Award-winning actor and veteran advocate Gary Sinise’s memoir details journey from self to service

In summer 1994, the recently released blockbuster “Forrest Gump” dominated the American box office. One of the movie’s main characters, Lieutenant Dan Taylor, is an Army officer who loses both of his legs in Vietnam. The role resonated with veterans, and the actor who portrayed Lt. Dan—Gary Sinise—was invited to the 1994 DAV National Convention, where he was presented with the National Commander’s Award. This moment, the actor writes in his new memoir, was more substantial to his life trajectory than he could have even imagined.

The Oscar-nominated actor—who also starred in hit movies “Apollo 13,” “Ransom” and “Truman” as well as TV drama “CSI:NY”—released his first book, “Grateful American: A
Journey from Self to Service,” in February. The book chronicles his life’s journey, “from aimless teen to an actor/director with a purpose: a mission to support and raise awareness for the men and women who selflessly put themselves in harm’s way in service to our country.”

“I am a grateful American for so many reasons,” said Sinise. “A big reason is because I value my freedom, and I know it has to be provided and protected. I’ve met great people in my life who have devoted their lives to service, and they have inspired me.”

Sinise writes in the book’s prologue about attending DAV’s national convention in 1994 and being stunned and humbled by the reaction he received for playing the role of Lt. Dan. He hadn’t realized the character would become a symbol to injured veterans.

“Little do I know how significant this moment at the convention will become in my life,” he wrote. “Seeds are being planted that will grow into a tree with many branches.”

Past National Commander Dick Marbes, who presented the award to Sinise at the convention, recalls the young actor being extremely humble about the honor.

“I remember that day well. But I would never have guessed then, nearly a quarter of a century ago, that the young man we recognized onstage would go on to do so much good for veterans,” said Marbes, who chairs the DAV Charitable Service Trust. “I remember he seemed a little concerned at the time. I don’t know if he was afraid his ‘warts and glory’ approach to the role would offend anyone. But as an amputee myself, I was amazed by his performance, and the Vietnam veterans seemed to identify very closely with his redemptive portrayal of Lt. Dan.”

Sinise comes from a military family—his uncle Jack Sinise was a B-17 navigator during World War II—and shares in his book
about the impact of those who served in Vietnam. He said their stories have motivated him to do whatever it takes to show service members and veterans they are appreciated and supported, and to not let the mistakes of our nation happen to another generation of veterans.

“Whether you’re in support of a particular war or not, do not let that affect your support of the men and women who go off to fight those wars,” Sinise said. “They sign on regardless of who is in the White House. I feel that if they’re going to do that, and they’re going to provide a defense for me and my family, with regards to the freedom that I enjoy, then I can take some responsibility for making sure that they know that I appreciate them.”

Since the early ’80s, Sinise has been an advocate for the military community. At the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago—co-founded by Sinise—veterans are offered free dinners and performances on Vets Night, a program founded more than 30 years ago. However, Sinise said the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks inspired him to do more than just help out “here and there.”

“I just started raising my hand where I could,” he said. “One of the first things I did was volunteer for the USO. Here I am, an actor, an entertainer, and I wanted to go visit the troops in Iraq. I wanted to go around the world and let them know they were appreciated.”

During those years, Sinise said he was involved with 25 or 30 programs designed to help, in various ways, their military members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Whatever it was, I was just trying to reach out as far and wide as I could to help as many different organizations as I could,” he said.

In 2004, he took his love of music and formed his band, Gary Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band, who have performed for the military and veteran communities around the world.
By 2011, it made sense to Sinise to funnel the energy of his personal mission to do all he could to support wounded heroes and their families, consolidate his volunteer work and become more effective. This led to the creation of the Gary Sinise Foundation.

“It just became clear that this was a game that I was in to play for a long time, and starting a foundation, an organization, a military charity, a nonprofit, would be the next logical step for me,” he said.

In the book, he details the experiences he’s had with countless wounded veterans over the years, many of whom are DAV members.

“I try to tell the inspirational stories of the people I’ve met, who’ve been injured in battle, and who have overcome those injuries,” Sinise said.

The DAV Charitable Service Trust has supported The Gary Sinise Foundation over the years, donating funds to help them as they build technologically advanced “smart” homes for disabled veterans, foster mentorship opportunities between older and younger wounded veterans through programs like Boulder Crest, and much more.

Sinise said his relationship with DAV is something he holds near and dear, and the work the organizations can do together has unlimited potential.

“I count [my] association [with DAV] as very significant in my journey to help our veterans,” he said. “I’ve always been honored and privileged to support DAV and to meet so many extraordinary heroes who have sacrificed so much for us. I never take it for granted for one second. I want them to always know that their sacrifices do not go unnoticed, or unremembered. I thank God every day for the men and women who serve our country. And I’ll always try to do a little more to make sure they know that they have a grateful American
supporting them here.”