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João Vinagre Receives HAI's Salute to Excellence Lifetime Achievement Award

Alexandria, Virginia (Jan. 13, 2023) – Helicopter Association International (HAI) is pleased to announce that Capital Air founder and director João “John” Vinagre is the 2023 recipient of the Salute to Excellence Lifetime Achievement Award. This award, sponsored by Bell, salutes excellence in management and leadership and is granted to an individual for long and significant service to the international rotorcraft community. It will be presented Mar. 6, 2023, at HAI HELI-EXPO 2023 in Atlanta, Georgia.

João Vinagre moved to Mozambique from Portugal with his family when he was just six months old, fleeing the post–World War II damage and poverty in his homeland. A fourth-generation pilot, he earned his private license in airplanes at 19 years of age and soon added his helicopter ratings after joining the army.

Vinagre was on a course to take over the family helicopter business when the 1974 Carnation Revolution forced Portuguese citizens to leave Mozambique in 1975. The new ruling political party seized his family’s company, including 13 aircraft.

Vinagre and his family left Mozambique for South Africa with little more than \$10 in today’s currency, and he was eventually able to find a flying job with a local company in his new country. When the company’s owner passed away eight years later, Vinagre purchased its Bell 206 with a business partner. Not long after, he secured the name and license of a South African company in liquidation, Capital Air.

Operating out of a wooden-plank Zozo Hut at Rand Airport (FAGM) in Johannesburg, Vinagre rebuilt his family’s legacy with Capital Air, seeking new opportunities anywhere they could be found, from nature conservation, weddings, and television broadcasting to schools and trade shows. No job was too small, and his tenacity paid off. In the late 1980s, Capital Air obtained exclusive rights to operate the Rand Show, the largest annual consumer exhibition in southern Africa. Drawing tens of thousands of visitors annually, the show helped put Capital Air on the map.

The company grew in size and reputation, adding an authorized maintenance organization certification from the South African Civil Aviation Authority, the country’s second such certificate at the time. Capital Air expanded its capabilities to the private security sector and gained a firm footing in hijacked and stolen vehicle tracking and recovery throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

The work in the region had its dangers. While searching for a hijacked truck in 1994, Vinagre’s helicopter came under fire. The aircraft suffered an engine failure and crashed when the rotors hit structures in the crowded area after autorotating. Vinagre evacuated his four passengers, even protecting one from an approaching mob bent

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

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on robbing the group, by getting between the attackers and his passenger. Vinagre was stabbed in the back for his effort, but all were saved by Good Samaritans on the scene.

Vinagre has come full circle in his career. He opened an affiliate operation in 1999, Helicopteros Capital, in Mozambique, returning the family business to the country more than two decades after it was lost.

Now, more than 40 years since Vinagre took over the name, Capital Air has grown to 1,000 employees and 17 helicopters, the largest fleet in South Africa. It remains a family business with three of Vinagre's children now helping run the company with a commitment to Vinagre's philosophy of exceptional customer service.

"Flying was in my bones," Vinagre says. "I was very lucky I found a flying job and could start over in South Africa. I am proud of the company we've built and hope to share it with many future generations."

The Lifetime Achievement Award will be presented during HAI HELI-EXPO 2023. HAI HELI-EXPO®, the world's largest helicopter trade show and exhibition, will be held at the Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta, Georgia, Mar. 6–9, with the exhibit hall open Mar. 7–9. For more information on HAI HELI-EXPO 2023, visit heliexpo.com.

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HAI is the professional trade association for the international helicopter industry and represents more than 1,100 companies and over 16,000 industry professionals in more than 65 countries. Each year, HAI members safely operate more than 3,700 helicopters and remotely piloted aircraft approximately 2.9 million hours. HAI is dedicated to the promotion of the helicopter as a safe, effective method of commerce and to the advancement of the international helicopter community.