

Honoring Our Wounded Heroes

By Neil Kagan

It is a simple gesture in contrast to such heroic action. A cane, turned on a lathe and topped with a handle carved in the shape of an eagle's head, is presented to a wounded warrior. "This cane is not to be seen as any sign of weakness," says Hank Cloutier, coordinator of the Eagle Cane Project for the Washington, D.C. area, to the recipient. "It is a sign of respect and honor and thanks for your personal sacrifice."

According to Cloutier, an Air Force retiree, cane-presentation ceremonies date back to the Civil War. The eagle carved into the cane is symbolic, Cloutier explains: "Native Americans believed when a warrior falls on the battlefield his spirit will return as an eagle."

On this cold Sunday in January, the Walter Reed Army Medical Center is packed with wounded warriors, their families, and young children. "We're fighting an enemy you can't see," says David Nieves, who was injured near Camp Liberty in Baghdad. "We are fighting a ghost you don't see." Nieves, like other soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, found that his armored vehicle offered little protection against IEDs, or improvised explosive devices. Unfortunately, he adds, "explosives cut through the armor like paper."

In spite of all they have been through, many of the soldiers at the presentation ceremony remain



The Capital Area Woodturners and Northern Virginia Carvers created these Eagle Canes for soldiers at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The eagle, strong and powerful, has come to embody the spirit of freedom in America. According to legend at one of the first battles of the American Revolution, the noise of the early morning struggle awoke the sleeping eagles. They flew raucously from their nests and circled over the heads of the fighting men. The patriots looked up and said "they are shrieking for freedom."

hopeful. Sgt. First Class Confesor Montanez looks forward to returning to his family in Puerto Rico after 33 years in the Army, including time spent in Special Forces. Pfc. Michael Dinkel, who lost his leg in Afghanistan when an explosion sent the transmission of his vehicle hurtling through the floorboard and out the roof, is walking well on his titanium leg and hopes to be back running

"You have given me not only a much-needed tool, necessary for my mobility, but also a constant reminder, as I walk with your cane, of the goodness that lies in the hearts of mankind. . . . A reminder that what I did, sacrificed, and physically and mentally gave of myself, mattered."

—Sgt. First Class Gordon L. Ewell

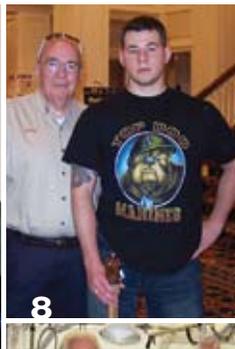
soon. Ray Nennagir, who lost both his legs in an explosion near Zaidon, Iraq, takes heart from the presence of his wife and child, who have been at his side during his recovery at Walter Reed.

The soldiers treasure the eagle canes and feel honored that thoughtful Americans have taken the time to handcraft an object that, like the Purple Hearts awarded them, will stand as mementos of their service and sacrifice. One of the cane recipients, Sgt. First Class Gordon L. Ewell, wrote what he described as a very humble thank-you:

“You have given me not only a much-needed tool, necessary for my mobility, but also a constant reminder, as I walk with your cane, of the goodness that lies in the hearts of mankind. It’s a reminder of the spirit of volunteerism and service to others. A reminder that what I did, sacrificed, and physically and mentally gave of myself, mattered. But most of all, a reminder that with every step I take, there is hope and the desire and inspiration to push forward...to take that next step... to recover, live, to love...to enjoy the life that I am blessed to still have and my beautiful wife and family that I love so dearly. You have given me not only a cane, but a small miracle I can feel, in the palm of my hand, and a family heirloom that will be treasured by my family for generations...for generations after the long life I have a desire to live, love, and enjoy.”

Cane presentations

The montage of informal cane presentation photos, *right*, reflects a cross section of America’s wounded heroes. Jack Nitz, a member of the Eastern Oklahoma Woodcarver’s Association (EOWA) (Photo 1), initiated the Eagle Cane Project in 2004 to honor wounded warriors at Walter Reed and the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda, Maryland. Working with EOWA, the NE Oklahoma Woodturners helped get the program started by turning cane shafts. The project has since spread to woodcarving and woodturning clubs in 25 states and has produced more than 600 handcrafted canes.



