



# Spotlight on the District

## Joe Cotton Lock and Dam Operator

By Mark A. Kane, Public Affairs

On a brisk Sunday afternoon in December 1998 at approximately 5 O'clock a vehicle traveling at 70 mph struck another vehicle stopped at an intersection located south of Willington, Ill. The driver collided with Joe Cotton's car crushing both of his legs. In that one moment, Cotton's life was changed forever.

Cotton, a Lock and Dam operator at Brandon Road Lock and Dam, suffered extensive injuries in the automobile accident and he was unable to work from December 1998 to August 1999. Although many District employees have never met Cotton, they've had an impact on his life.

"There's a lot of people that donated their leave, almost six months of leave from people all over," said Cotton. "When I came back I only owed one week of leave ... I couldn't believe it."

After a great deal of therapy, rehabilitation and hard work Cotton returned to the lock and dam on light duty and continues to contribute to the mission.

"He's a team player, gets along well with everyone and he knows a little bit about everything," said Bob Smolka, Brandon Road Lock and Dam lockmaster.

"He's a very likeable guy and his personality sets him apart from everybody else. He doesn't get upset about anything and has a good outlook on life."

Cotton has such a good outlook on life that he's not even upset with the individual that put him in the hospital more than a year ago.

"Everyone said 'you should sue,' but he didn't do it intentionally and people can't understand why I have such a good attitude," said Cotton.

His positive attitude toward life has gone far beyond a daily collection of frequent smiles.

"I think he's really rubbed off on a lot of the other people since what he went through," said Smolka. "If they've ever (been prone to)

complain about anything, now they don't."

As his lockmaster readily points out, Cotton does a little bit of everything at Brandon Road Lock and Dam, but his main job and love is being a lock operator.

"When a boat flattens out on the lock-wall I catch the line, they get flat, I guide them in the lock and take responsibility of getting that done ... I love the job and being outside," said Cotton. "I meet a lot of people and learn something new

everyday. It's a very interesting job ... I wish I was here 20 years ago."

Cotton has worked for the Corps since October 1994 and has been married for 33 years. His wife works with the local Veterans of Foreign Wars, Post 5422, in Willington, Ill., and is the 18th District President for the Women's Auxiliary. He is also involved with the local VFW, and was recently selected to be the Post Commander.

Cotton spent four years in the Navy from October 1960 to December 1964. In that time he made four cruises at sea. He excelled at his job serving as a Machinist's Mate and was promoted to Petty Officer Second Class before he left the active duty ranks. Cotton was awarded the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal for serving overseas during time of war.

Although Navy life may not relate directly to the Corps of Engineers, Cotton says the experience served him well.

"I graduated from high school, but I got my education in the Navy," said Cotton. "I learned how to get along with people in the service. In fact, I met my best friend in the Navy and I still see him twice a year."

Cotton and his wife have one son, 34, who works with Caterpillar Tractor Company in Joliet, Ill. He also has a granddaughter, 12, and a grandson, 8.

Fishing tops the list of Cotton's hobbies.

"My wife and I both love fishing and we frequently fish up in Genoa, Wis.," said Cotton. "The first time I was up there with my dad we caught 13 crappie, they were so big that the locals called them 'slabs.' Real nice people up there, in fact almost any people you meet near a river are."



Photo by Bob Smolka, Lockmaster  
**Joe Cotton surveys his work after spending several hours doing carpentry at Brandon Road Lock and Dam. Although Cotton's main job is as a lock and dam operator, his carpentry skills are an added asset to the lock.**



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District Engineer  
Col. James V. Mudd

Chief, Public Affairs  
Ron Fournier

Editor  
Mark A. Kane

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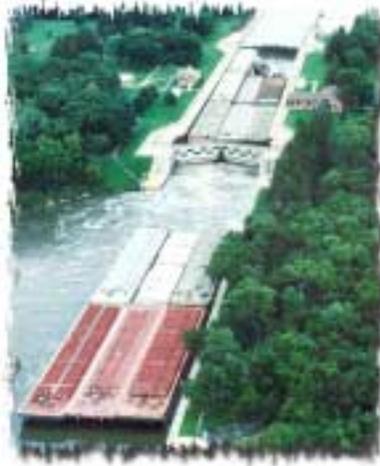
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**On the Cover**

Curt Winters, Williams Intermediate School, "scoped" out a member of the local eagle population while he and his classmates took time to checkout the Mississippi River Visitor Center, Feb. 2. Photo by Mark A. Kane, Public Affairs.