

Jon Ward

United States Foreign Service Officer, Retired
Member Since 2023

Look around at any Rotary event—Tuesday meetings to Tyrotarian tours, committee meetings to social gatherings—and you’re apt to see Jon Ward. Being in on the action (and even in the line of fire) has long been his modus operandi. And after a storied career, focusing his energy on service to others has become his M.O.

“When I decided to retire, I wasn’t ready to not have a job title. Retirement is a little challenging for me.”



That’s not surprising for someone who has juggled so much for so long. After completing a double major in political science and zoology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and graduating with a commission as an Army field artillery second lieutenant through ROTC, Jon spent five years on active duty, including serving in Operation Desert Storm.

“As a young lieutenant, I was on the front lines leading a rocket artillery platoon in combat.”

After his active military service, Jon returned to Madison and earned a Juris Doctor focused on business law and an MBA in supply chain management. During grad school, he continued to serve as senior instructor of the Wisconsin National Guard’s Officer Candidate School and later, as company commander of the Army Reserve 826th Ordnance Company.

Jon then worked as a supply chain and logistics executive in the private sector in Chicago and Milwaukee.

“I gained my logistics expertise as an Army officer in charge of moving equipment and people. Actually, my logistics experience goes back even further since I put myself through college working summers in the Piggly Wiggly warehouse in Sheboygan. Whenever I’m in a warehouse, I feel in my element.”

Jon then decided to pursue a long-held dream of serving as a U.S. diplomat.

“It was something I’d always been thinking about and as I approached the age of 40, I thought, ‘If I don’t do it now, when will I?’”



He made it through the arduous process of becoming a U.S. Foreign Service officer—something only a very small percentage of applicants do—passing difficult exams and stringent medical and security clearance requirements. His first state department job was logistics officer at the U.S. embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. His next assignment was in Papua New Guinea.

“That was a wild place and I absolutely loved it. The embassy is small so I got to do a little bit of everything.” He was then assigned to a position in Baghdad, Iraq.

“The embassy there got hit every day by rockets or mortar,” said Jon, a self-professed thrill seeker who thrived under the threat of danger.

His foreign service career also included positions in Pakistan, India and Brazil. Each new assignment required swift assimilation into a foreign country and unfamiliar culture.

“It was a privilege to have a 20-year career with the U.S. government, serving around the world and being able to adapt to any culture and environment—the more dangerous the better,” said Jon, who has lived in seven countries and nine U.S. states.

After stints in Miami and New Jersey, Jon, who was raised in Kohler, returned to Wisconsin where he’s taken on new job titles: veterans advocate, volunteer, peacebuilder. The number and scope of his commitments is impressive—from pulling invasive species in parks to driving older adults to appointments to helping refugees set up new homes. He is currently leading program planning for the Rotary-supported World Affairs Seminar in June with a goal of expanding its reach to people of all ages year-round.

Additionally, Jon has a couple side gigs: escort officer for the Department of State International Visitor Leadership Program and City of Milwaukee election poll worker. Family is also a priority, spending time with his sister in Kohler (and spoiling her cat and dog) and visiting his two brothers and eight nieces and nephews spread across the globe. He’s looking forward to meeting his first great-niece later this year.

Jon’s unwavering commitment to making a difference begs the question: what drives him?

“I love the opportunity to work with people to build or improve institutions that are doing good things and I really enjoy mentoring younger people.”

It’s what makes Rotary such a perfect fit for Jon, who first joined in 2008 in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, hoping it would help him become a more effective diplomat. He was also a Rotary member in Kolkata, India, before joining the Rotary Club of Milwaukee in 2023.

“I joined Rotary in Port Moresby to network and meet people, but immediately got hooked on the service aspect. When I moved back to Milwaukee after being gone for 20 years, Rotary was a great way to meet people and reestablish my sense of community,” said Jon, who serves on the Environment & Ecology Committee, chairs the Veterans & Military Community Committee, established and co-chairs the Peacebuilding Committee and is on deck to be the club’s next sergeant at arms.



“I’ve made great new friends but the best part is that Rotary offers so many opportunities to serve.”

Editor’s Note: *Rotary People of Action* is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich