

Enger gives an uplifting gift to wounded soldiers

Portland, N.D. man makes walking sticks for veteran amputees

PORTLAND, N.D. — Denis Enger has provided lifts to about 250 American soldiers who were wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, most of them amputees. The lifts are both physical and emotional.

Doing the literal and figurative lifting are walking sticks, which have been embraced by the recipients at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C.



Enger

On Thursday, Dan Stenvold of Park River, N.D., witnessed the gifts of lifts at Walter Reed for the third time, an experience that never gets less emotional. The North Dakota president of Vietnam Veterans of America, Stenvold has been at Walter Reed all three times that Enger's walking sticks have been awarded.

"They put a smile on their faces," Stenvold said. "You can see it in their eyes that they realize someone cares enough about them to give them this."

But it's more than just the thought that counts. A walking sticking has utility, with greater practical value than a cane. Stenvold and Enger tell about the times when, using the stick, amputees are able to lift themselves from their wheelchair for the first time. They tell about how double amputees, using two walking sticks, are able to walk.

One instance came Thursday. "A double amputee is hobbling around on a cane, but he grabs two walking sticks and he walks across



Ryan Bakken

rbakken@gfherald.com

the room like he's cross country skiing," Stenvold said.

They not only have more value, but they're cooler. Canes are for old people. Walking sticks are for the young. They're "classy," several recipients have said.

Mokie Porter, a Maryland member of the VAA, saw the value Thursday. "They are so beautiful, with so much handiwork that they're almost alive," she said.

The walking sticks are respectful. "We don't look at these kids as cripples. We look at them as heroes," Enger said.

It all started about two years ago, when Enger learned that the grandson of longtime pal and childhood neighbor Carl Olson had lost a leg in Iraq two years ago. Enger, himself an Army veteran who served in the Vietnam War era, knew he had to do something. But what?

A conversation with an amputee suggested walking sticks. So, he made 50, and Stenvold delivered them in April 2007. Stenvold said the response was so emotional that Enger needed to experience it first hand.

So, Enger made and personally delivered another 100 on Veterans Day in 2007. It was going to be his last batch. "But I looked at Dan after we handed them out and said, 'I can't quit because these kids are too unbelievable.'

"They were hugging us and thanking us. I'm going to

do this as long as the war goes on. I would like to never have to do this again."

The value of the sticks is high, but the biggest investment is Enger's time.

The process starts with a trip to rural Drake, N.D., to cut what Enger calls "swamp willow." Although other wood varieties will work, swamp willow is desirable because it grows straight and has an abundance of the desired size — 1½ inches in diameter — that fits comfortably within a closed fist.

Using a razor blade knife, he strips the bark. The sticks then spend the next four months in his garage being dried by fans. The family vehicles have been relegated to the outdoors to make room for the operation.

Once they're dry, they're sanded three times until they're smooth. Following are the stain, five coats of polyurethane and another sanding. A leather strap and a North Dakota quarter are then attached.

Each walking stick takes close to five hours of labor, meaning Enger more than 1,000 hours invested. The Vietnam Veterans of North Dakota organization has donated \$1,000 for materials and shipping.

Vietnam veterans were greeted with scorn when they came home from war. Vietnam vets now are among those now who are making sure the same fate won't greet those who return from the Middle East.

"When we hand them out, we thank them for serving their country," Enger said.

Reach Bakken at (701) 780-1125; (800) 477-6572, ext. 125; or send e-mail to rbakken@gfherald.com.