1. Jeffery Hudgens USMC is honored by his former Boy Scout troop in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Jack Nitz, founder of the Eagle Cane Project, is the second from left.

2. SPC Evan Mettie's mother receives an eagle cane on behalf of her son from Richard Hamilton at the Palo Alto VA Hospital, California.

3. Sgt. David Emery Jr. with daughter receives a cane from Ted Nettles.

4. Cpl. Alexander Buitron

5. SPC Crystal Davis receives a cane from Don Patterson.

6. Adrian Garcia

7. G/ Sgt. Tai Cleveland receives a cane from Pete Ward, a member of the Northern Virginia Carvers and Capital Area Woodturners.

8. Cpl. Chris Malone with Hank Cloutier, coordinator of the Eagle Cane Project, Washington, D.C. area.

9. SPC Derek Weida 82nd Airborne with woodcarver Harold Joseph.

10. SPC Travis Webb

11. E-3 Demario Hicks and family

12. Staff Sgt. Daniel Pena and mother

13. Sgt. Luis Rivera

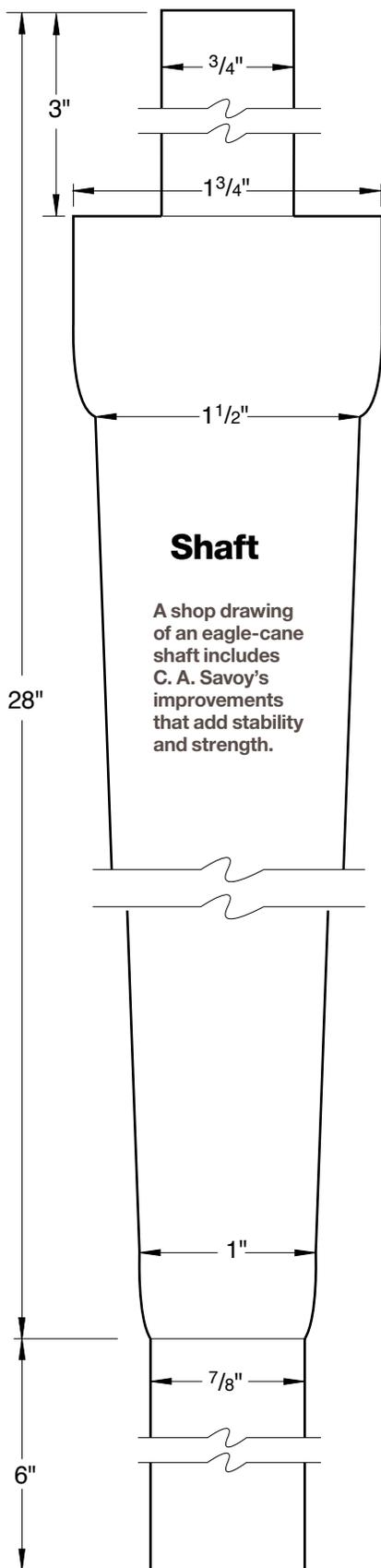
14. Sgt. First Class Gloria Santos

15. Sgt. Gilberto Santiago

16. Maj. Alea Morningstar

17. E-3 Abelino Gomez and mother

18. SPC Michael Cameron and family



How to create an Eagle Cane: An opportunity for collaboration in wood

In October 2006, Northern Virginia carver Hank Cloutier heard about the Eagle Cane Project and Jack Nitz's effort to get carvers and turners involved across the nation.

Hank learned that if a soldier from a state is injured, then carvers and turners from that state could make a presentation cane for that soldier.

Hank forged a collaboration between his carving club and the Capital Area Woodturners. C. A. Savoy, a master woodturner and operations director for the chapter, went to work with Hank by cutting turning blanks out of maple, walnut, oak, and ash, and recruiting fellow turners to join the effort. C. A. adjusted the shop drawings downloaded from eaglecane.com, making the cane shaft stronger and more stable. C. A. presented cane-turning demonstrations and hands-on direction to turners in the bimonthly skill



Mount a kiln-dried 2x2x37" blank between centers. (Hardwoods such as maple, walnut, oak, and ash work best.) Using a spindle roughing gouge, C. A. Savoy brings the bottom half of the cane into round by working from the tailstock toward the headstock.

sessions he runs for the Capital Area Woodturners.

