



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jan. 24, 2025

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PRESS RELEASE

Vertical Aviation International Announces the Winners of the Annual Salute to Excellence Awards

Honoring the best in vertical aviation.

Alexandria, Virginia, USA (Jan. 24, 2025) — Vertical Aviation International (VAI) is proud to announce the winners of this year's prestigious Salute to Excellence Awards. This annual program is dedicated to recognizing the extraordinary achievements and unwavering commitment of professionals within the vertical aviation industry.

Celebrating the best of the best in vertical flight, Salute to Excellence highlights outstanding contributions from pilots, maintenance technicians, operators, and safety professionals who set the highest standards of professionalism and safety in the field.

"We proudly recognize the exceptional talents and steadfast commitment of this year's Salute to Excellence awardees," says James Viola, VAI president and CEO. "Their dedication to advancing safety, innovation, and professionalism within vertical aviation not only reflects the highest standards of our industry but also continuously pushes the boundaries of what is possible, ensuring a safer and more successful future for all of us in this community."

Focused exclusively on the vertical aviation industry, the awards acknowledge those who are at the forefront of operational excellence. The awards span multiple categories, ensuring a comprehensive acknowledgment of the diverse roles and exceptional dedication displayed across the industry.

The core purpose of Salute to Excellence is to honor those who not only uphold but exceed the standards of safety, professionalism, and quality that define high-performing vertical flight operations. These winners embody the spirit of excellence that VAI strives to promote throughout the vertical aviation community.

Salute to Excellence Harold Summers Legacy Award (Sponsor: Vertical Aviation International)

Allan Overbey, project manager at GEMS Inc. in Washington, D.C., is recognized with the 2025 Salute to Excellence Harold Summers Legacy Award for his remarkable long-term contributions to the vertical flight industry, particularly his pivotal role in the implementation of ADS-B for safer helicopter operations in the Gulf of Mexico and throughout the United States. Created in 2024, the award honors the spirit and legacy of the late Harold "Hal" Summers, a longtime VAI (then Helicopter Association International) employee who was renowned for his dedication to improving the rotorcraft

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industry. Upon retiring after more than 26 years in the US Air Force, Overbey was recruited by GEMS, a contractor assisting the FAA in implementing ADS-B in helicopter operations in the Gulf of Mexico. Overbey's dedication to overcoming trust barriers between the FAA, helicopter operators, and the oil-and-gas industry led to the successful early adoption of the technology in 2009, enhancing helicopter safety and operational capabilities. His efforts, guided by Summers and other industry veterans and supported by leaders such as 2025 Salute to Excellence Lifetime Achievement Award winner and PHI Americas Director of Operations Pat Attaway, not only led to achieving initial ADS-B operational capability in the Gulf but also paved the way for the implementation of the technology throughout the National Airspace System by 2020. This advancement significantly improved air traffic control for IFR helicopter operations in the Gulf, increasing the number of such flights from 9,742 in 2009 to nearly 32,000 in 2024.

Salute to Excellence Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award (Sponsor: Vertical Aviation International)

Elijah Hobbs, chief pilot with Jack Harter Helicopters in Lihue, Hawaii, is the recipient of the 2025 Salute to Excellence Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award. Hobbs is recognized for his exceptional decision-making skills and artful handling of an in-flight emergency that resulted in a forced-autorotation landing on a remote Hawaiian beach. During a routine tour flight, Hobbs detected a critical engine failure, initiated an emergency landing on challenging terrain, and evacuated all passengers without any of them sustaining severe injuries. His actions, underpinned by comprehensive safety training and over 11,000 flight hours, exemplify professional excellence and the importance of preparedness in aviation safety. The award was established to honor the legacy of the late Matthew S. Zuccaro, the association's longtime president and CEO and a helicopter pilot and industry leader. Zuccaro passionately advocated for improved helicopter safety measures, including landing the aircraft to prevent accidents in life-threatening situations.

Salute to Excellence Communications Award (Sponsor: HeliValue\$, Inc.)

Paul Kennard, European editor for *Antares* magazine, is the recipient of the 2025 Salute to Excellence Communications Award. This award recognizes Kennard's influential role in aviation media, particularly his distinct and creative dissemination of information about the helicopter and unmanned aircraft system (UAS) industry. His career, deeply rooted in his early fascination with aviation and extensive experience as a CH-47 pilot in the Royal Air Force, transitioned into media, where he has been a vocal advocate for transparency and integrity, highlighting underrepresented issues within the industry. Kennard's writings highlight his commitment to truth and the advancement of aviation safety and awareness.

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Salute to Excellence Humanitarian Service Award (Sponsor: POWER UP magazine) Rotorforce New Zealand, Helicopters Hawkes Bay, and No. 3 Squadron of the Royal New Zealand Air Force are collectively awarded the 2025 Salute to Excellence Humanitarian Service Award for their crucial roles during Cyclone Gabrielle's devastation of New Zealand's North Island in February 2023. The three organizations showcased the critical utility of helicopters in disaster response, engaging in lifesaving operations amid record flooding and widespread destruction that isolated many communities. Their operations included dramatic rescues of stranded individuals, transport of essential supplies, and restoration efforts, with the helicopters also facilitating communication where traditional means failed. The combined efforts of these teams, which continued for eight weeks, were instrumental in saving approximately 400 people in the initial days of the storm, demonstrating extraordinary coordination and bravery in the face of natural disaster.

