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On the Cover

Patrick T. Fallon, Photographer

On Jan. 11, 2025, a Sikorsky S-70i drops water as the Palisades Fire spreads. Read some first-person stories of those who worked the Southern California wildfires on p. 32. *(Patrick T. Fallon/ Getty Images Photo)*

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A Historic First

How will VERTICON change YOUR life?

By Mark A. Schlaefli

GREETINGS FROM DALLAS AND WELCOME to VERTICON 2025!

"The stars at night are big and bright, [insert claps here] deep in the heart of Texas!" goes the popular song, describing some of the delights found in the state. And now, Texas logs another first by hosting the inaugural edition of our new annual conference and trade show, VERTICON.

In September 2024, I wrote about the many firsts that Vertical Aviation International (VAI) was driving in my column for the first issue of POWER UP (another first for VAI!). Six months later, and we're now in Dallas for the first VERTICON, ready for the best week of the year. Hats and boots are not only welcome but expected!

My first VAI show (HAI HELI-EXPO® back in the day) was in 2005. Before I made the commitment to follow a lifelong dream to become a professional helicopter pilot, I decided to head to Anaheim and see what the industry was all about. I didn't know a single person in the industry then, and I figured this HAI HELI-EXPO event would be a great place to change that.

Attending that show was an unforgettable experience that changed my life. Upon entering the convention center, the excitement and energy was palpable. The enthusiasm built at every turn as I walked the show floor, seeing these incredible machines up close and personal. That experience alone was confirmation that I was on the right path.

The incredible added value of being surrounded by thousands of vertical aviation professionals was evident as I discovered them to be diverse, adventurous, innovative, focused, and just plain fun—definitely the type of people with whom I wanted to work and build a career. I asked a lot of questions at the show, which led to dozens more. The feedback I received was instrumental in determining my career path.

That's my story, and I'm sure there are thousands of other stories that have been told—and will be told in future hangar chats—about how attending the world's largest vertical aviation conference and trade show changed lives.

MARK A. SCHLAEFLI, the owner and operator of Dakota Rotors, a Part 135/133 operator in the Upper Midwest and Mountain West, began his one-year term as chair of the VAI Board of Directors on Jul. 1, 2024. Mark holds an ATP rotorcraft certificate as well as instrument, CFI, and CFII ratings.

First, there's the show floor. VERTICON 2025 will feature over 600 exhibitors showcasing everything you could want for your aviation business or pleasure. Each year, we see more emerging technologies—automation, unmanned systems, new vehicles—on display, which is why innovation is a constant of the VERTICON experience.

Engaging with your industry at VERTICON is a critical piece of how we—and you—will move forward.

Second, with over 15,000 industry professionals in attendance from more than 85 countries, you also have unparalleled opportunities to develop strategic connections and partnerships. I encourage all those at VERTICON to attend at least one of the many industry advisory council meetings, forums, panel discussions, and other industry events listed in your Program & Exhibit Guide, including the 100-plus education sessions and briefings.

Yes, the VERTICON show floor is focused on the business of vertical aviation, but as an owner and operator, I can tell you that what happens off the show floor is also critical to the success of my business. Engaging with your industry at VERTICON is a critical piece of how we—and you—will move forward.

On behalf of the VAI Board of Directors and the VAI staff, I welcome you to the show. We look forward to meeting you, learning your story, and sharing with you all of the great things VAI is doing for the industry and for you. Now, sit back and buckle up: time to enjoy your very first VERTICON!

The Vision of VAI

Here is what we can achieve by working together.

By James A. Viola

AS YOU MAY ALREADY KNOW, on Mar. 15, 2025, I will leave Vertical Aviation International (VAI) to join the General Aviation Manufacturers Association as its president and CEO. My decision was not made lightly and comes after much deliberation.

It has been an incredible honor to serve you as the president and CEO of the trade association for the global vertical aviation industry. My admiration for the great work done in and by this industry has only grown since I joined the VAI staff a little over five years ago. And that is saying a lot, as my passion for vertical aviation—and my ideas for how I could promote and support it—are what drove me to apply for this job in the first place.

The past five years have been eventful, as you can read in a related story on my tenure at VAI on p. 60. But I want to use this space to look forward and talk about what I hope the future holds for this industry: the VAI vision.