In the meantime, Hank and the Northern Virginia Carvers went to work carving eagle heads, as described on page 32. He received donated materials and supplies from local companies including Woodcraft and North Land Forest Products. People were happy to pitch in and in some small way say "thanks" for the heroic efforts of our soldiers.



Hank Cloutier, left, and C. A. Savoy personify the spirit of the Eagle Cane Project that brings together talented carvers and woodturners across America to make handcrafted canes to honor wounded veterans. So far, the Northern Virginia Carvers and Capital Area Woodturners have created more than 80 presentation canes. As a result of the collaboration, carvers are learning woodturning, and woodturners are learning how to carve.



2
Once the bottom half of the cane is in the round, use a steady rest in the center for stability. Make sure all three wheels move smoothly. Continue to bring the cane into round and begin to taper the bottom half (see Shaft Drawing *opposite*).



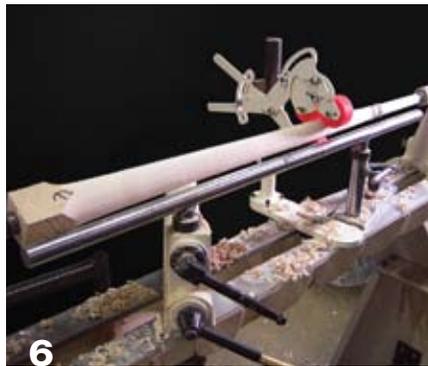
3
Measure 6" from bottom, reduce surface to $\frac{7}{8}$ " diameter. An easy way to ensure that your diameter will be even is to use a parting tool with calipers locked at $\frac{7}{8}$ ", making cuts every few inches, *above*. Then reduce the remaining surface to the depth of the cuts.



4
Directly above the 6" measurement, create decorative beads and coves, giving the cane character and forming the bottom half of a frame for the veteran's personal information as described in Step 10.



5
Using a skew, refine the taper of the bottom half of the cane. The steady rest, *right*, makes turning long objects like canes manageable. Because the wood turns smoothly (free of wobble), you can make delicate finish cuts concentrating on one half of the cane at a time.



6
Move the steady rest toward the tailstock, bring the top half of the cane into round, and taper according to drawing *opposite*. C. A. designed a custom 36"-long tool rest with an extra post and banjo to make turning long objects like canes easier and more efficient.



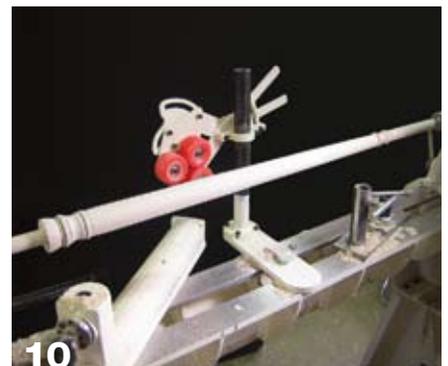
7
Measure 3" from top of cane. At the 3" mark, reduce the surface to $1\frac{3}{4}$ " and refine the taper of the top half of the cane to blend smoothly into the bottom half, see drawing. To the right of the 3" mark, create beads and coves to complement those at the bottom of the cane.



8
Using a stainless-steel wire, define the shape of the beads and coves by placing the wire on the turning wood. By applying pressure, the wood will burn, setting off your design and complementing the wood burning that will personalize the cane, Step 10.



9
Reduce the top 3" of the cane to a $\frac{3}{4}$ " diameter to accommodate the eagle head. When the eagle head is placed on the cane, the shaft will need to be cut so the eagle fits flush or a decorative transition collar can be used to fill the space, see *page 33*.



10
The cane is now ready to be finished. Use full sheets of sandpaper folded in half and sand using grits from 150 through 400. Remove the cane from lathe and personalize cane by woodburning the soldier's name, branch, rank, date, and place of injury. Then coat with a clear finish of your choice. If the cane is for a short individual, remove excess wood from the bottom of the cane. For stability, add a $\frac{7}{8}$ " rubber chair tip to the end of the cane.

