

Dan Buttery

President & CEO, War Memorial Center

Member since November 2021

Semper Fi describes a brand and a behavior known throughout the US and applied worldwide in the defense of freedom. Although he's an Army vet, one can apply the Marines' "Always Faithful" brand to Rotarian Dan Buttery in his role as CEO of the War Memorial Center. Dan is "always faithful" not only to Wisconsin military veterans past, living, and missing but their loved ones who are counted among his "special people" who sacrifice for our freedom.

"Honor the dead. Serve the living" is the Center's motto. It's a succinct, powerful phrase that occupies every waking moment of Dan's life and perhaps when he sleeps as well.



Dan hiking at Blue Ridge, Mt. Mitchell, NC

Indeed, one gets the impression that Dan will not rest until every person in Wisconsin not only knows that phrase but acts upon it as citizen, volunteer, educator, and official. Dan humbly recalls on what brought him to this life mission in a matter-of-fact way, reflecting his character as well as military demeanor. He wanders back to his childhood at the family farm in Rio, 30 miles north of Madison. "The military members of my family would come home and tell stories about their service," he recalled. "It was in the early 1970s and the Vietnam war was going on."

Dan absorbed their words, imagining their worlds, and wondering how it can happen one could be called to a profession – a service -- where harm or death could come thousands of miles away.

"I was driven to understand what it takes to put oneself in harm's way," he recalls, adding that he spent hours as a child watching the Victory at Sea series depicting the World War II Pacific Theater.

He also recalls his mother didn't approve of where his heart was taking him, and she forbade his joining the armed forces. He joined only after she passed away and was commissioned as a US Army Engineer officer in 1998. Dan was elected Class President of Officer Candidate School (OCS) Class 39, based out of the Wisconsin Military Academy in 1997. Deployments were made to Germany, Nicaragua, Korea, and Iraq, where he conducted 300 missions from May 2003 to April 2004. He was awarded the Bronze Star.



Dan serving in Iraq

As a reservist, Dan also managed a civilian career in marketing, a profession that ultimately brought him to the War Memorial, with a stop in Madison. Dan was the founder of Fisher House, Wisconsin, which provided a place to stay for families who wanted to be near their veteran at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center. He described it as like a veteran's Ronald Mac Donald House. Families reside, share meals, and support each other "through joys and sorrows."

That got Dan "noticed" and he was appointed Assistant Deputy Secretary for the state Department of Veterans Affairs. He was responsible for veterans' legislation, and he got bi-partisan support for several laws.

“Dan exemplifies character,” said his boss, Secretary John Scocos. “He always put veterans first. He put integrity in everything and was a strong advocate.” Advocate” is what the War Memorial Center Board wanted when they hired Dan as CEO in January 2020: Advocate and businessperson. “The time was right,” Dan said, reflecting on the pressure he received from Vietnam vets to compete. “I wanted to align passion and profession.”

Coming aboard, however, Dan found it also was about turning around a business with a profit and purpose mandate. The center had a deficit.

Dan put his mind and energy to the task, evidence of which Rotarians see regularly:

- Breath-taking, exhibits about veterans, their stories, and deeds.
- A memorable and meaningful LEGO exhibit by Combat Vet Jeff Haagensen.
- A moving Medal of Honor exhibit.
- Support for the 1,700-mile honor ride of Col. Chris Kolenda for his fallen friends.
- A community and tourist-friendly beer garden
- The field of 15,015 flags in Veterans’ Park representing vets killed in action since WW I.
- A Missing in Action exhibit that reaches back to the civil war.
- Compelling and memorial speakers at our Tuesday lunches
- Plus, “long game” efforts to connect with youth, like STEM programs.

“We are a gathering point for healing” Dan says of the Center, pointing to its strategic plan that reaches beyond the campus. The healing might be in the veteran themselves, with the family or even between the vet and community, recalling the divisions brought by Vietnam and America’s toxic political culture that is producing a military fallout in dropping enlistments.

“I want everyone in Wisconsin to visit this place, to help us declare it as important to our past, present and future,” Dan says. “We want Wisconsin to unite on the subject of service and the merit of selfless sacrifice.”

Dan knows that might be a tall order when new generations are avoiding service and even questioning America as worth defending. As a UW-Steven Point history student, Dan visited Poland for study abroad. While studying abroad at Poland’s Jagiellonian University in 1990, it was discovered his economic professor was a survivor of Auschwitz. This introduction eventually resulted in Dan meeting and interviewing multiple survivors of both the German and Soviet concentration camps. This would become the topic of his senior thesis prior to graduation.



Dan & his wife Patty celebrating their 20th anniversary at Blue Ridge, Mt. Mitchell, NC

“That changed my life,” Dan declared. “It reminded me of evil in the world and the humans’ ability to terrorize other humans. This evil exists today, exposed elsewhere in oppression, torture, and death. Because of veterans, we have not fallen to tyranny. But that should not be complacent. We can become victims of military, economic, psychological, or political aggression.”

Dan remembers daily his relatives who seeded his cause, the survivor who affirmed his purpose and carries with him another mantra he learned from the US Army Corps of Engineers, “*Essayons*”, Greek for “let us try”.

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