For those who have not sat through a branding workshop (and so missed out on all the fun!), an organization's vision represents what the world will look like after it has achieved its purpose.

When we rebranded as Vertical Aviation International, the Board of Directors selected these words as our vision: "To fuel the growth of the vertical aviation industry through connection, education, advocacy, and safety so that communities around the world are strengthened by the power of vertical flight."

First, we need to unpack that desired end state: VAI wants to build a world where the unique capabilities of vertical flight are available to everyone who needs them. This can only be done by a viable, sustainable, safe, and prosperous industry. To accomplish this, the global vertical aviation community must unite to reach our common goals. We must protect our access to airspace and our freedom from overly burdensome regulation. We must continue to innovate our technology and services

JAMES A. VIOLA is VAI's president and CEO. After a career as a US Army aviator, he joined the FAA, where he served as director of the Office of General Aviation Safety Assurance before joining VAI. James holds ATP ratings in both airplanes and helicopters and is a CFII. Contact him at President@verticalavi.org.

so that people recognize us as a go-to provider of aerial solutions. We also need to ensure that we recruit and retain the skilled aviation professionals who will build, operate, fix, fly, and supply our aircraft.

The middle part—connection, education, advocacy, and safety—is where VAI explains our role in creating this vision. Helping you conduct these four activities is the best way we can contribute to your success. Each of them is essential to meeting your goals for your career or business, or even for the vertical aviation industry, depending on your lens. The lack of any single one of them will mean we will not achieve our vision.

> **A world where the unique capabilities of vertical flight are available to everyone can only be achieved by a viable, sustainable, safe, and prosperous industry.**

The first part is why VAI exists: to fuel the growth of the vertical aviation industry. We cannot ensure your growth—only you can do that. But for those of you who dream of bigger things, VAI will provide the POWER you need to grow.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve, lead, and grow together. As I approach my final days in the "right seat" here at VAI, I look forward to celebrating our shared accomplishments and setting the stage for the exciting future that lies ahead.

Fed Leadership Changes Mark Start of 2025

State legislatures also busy as first quarter nears completion.

By Cade Clark, Theresa Marr, and Katia Veraza

AS THE AVIATION INDUSTRY ENTERED THE new year, key leadership changes shaped the landscape of federal aviation oversight. The 119th Congress was sworn in on Jan. 3, followed by the inauguration of President Donald Trump on Jan. 20.

Also on Jan. 20, FAA Administrator Michael Whitaker officially stepped down from his post. Upon his departure, VAI recognized Whitaker's significant contributions to aviation and thanked him for his steadfast leadership in advancing priorities critical to the vertical flight industry and the nation.

"Administrator Whitaker's time at the helm of the FAA has been impactful, marked by meaningful progress in aviation safety, workforce development, and the integration of advanced technology," says James Viola, VAI president and CEO. "We extend our sincere thanks for his dedicated leadership and wish him continued success in his future endeavors."

On Jan. 30, Chris Rocheleau was appointed as acting FAA administrator, ensuring continuity in the agency's leadership. VAI looks forward to working with Rocheleau in his new capacity and is confident in his ability to contribute positively to the FAA's mission.

In Congress, key aviation oversight committees remain in experienced hands. The House Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I) Committee continues under the leadership of Chair Sam Graves (R-Mo.-06) and Ranking Member Rick Larsen (D-Wash.-02)—a signal of stability in congressional oversight of aviation policy. In the Senate, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) now chairs the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, with Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) serving as ranking member. VAI applauds their leadership and ongoing commitment to addressing industry concerns.

This year, both committees will play a critical role in overseeing the implementation of the FAA Reauthorization Act, ensuring that key provisions—including workforce development initiatives and infrastructure improvements—are carried out effectively. In light of the recent midair collision at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (KDCA), congressional leaders have signaled their intent to hold hearings on aviation safety but are awaiting additional details on the accident from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) before proceeding. VAI will continue to engage with lawmakers as they shape the policy landscape for the vertical aviation industry.

Additionally, former US Rep. Sean Duffy has been confirmed as

Secretary of the US Department of Transportation (DOT), bringing a new perspective to the agency's aviation policies. VAI looks forward to engaging with Secretary Duffy and DOT leadership on issues affecting vertical flight.