Carve the eagle head

Once the cane is turned, it is ready for the eagle head and to be personalized by wood burning the shaft with the soldier's name, branch, rank, date, and place of injury. In the collaboration between the Northern Virginia Carvers and Capital Area Woodturners, the carvers created all the eagle heads, wood burned the soldier's personal information on the shaft, and finished the canes with oil or lacquers. Using the eagle head drawings, *opposite*, and Pete Ward's step-by-step carving tips, *right*, you can carve eagle heads from soft basswood or butternut by using carving knives or gouges. Use power tools and carbide burrs to carve hardwoods such as walnut or cherry.



Get Started in Carving

Since carving knives and gouges are extremely sharp and can easily slip off the carving surface into the hand that holds a small object like the eagle head, special carving gloves, *above*, are an absolute must. A heavy-duty leather work glove covering your support hand works well when power carving. High-speed carbide burrs can also skip off the carving surface. Additional power-carving essentials include a fan to blow the dust away from the face, eye protection, and a dust mask or respirator.



PREPARE THE CARVING BLANK

Trace the profile of the eagle on a 2"-thick board. Use basswood or butternut for hand-carving, walnut or cherry for power-carving. Mark the position of the eye with an awl and drill a small hole through the board. Cut the profile of the eagle on a bandsaw; save the excess wood from the top of the head. Turn head over, draw pattern of eagle head as seen from below (*opposite center*) and mark the center of the hole. Using the excess wood from the top for stability, cradle the eagle head and drill a $\frac{3}{8}$ " hole 2" deep. While the head is upside down and cradled, follow the pattern and cut the profile on the bandsaw to shape the beak and to round off the back of the neck.



ROUGH-CARVE THE HEAD

Referring to a photograph of a bald eagle as a guide, shape the bird by rounding all edges. Make sure the sides of the top of the head are well rounded so that it fits comfortably in your hand. Draw a line to define the prominent brow of the eagle (*opposite top*). Undercut the line to create the distinctive profile of an eagle.



