



NEWS

ATA's Mike Russell dies in river rafting accident

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Mike Russell, 64, vp of public affairs and press secretary for the American Trucking Assns. (ATA) since 2001, died as a result of a whitewater rafting accident near Clear Creek, CO on June 15.

Russell was declared dead when pulled from the river. Extended efforts to resuscitate him were not successful. He and his wife Rita were in Colorado for a large family reunion. Funeral services are pending.

“This is a very tough loss to take,” Tim Lynch, ATA senior vp, told *FleetOwner*. “Mike was universally liked – he was just a great, great guy and a tenacious advocate for the trucking industry.”

Russell joined ATA in 1999 as director of media relations after holding a variety of political-public affairs slots, including serving as director of public and consumer affairs for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and service with Vice President Al Gore’s National Performance Review (NPR).

He also served as press secretary to U.S. Surgeon General M. Joycelyn Elders, M.D, and filled the same slot for Michigan’s former U.S. Senator Donald Riegle (D) and late Congressman William D. Ford (D), following an extensive television news career in Pennsylvania and Michigan.

“One of the reasons he was such a strong defender of the trucking industry’s image is that he not only liked the people working in it – especially the drivers – but felt they constantly got an unfair and bum rap by most of the mainstream media,” Lynch said. “That’s why he never considered any of the work he did on trucking image campaigns as an ‘assignment’ – to him they were a labor of love.”

A graduate of the Boston University School of Public Communications, Russell’s respect for truckers developed in part from his days as a corporal driving trucks in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Russell’s passion for trucking and the Marines led to a creative partnership spawned by a chance meeting a few years back with Major Rob Winchester of the USMC’s recruiting command at a NASCAR race outside Richmond, VA. The two hit on the idea of asking ATA’s nearly-3,000 motor carrier members to turn truck trailers into rolling recruitment billboards for the Marines.

The program got off the ground in 2002 with decal manufacturer and applicator Y3K Grafix of California eventually wrapping over 2,000 ATA-member trailers with the Marine recruitment advertisements. “It’s a unique way of telling our young Marines now overseas that we’re proud of them and that we’ll do our part by carrying the Marine Corps colors in support of their efforts,” said Russell at the time.

“The ‘rolling billboard’ campaign continues to assist our recruiting efforts by increasing awareness about opportunities for young men and women to serve in the Corps,” said Major General Christopher Cortez, then-commanding general of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command. “The Marine Corps is grateful to the ATA, whose members—among them a dedicated contingent of former Marines—have contributed greatly to our effort to bring the Marine Corps message to the public.”

“That was Mike – always looking to do different and positive things for this industry’s image,” added ATA’s Lynch. “That’s an example of the fun times I had with Mike – kicking around ideas and concepts like that. It’s part of the innate talent he brought to this industry.”