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**Cpts. Steve Buhagiar and David Sidorski Receive HAI's Salute to Excellence
Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award**

Alexandria, Virginia (Jan. 08, 2024) – Helicopter Association International (HAI) is pleased to announce Cpts. Steve Buhagiar and David Sidorski as recipients of the Salute to Excellence Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award. This award, presented by HAI in honor of Zuccaro, recognizes outstanding aeronautical decision-making, crew resource management, and/or coordinated actions performed by a helicopter pilot(s), flight crew member(s), and/or maintenance personnel during the year. It will be presented on Feb. 26, 2024, at HAI HELI-EXPO 2024 in Anaheim, California.

On the afternoon of Sep. 24, 2022, Buhagiar and Sidorski were flying four passengers in a Bristow Group Leonardo AW139 to Houma, Louisiana, from an offshore oil platform. When the flight was about seven minutes from the airport, the crew heard a loud “whoof” sound and saw thick smoke coming from the overhead circuit-breaker panel. Smoke immediately filled the cockpit as the low-rotor rpm warning alarm sounded, both engines began racing, and the aircraft started a rapid climb.

Buhagiar, the pilot-in-command for the flight, fully lowered the collective as he fought to bring rpm back and maintain aircraft control. Meanwhile, Sidorski snapped the left-side door window in two and, to protect the tail rotor, pulled half of it in and behind the seat to clear smoke from the cabin. Buhagiar then lowered the landing gear as a precaution. The engines were at 140% torque as rotor rpm slowly returned to 100%. Even with collective full down and nose level, the aircraft was in a 1,700 ft.-per-minute climb.

“We’d climbed from 3,500 to almost 7,000 ft. in the span of a few minutes,” Buhagiar recalls. “I remember thinking at that point we were going to climb to 20,000 ft., flame out, and be a lawn dart into the marsh. I didn’t know how much more the aircraft could take. We needed to reduce power. I asked David to bring engine one down to idle to see if that helped.”

Sidorski brought engine one to idle and the rpm immediately deteriorated to 80%. He rapidly brought it back and rpm slowly returned. During that maneuver, however, the aircraft had descended 1,000 ft. With no other option seemingly apparent, Buhagiar nosed the aircraft forward in an attempt to lose altitude. The aircraft sped up to more than 186 kt., well above the aircraft’s maximum speed, as Buhagiar flew in a large, gradual spiral to descend.

Once lined up for the runway, the crew decided to bring engine two to idle in an attempt at an autorotation. The rotor rpm immediately plummeted to 67% before returning with full engine power.

Now knowing the aircraft could still fly at 67% rpm, Buhagiar and Sidorski elected to exchange rpm for altitude by throttling back the engines and immediately powering back up repeatedly to descend. The two pilots

continued the maneuver, exchanging rpm for airspeed in the end to lose the last several feet. The helicopter touched down at what Buhagiar believes was about 60 kt. Both main landing gear collapsed while the aircraft skidded 800 ft. down the runway before sliding 15 ft. into the grass and stopping.

“This incident, while harrowing, highlights the significance of exemplary pilot training, the importance of teamwork under duress, and the ability to make strategic decisions during crises,” wrote Jason Glynn, US area manager for Bristow Group, in his nomination for the award. “Buhagiar’s and Sidorski’s actions were instrumental in preventing a potential tragedy.”

Buhagiar and Sidorski were successful in safely landing the aircraft with only one minor injury (a passenger noted a sore back but was released after medical examination). Later, the US National Transportation Safety Board determined the incident was caused by incorrectly routed wiring that chaffed, caught fire, and caused the upper carbon-fiber collective torque tube to melt and rotate, leaving the rotor blades in a full pitch position even when the collective was down.

“It was such an intense experience, the entire event,” Sidorski recalls. “There were so many times we could have died, but neither of us locked up. We kept flying the aircraft. There is nothing in the manual that tells you what to do in this situation. We worked together to meticulously test options based on the warning and caution, not making any sudden or drastic actions. We knew we were done if we didn’t do anything, so we did what we could while the aircraft was still flying to get us down safely.”

The Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award will be presented during HAI HELI-EXPO 2024. HAI HELI-EXPO[®], the world’s largest helicopter trade show and exhibition, will be held at the Anaheim Convention Center in Anaheim, California, Feb. 26–29, with the exhibit hall open Feb. 27–29. For more information on HAI HELI-EXPO 2024, visit heliexpo.com.

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HAI is the professional trade association for the global 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 business tool that provides unique advantages to society and to the advancement of the international vertical aviation community.