines.

But when Sinise started filming "CSI: New York" in 2004, long overseas tours weren't an option. That didn't stop him though.

Gary Sinise signs autographs after performing with the Lt. Dan Band at the Pentagon.
U.S. Navy Photo/ Molly A. Burgess

Sinise and bandmates perform for service members and their families in Great Lakes, Ill. Sinise is the United Services Organization of Illinois Goodwill Ambassador. U.S. Navy photo / Thomas Miller

"We just started doing weekend shows all around the country," Sinise said. "It turned into something that I'll do 10 to 15 times a year. It just became part of my mission to support the troops and help them through this time by not only visiting them and patting them on the back but actually entertaining them with the band."

Entertainment isn't the only thing Sinise contributes to the military. He works as a spokesperson for several military organizations like Snowball Express, an organization dedicated to providing memorable experiences to the children and families of fallen military heroes.

Sinise is also a spokesperson for the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, which raises money for a monument to honor America's three million living disabled veterans that will stand in Washington, D.C.

In 2009, Sinise teamed up with Kristy Swanson on behalf of Iraq Stars, Inc., to visit the American Choppers shop, where a bike was created for the foundation and then auctioned off to help fund reconstructive surgery for war veterans in hopes of helping better their quality of life.

As co-founders of Operation Iraqi Children, Sinise and author Laura Hillenbrand enabled Americans to send necessities and school supplies to children in Iraq. They have since renamed the organization Operation International Children and now provide supplies to children in many areas served by American troops worldwide, including Afghanistan.

As a successful working actor, Sinise's volunteer schedule carves even more time away from home. But his family remains incredibly supportive of his mission. With a nephew currently deployed to Afghanistan and military on all sides of the family, they understand how personal the connection can be.

"The lattes are still flowing at Starbucks, and gas is still pumping, and people go to movies and concerts and go about their day, but the people that are really feeling the sacrifice are the people who are in the military," he says.

Sacrifice is something Sinise acknowledges at hospital visits, which he does at least twice a year. From Palo Alto in California to Walter Reed in Washington, D.C., Sinise tries to bring hope to the wounded, embracing the fact that so many people relate to the double amputee he played in Forrest Gump.

Following a concert by the Lt. Dan Band in San Antonio in late 2009, Sinise accompanied Disabled American Veterans National Commander Roberto Barrera to the Brooke Army Medical Center and the Center for the Intrepid, where he spent time with hospitalized soldiers and their families.

"I wouldn't continue to do it if I didn't feel like it was making an impact or having a positive effect on the people I was visiting," Sinise said. "Every time I do it, it has an effect on me as well."

The professional side of Sinise is also linked to support of the military community. He was executive producer of the 2009 film *Brothers at War*, a portrait of one brother who travels to Iraq to film a documentary about why his two younger brothers are serving there. A hit in the eyes of critics, it was about more than just acclaim or box office dollars to Sinise.

He remains committed to supporting the men and women in uniform because he remembers. Whether it comes from memories committed during his life or the influence of his famous Gump character, the fear that America will recreate the treatment of Vietnam veterans with troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan is a driving force behind his support.

"I know all too well what they went through when they came home from war and we don't want that to happen again," he said. "We can't be a country that turns its back on our soldiers again."

But the main inspiration behind Sinise are the troops themselves.

"They don't make a lot of money doing this," Sinise said. "They struggle through these long deployments, they deal with injuries, they go through all kinds of grief and fear and difficult challenges and if me coming in there for a minute can brighten them up and help them out then it's a good feeling to know that a little time can make a difference."

And it does.

Tara Puckey is a freelance writer who lives in Indiana with her Army husband and two daughters.