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World War II vet becomes Eagle Scout

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FORT MYERS -- An 88-year-old Southwest Florida man was honored as an Eagle Scout on Saturday, decades after he finished the requirements to earn the rank.

Walter Hart never collected his Eagle Award as a young man because his service in World War II got in the way. Scout officials say he may be the oldest person to ever earn the honor.

"It means a lot to me," said Hart, who lives in a retirement center in nearby Lehigh Acres. "I've been looking forward to this for a long time."

Hart joined the Cub Scouts in 1928 in Malden, Mass., and earned 23 merit badges during his years as a Boy Scout, where he earned ranks of Star and Life, Scouting officials said. Of the 120 merit badges available, 21 must be earned to qualify for Eagle.

Hart joined the Navy in 1943 and served for two years aboard the USS Alfred A. Cunningham, preventing him from getting his award. But Hart found some of his old Boy Scout memorabilia last year, including documents that showed he completed the requirements for his Eagle Scout rank. He contacted the Scouts about receiving his award.

"I think this was something that was always on his mind, but every time he went to go do it, something else came up," his daughter, Elizabeth Gatturna, said. "I know how hard he's tried to get to this point."

Gatturna, another daughter and a group of Hart's grandchildren and great-grandchildren were joining the new Eagle Scout at Saturday's ceremony.

Only about 5 percent of all Boy Scouts earn the rank of Eagle Scout, which is achieved by fulfilling requirements in the areas of leadership, service and outdoor skills. Since 1912, nearly 1.9 million Eagles have been awarded, but the recipients' ages are not recorded, Boy Scout officials said.

"I'd be pretty surprised if anyone older has ever become an Eagle Scout," said Margie Byers, spokeswoman for the Southwest Florida Council, Boy Scouts of America.

Hart moved to Southwest Florida just last month after the death in April of his wife of 66 years, Catherine. His new neighbors include many other veterans and veterans' widows, his daughter reported.

"He's got a more exciting life than I do," Gatturna said Saturday. And an Eagle Scout badge, too.

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