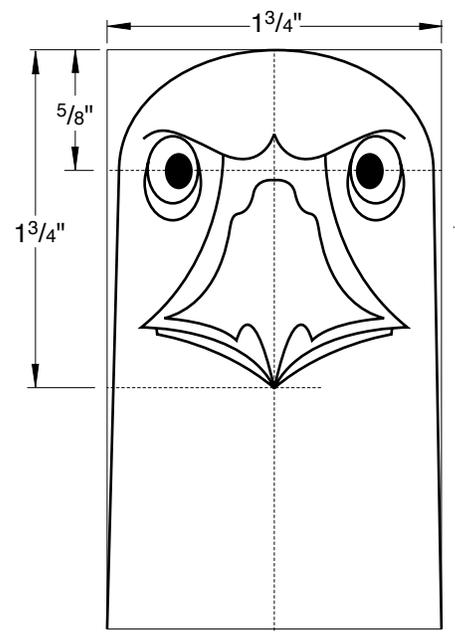
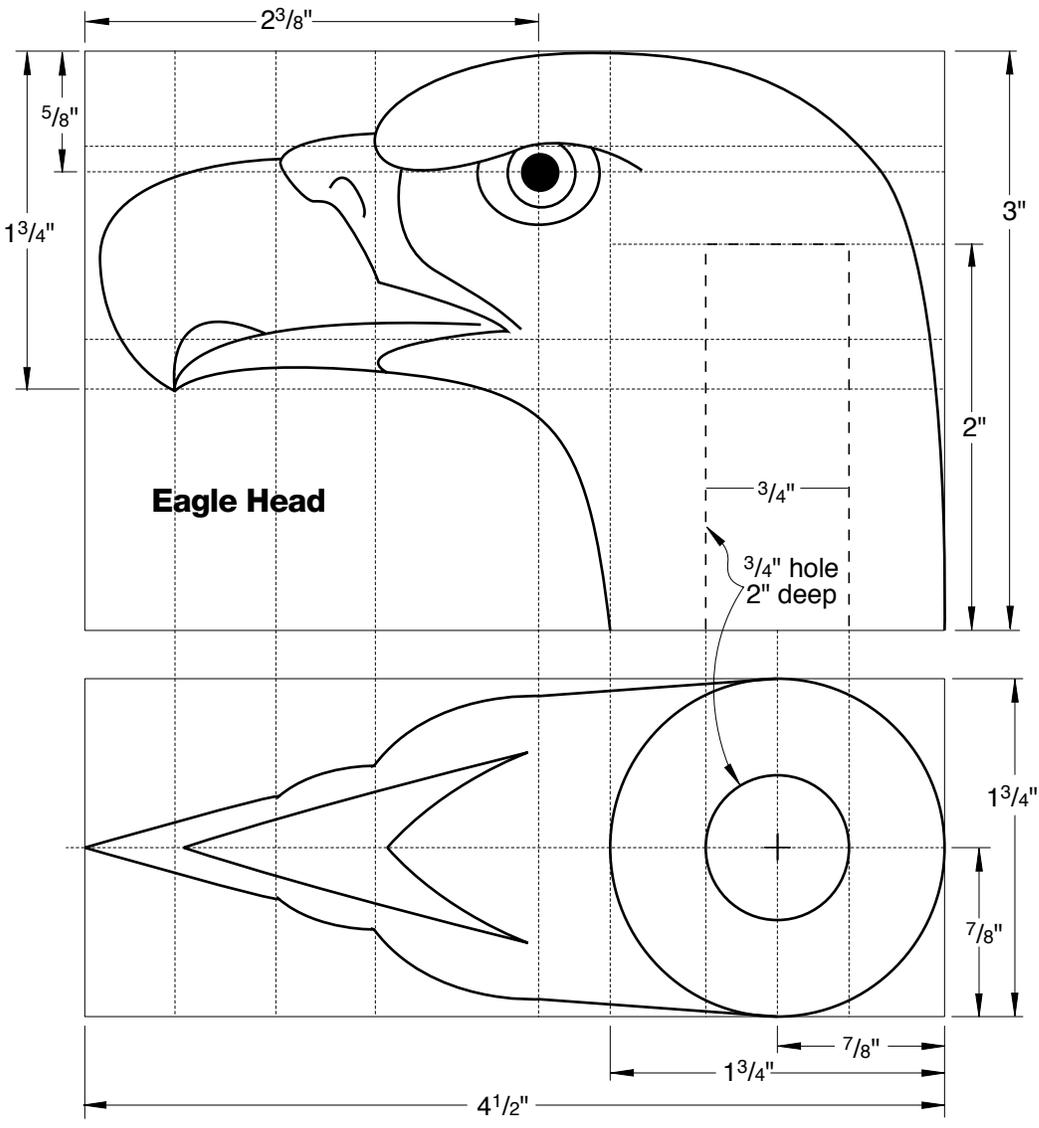
DEFINE THE EAGLE

Using a $\frac{3}{8}$ " Forstner bit, drill each eye $\frac{1}{4}$ " deep. Sand eagle head with 120-grit sandpaper and then burn or carve outline of beak and nostrils, defining the character of the eagle.

