

In Memoriam: Colonel M. Paul Sams

By Bill Falcone

Paul Sams came to the Rhode Island Water Resources in 1993. At that time, the Board had suffered after 25 years of trying unsuccessfully to construct the Big River Reservoir Water Supply Project in Coventry and West Greenwich. The Legislature and Executive branches had turned their backs on the Board after excruciating years of unwarranted and false attacks by various environmental groups locally, regionally and nationally. The Board was weakened and possibly on the way to extinction as a viable and only agency serving Rhode Island's 31 municipal water supply systems.

The Colonel came to the Board from the Narragansett Bay Commission via the Blackstone Valley Sewer District. Some say that the Governor at the time sent him to the Board to end its existence. No matter the reasoning for his entry, Paul saw this small (9 people) agency as an important entity with vast powers and duties in water supply and water resources. He felt that this agency needed to continue in the best interests of the people of the State of Rhode Island. Paul needed to somewhat change the Board's direction from a Big River agency to a more well rounded agency in water planning, watershed protection, as well as a water supply loaning and granting entity.

Paul succeeded in all aspects of saving the Water Resources Board from extinction and making it into an agency more suited to the times. He freed up millions of dollars in Water Facilities Grant monies previously frozen and made better the process for millions of dollars remitted to the water systems for watershed wellhead protection for the purchase of lands forever free from development. Paul was a great Leader through his 23 years as a Marine. As all Marines, Paul will be one forever. Paul was well liked by water suppliers, state government people, city and town people, and politicians. This was not an easy task but his leadership skills, personality, and the ability to get things done and inspire people will not be forgotten. Paul could be a tough taskmaster but what great leader who actually accomplished important matters was not.

Paul and I did not always see eye to eye; but we always agreed on making the Board a strong and important agency serving the people with one of the hardest jobs there is, supplying good safe drinking water to Rhode Island's 900,000 municipal water supply customers. With the help of RI's dedicated water suppliers, Paul Sams did that with class, humor, and enthusiasm, which was effective in his 13 years as General Manager of the Water Resources Board. Since my retirement in 2003, I did not often see Paul except for a quarterly RI Water Works Association meeting in either May or September. I was not close to Paul like Ken Booth or George Palmisciano, however, knowing he was there was comforting because, in the pinch, his loyalty to his friends and his former troops (employees) was unwavering. Paul was the finest Commanding Officer I ever had the honor and privilege to serve under.