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## Cane do attitude: Daughter finds practical honor for WWII vet dad

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**Tom Sistak**

World War II veteran Gilbert Pote, in civilian clothes, is presented with an Eagle Project Cane on Friday afternoon by (from left) American Legion Post 33 Commander Jim Nanowski, Sergeant at Arms Bob Cupples and Senior Vice Commander Roger Schueler.  
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Charles Stanley, [charless@mywebtimes.com](mailto:charless@mywebtimes.com), 815-431-4063 | [0 comments](#)

The wily ways of a determined daughter prevailed with a military flourish Friday afternoon.

A year ago, Theresa Pote thought her World War II veteran father, Gilbert Pote, 92, of rural Ottawa, would benefit from using a cane for balance. But he refused.

However, she was not ready to give up. Aware that he regularly wore a cap that identified him as a World War II veteran, it set Theresa thinking.

"I decided the only way he would use a cane is if it somehow said World War II on it," she told The Times.

"I probably looked for one for a year and called I don't know how many places," she said.

Finally she happened on the Eagle Cane Project.

In 2004, retired Navy Chief Petty Officer Jack Nitz, an Oklahoma woodcarver and cane maker, was inspired to show appreciation to the young soldiers suffering leg wounds and amputations from service in Iraq.

His thought was to create "presentation" canes, once a custom for leg amputees from the Civil War.

Soon the project — dubbed the Eagle Cane Project because the canes typically are topped with the head of a bald eagle — spread to other states.

Over the years, the criteria for a cane was expanded to include some veterans of other wars.

"I wrote to them and asked them if they would make an exception for my dad, and they agreed," said Theresa.

In Illinois, cane maker Gene Henrikson, of Walnut, who has created many of the Eagle canes, agreed to fashion one for Gilbert Pote.



The cane, with a cherry shaft and mahogany handle, is inscribed with Pote's name and his years of service from 1942-46. Beneath a shoulder patch for the 103rd Infantry Division he served with is his unit, Company M of the 411th Infantry Regiment.

Theresa kept the cane a secret until a half-hour before the arrival of three members of Ottawa American Legion Post 33, who agreed to make the official presentation.

"He was mad," said Theresa, arching her eyebrows.

But Gilbert Pote also was gracious when Post 33 Commander Jim Nanowski, Senior Vice Commander Roger Schueler and Sergeant at Arms Bob Cupples dressed in their Legion uniforms met him in his living room and Nanowski made the presentation.

"It's to commemorate your World War II service in the Army, and we're really proud to be presenting this to you," said Nanowski.

After the inscription was reviewed, Theresa encouraged her father to give the cane a try. To her relief, it nicely filled the space between his hand and the floor.

"You don't know what a hard time I had trying to figure out how tall you are," she told her father.

Cupples and Schueler offered their thanks to Pote for his service, and Schueler added some words of appreciation to Theresa.

"In today's society, veterans are not always remembered," Schueler said. "It's people like you who make us feel good."

Pote grew up on the South Side of Chicago and joined the Army in World War II. His first overseas duty was in Africa. Then he arrived in France at the port city of Marseilles, and proceeded through France and into Germany, seeing action along the way.

One close call he recalled was an artillery shell landing near his jeep but turning out to be a dud.

"If it had gone off that would have been the end of us," he said.

At the end of the war Pote was hospitalized with a service-connected kidney problem which kept him in the Army longer than expected.

When he got out his rank was private first class.

"My highest rank was staff sergeant — but that's another story," Pote said.

Discharged and then married in 1946, he and his wife, Lorraine, bought the first of the two houses they would live in for 46 years in the Chicago south suburb of Markham.

With a family of five daughters — Theresa was the fourth — Pote decided to go to college and earned a degree from Purdue University by attending night school classes.

He worked for a company that manufactured high pressure boilers and incinerators and later became the director of engineering at Ingalls Memorial Hospital in Harvey.

Pote became familiar with La Salle County when he and his wife would visit a daughter who liked to stay at the Thousand Trails campground near Sheridan.

"We liked it so well we started looking for a house," he said.

It turned out a house north of Ottawa on Terra Cotta Road with a big lot that he often had passed and admired was on the market.

"So we bought it and moved in 1992," he said. "I've loved it since the minute we got out here."

- **TO SEE** other Eagle Cane Project canes presented to Illinois veterans visit [eaglecane.com/ftp.eaglecane/Recipients/Pages/Illinois.html](http://eaglecane.com/ftp.eaglecane/Recipients/Pages/Illinois.html).  
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