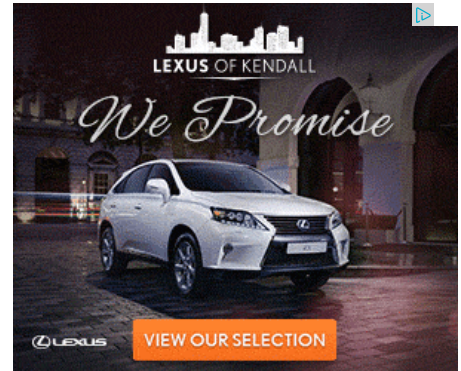


# Grit and granite: A monument to disabled veterans

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Tom Potts, 89, and at boot camp at age 17. Potts, of Salem County, suffered severe hearing loss while serving on a destroyer on D-Day. (MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer)



**GALLERY: Next Sunday in Washington, the American Veterans Disabled...**

By Edward Colimore, Inquirer Staff Writer

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At one point during the chaos and carnage of D-Day, the USS Frankford sailed so close to Omaha Beach that it scraped bottom.

The destroyer's big guns blasted German machine-gun positions and helped pinned-down GIs advance on June 6, 1944, when all seemed lost.

Tom Potts, then a teenager from Moorestown, was manning an antiaircraft gun on the Frankford's deck amid the cacophony of fire - and lost most of his hearing that day 70 years ago.

After numerous surgeries and hearing aids, the now-89-year-old from Upper Pittsgrove, Salem County, still has trouble following conversations and is among four million disabled service members who returned home with the lingering effects of war.

Next Sunday, all of them will be honored with the dedication of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial in Washington.

The 2.4-acre triangular site - across from the U.S. Botanic Garden and about 1,000 feet from the Capitol - uses granite and glass to communicate the strength and vulnerability of service members.

An eternal flame, star-shaped fountain, reflecting pool, four bronze relief sculptures, and 48 laminated glass panels with text and images tell a story of sacrifice.

"I think it's a great idea to honor disabled veterans," Potts said. "I'd love to see the memorial."

The \$85 million project is a dream come true for Philadelphia native and philanthropist Lois Pope, who devoted nearly two decades of her life to it - ever since her visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1995.

She was there to find the name of her cousin who died in the war and remembered seeing a multiple-amputee crying and struggling to lay flowers at the polished black granite wall.

"I went over to hold him," said Pope, who was born in Philadelphia's Germantown section and grew up in Cheltenham. "As I was

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turning to go, I saw a Park Service ranger and asked him where the memorial to disabled veterans was.

"His answer was that there wasn't one. That did it. That was the catalyst that sent me on a quest that turned into an obsession to build the memorial."

The seeds of the idea were planted about 30 years earlier when, as a young Broadway actress, Pope joined a group of performers entertaining soldiers one day at the Rusk Rehabilitation Center in New York.

"It was jammed with men lying on gurneys," she said. "Some had no ears or noses; they had been burned all over.

"They were hobbling on crutches, and amputees were sitting in wheelchairs. I began singing the song 'Somewhere' from *West Side Story*, and as I sang that line 'Hold my hand and we're halfway there; hold my hand and I'll take you there,' I reached out to hold a young soldier's hand, and he had no hand for me to hold."

Five days a week

The experience left a lasting impression that turned into a commitment after the 1995 visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Pope, widow of National Enquirer founder Generoso Pope Jr., phoned then-U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jesse Brown five days a week for five months - until her persistence paid off and he took her call.

"How come there's no memorial to disabled veterans in Washington?" she asked him. "Would you help me?"

Pope and Brown formed a foundation in 1998 to begin collecting contributions for the work. She provided \$10 million. The 1.2 million-member Disabled American Veterans contributed another \$10 million toward their own memorial. Other donations from companies and individuals brought the total to more than \$80 million.

"The hard part was raising the money," said Pope, 81, a Manalapan, Fla., resident who has a brother in Media. "We were committed to doing this without the U.S. taxpayer.

"You should know I had many restless days and nights, wondering if we would ever be able to accomplish our goal," she said. "This required a bit of arm-twisting and commissions you had to go back to again and again."

In the end, all the hard work was worth it. Pope expects the memorial to be one of the most visited sites in Washington.

The five points of the star-shaped fountain represent the services: Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard.

Compelling

The panels, designed by the Philadelphia firm of Cloud Gehshan, and sculptures by Washington artist Larry Kirkland portray the disabled veteran's call to service, trauma, challenge of healing, recovery, and discovery of new purpose. Michael Vergason Landscape Architects Ltd., of Alexandria, Va., conceived the overall design.

The memorial "increases awareness and provides recognition" that hopefully will encourage employers to hire more disabled veterans, said former Navy officer Cauldon Quinn, a Chester Springs resident who was injured during his service from 1997 to 2002. "It could be part of the process.

"What I find compelling about this is that this initiative started 20 years ago," said Quinn, 42, the managing director of the Center City broker dealer firm Drexel Hamilton. "There are a lot of Johnny-come-latelies and a lot of bumper stickers, but this is not something that just happened.

"The country has finally separated the disdain for what politicians do with the military and the service member who sacrifices himself for his country," he said. "Our country loves the soldier and hates the war; that's a positive evolution."

The memorial can be part of the healing of disabled veterans and project the public's support for them, veterans said.

"Anything to help them is good," said Simon Roman, 59, a Northeast Philadelphia man who was serving in the Marines in the 1970s when he fell from a cliff during a training exercise in Okinawa and seriously injured his back. He's now 100 percent disabled. "I do want to see the memorial."

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