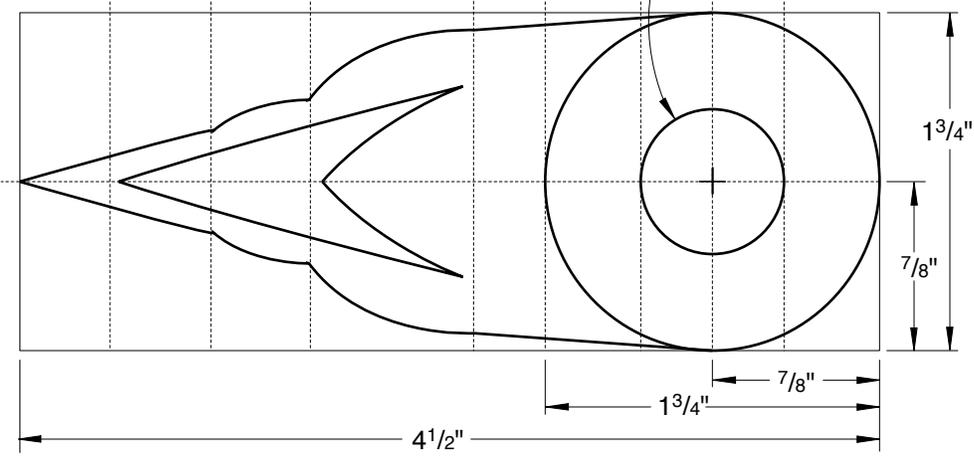


ADD FINISHING TOUCHES

Create the look and texture of eagle feathers by carving or woodburning. Using sandpaper or a carving knife, round off the eye holes to recess eyes. Unpainted eagle heads finished with oil or clear lacquer are best for daily use. To paint a bald eagle apply white and yellow paint as shown *opposite*. Then apply a clear finish. (Over time, paint will wear off of functional canes.) Insert glass eyes using epoxy or Quickwood. Use brown eyes for unpainted, natural wood eagles. Use yellow eyes for bald eagles that are painted white. One source of glass eyes is G. Schoepfer Inc. (schoepferseyes.com).



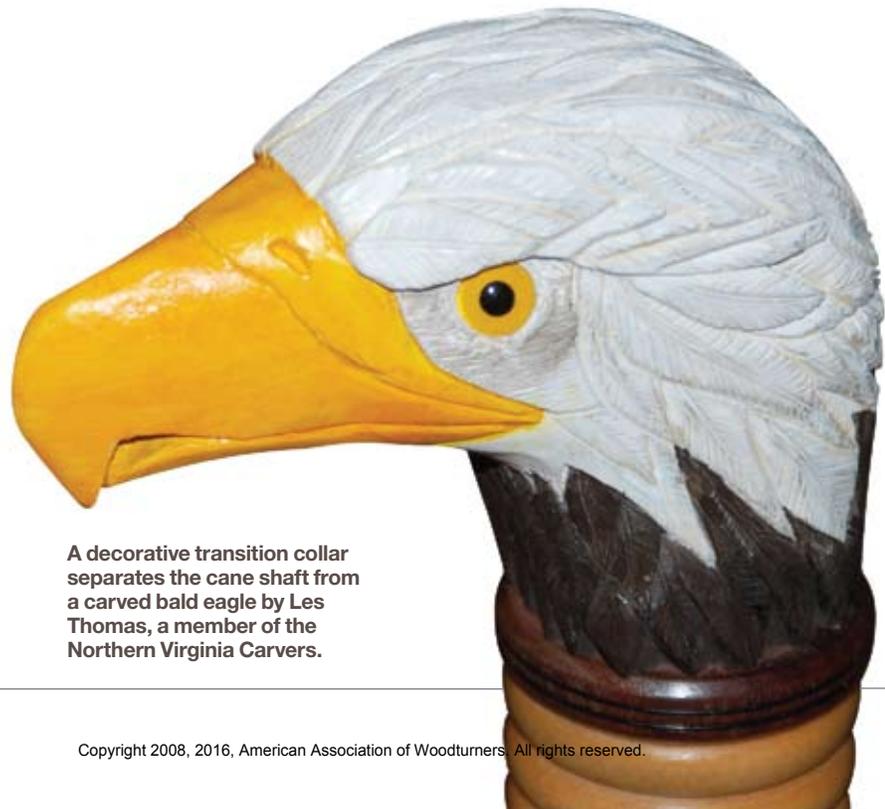
Rusty Johnson, Eastern Oklahoma Woodcarver's Association, created these drawings (free download available at eaglecane.com).



How Your Turning Club Can Help Honor Our Wounded Warriors

One way to get started creating an Eagle Cane for a wounded veteran is to contact National Program Director Jack Nitz (thehickoryhiker@gmail.com). Jack will offer advice, tips, and contacts with local carving clubs. He will also contact you to coordinate the placement of your canes with veterans from your home state. For more details, see eaglecane.com, which includes cane plans and an eagle-head tutorial. Finally, talk to your lumberyards and woodworking-supply companies to obtain donations.

Neil Kagan (NKagan1@aol.com) lives in Falls Church, VA. He's a member of the Capital Area Woodturners and the Northern Virginia Carvers.



A decorative transition collar separates the cane shaft from a carved bald eagle by Les Thomas, a member of the Northern Virginia Carvers.