Salute to Excellence W.A. "Dub" Blessing Flight Instructor of the Year Award
(Sponsor: Hill Air Corporation)

Ken Obi, owner and flight instructor at Orbic Helicopters in Camarillo, California, is the winner of the 2025 W.A. "Dub" Blessing Flight Instructor of the Year Award. The honor celebrates Obi's outstanding dedication to flight instruction in the helicopter industry, emphasizing professionalism and safety. Since the day a revelatory demo flight shifted his career interests to aviation after he initially sought to become a cowboy, Obi has had a profound impact on the industry. Having founded Orbic Helicopters amid challenging circumstances, Obi continues to pass on his deep-seated knowledge and passion for flying to hundreds of students, maintaining a focus on safety and quality training at his flight school.

Salute to Excellence Law Enforcement Award (Sponsor: POWER UP magazine)

The 2025 Salute to Excellence Law Enforcement Award is presented to the Air Tactical Group of the Public Security Department of Pernambuco State, Brazil. This recognition is for the organization's exceptional use of helicopters in law enforcement and rescue operations during the devastating floods in Pernambuco, Brazil, in May 2022. Despite initial visibility challenges that grounded its fleet, the team's heroic efforts included airlifting critical patients, conducting numerous rooftop rescues, and providing essential supplies to isolated communities. Their relentless service throughout the state's worst natural disaster on record highlighted their critical role in emergency response, leading to increased government funding and an expansion of their fleet to enhance their operational capabilities.

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Salute to Excellence Golden Hour Award (Sponsor: POWER UP magazine)
Toll Ambulance Rescue Helicopter Service, based in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, is awarded the 2025 Salute to Excellence Golden Hour Award. This award honors Toll's significant contributions to air medical transport in utilizing helicopters to execute lifesaving missions within the critical "golden hour" after a traumatic injury or illness. Operating from four bases, Toll works in close collaboration with NSW Ambulance, ACT Ambulance, and NETS (Newborn and Paediatric Emergency Transport Service) conducting over 3,000 critical-care, search-and-rescue, and interhospital transport missions annually. Toll's integrated approach and standardized procedures have allowed the organization to achieve impressive response times—less than 10 minutes, on average, during daytime flights—and conduct complex rescues, dramatically increasing survival rates for those in urgent need.

Salute to Excellence Safety Award (Sponsor: BLR Aerospace)
LifeFlight of Maine, in Bangor, Maine, is the winner of the 2025 Salute to Excellence Safety Award, sponsored by BLR Aerospace, for the organization's exceptional contributions to enhancing safety and safety awareness in vertical aviation operations. Established in 1998 in response to a helicopter air ambulance accident, LifeFlight of Maine was founded as a nonprofit charitable organization by air medical veteran Tom Judge with the help of then-Maine Gov. Angus King, now a US senator, and state health-care leader Dr. Norm Dinerman. Facing the challenges of Maine's complex terrain and harsh weather, the organization has significantly developed the state's air medical infrastructure, creating a comprehensive system that includes hospital and community helipads, emergency landing areas, and advanced weather-monitoring systems to support safe operations. Today, LifeFlight of Maine operates three Leonardo A109SPs and two A109Es, transporting an average of 2,500 patients a year in the helicopters. To date, it has safely cared for and transported more than 40,000 patients

Salute to Excellence Maintenance Award (Sponsor: Rolls-Royce)
Helicopter aviation maintenance and safety advisor George Quackenbush, based in Santiago, Chile, is awarded the 2025 Salute to Excellence Maintenance Award, sponsored by Rolls-Royce, for his outstanding contributions to helicopter maintenance over a distinguished career. Quackenbush began his aviation career out of a quest for challenging and precise work using skills honed from an early age repairing automobiles and further refined through rigorous military training and service during the Vietnam War. His post-military career led him to various international roles in which he excelled as an aviation mechanic, inspector, and mentor, notably improving safety practices through continued education and the implementation of critical safety lessons. Celebrated for his ethical standards and dedication to the field, Quackenbush's career is

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marked by his commitment to excellence, safety, and mentorship, influencing maintenance practices and personnel across the globe.

Salute to Excellence Pilot of the Year Award (Sponsor: POWER UP magazine)
VAI posthumously honors Mike Roederer, retired chief pilot of Air2 in Pembroke, New Hampshire, with the 2025 Salute to Excellence Pilot of the Year Award. The award recognizes his outstanding professionalism and commitment to safety throughout his aviation career. Roederer, who began flying helicopters in 1983, consistently prioritized the safety and well-being of his crew and anyone involved on the job, embodying integrity and leadership until his retirement in 2022. Known for his hands-on approach, Roederer always stressed the ultimate authority of the pilot in command to ensure operational safety. His legacy continues to inspire others, marked by heroic acts such as his decision to stay with his helicopter during a hydraulic failure in a fire, ensuring his crew's safety by evacuating them before the area was engulfed in flames. Roederer passed away in 2024 due to a heart condition.

These awards will be presented during VERTICON 2025, the world's largest vertical aviation conference and trade show, being held at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center Dallas, Dallas, Texas, Mar. 10–13 (exhibits open Mar. 11–13), 2025. For more information on VERTICON, visit [VERTICON.org](https://verticalavi.org).

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Vertical Aviation International (VAI), formerly Helicopter Association International (HAI), is the world's leading membership association dedicated to the vertical aviation industry, which encompasses all aircraft capable of vertical flight or short takeoffs and landings. Throughout its 76 years of fueling industry growth through connection, advocacy, safety, education, and support for its members' success, VAI has leveraged the power of vertical flight to strengthen communities worldwide. The association welcomes all members of the vertical aviation industry, including manufacturers, operators, suppliers and vendors, pilots and maintenance technicians, and other aviation professionals. For more information about VAI, please visit <https://verticalavi.org/>.

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