VAI Promotes Safe Air Tour Operations at AAAE Conference in Hawaii

From Jan. 5–9, VAI attended the American Association of Airport Executives (AAAE) 39th Annual Aviation Issues Conference in Kauai, Hawaii. For over three decades, the event has brought together professionals and top officials from government and all sectors of the aviation industry.

Cade Clark, VAI's chief government affairs officer, participated in a panel on aviation safety, highlighting key safety initiatives and concerns for the vertical aviation industry.

While in Kauai, VAI visited with local air tour members to learn more about their operations and how the association can better serve them.

At the conclusion of the AAAE conference, VAI held a Hawaii member meeting in Honolulu, bringing together a majority of the association's operator members to discuss issues facing the vertical aviation industry in the state. Topics included top regulatory and legislative concerns as well as important safety initiatives.

FAA Delays Implementation of Medical Certification Policy

In a significant win for the aviation industry, the FAA postponed the implementation of a controversial new medical certification policy. Initially set to take effect on Jan. 1, 2025, the policy would have classified incomplete applications as denied rather than deferred. Following concerns raised by VAI and 13 other aviation organizations in a joint letter, the FAA has delayed implementation until Mar. 1, 2025.

Under the proposed policy, applications requiring additional information would have been categorized the same as those denied on medical grounds, potentially harming pilots' professional

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MERCY FLIGHT CENTRAL

opportunities. VAI has worked closely with House T&I Committee Chair Graves to address this issue and commends his dedicated leadership in pursuing a fair resolution.

The FAA's decision to delay the policy reflects a commitment to listening to industry concerns and ensuring fairness. The agency has also announced plans to hold a listening session to gather further feedback and provide additional guidance to pilots.

State Action

US state legislatures have also started off 2025 with a flurry of activity.

With all 50 states in session this year, legislative activity related to vertical aviation is at a peak. While some legislatures convened in January, others are beginning in February, bringing a surge of new bills impacting conventional rotorcraft, drones, advanced air mobility (AAM), and aviation fuels.

- **Unmanned aircraft systems (UASs):** In response to last year's New Jersey drone sightings, multiple states have introduced bills aimed at strengthening state oversight and safety for drones.
- **Helicopter legislation:** Several states are reintroducing previously contested helicopter-related bills that VAI opposes due to conflicts with federal preemption.
- **Aviation fuels and sustainability:** A growing number of bills propose state incentives to slowly phase out leaded aviation fuels and promote unleaded and sustainable aviation fuels.

VAI is actively monitoring legislative developments that affect the general aviation and vertical flight industries. Our goal is to work closely with state legislators to promote policies that support industry growth while addressing community concerns.

We encourage our members to stay engaged—if you have questions about bill language or are aware of legislation in your state that may affect vertical aviation, please contact Katia Veraza, assistant director of government affairs and regional relations, at katiav@verticalavi.org. Your insights are invaluable in shaping our advocacy efforts and ensuring that state policies align with the success of vertical aviation.

> **With all 50 states in session this year, legislative activity related to vertical aviation is at a peak.**

The following is a list of key recently introduced bills that VAI is closely tracking.

Hawaii: H.B.810

Summary of facts: Establishes a private right of action allowing individuals to sue helicopter owners or operators for alleged violations of the Federal Aviation Act and existing federal laws.

Industry impact: This bill is a major concern as it conflicts with federal preemption, which grants the FAA exclusive authority over aviation regulations. If passed, it could lead to frivolous lawsuits, increased legal costs, and operational uncertainties for helicopter operators in Hawaii.

Hawaii: S.B.1197

Summary of facts: Requires tour aircraft operators at state-controlled airports to maintain a certain amount of liability insurance coverage.

Industry impact: This proposal is preempted by federal law. Only the FAA can set requirements for the operation of aircraft, including insurance requirements.

New York City Council: 0026-2024

Summary of facts: Restricts nonessential helicopter operations at city-owned heliports to those powered exclusively by electric engines.

Industry impact: If enacted, this legislation would eliminate helicopter operations at New York City–owned heliports shortly after FAA certification of AAM aircraft. The bill would shutter an entire industry in New York while severely damaging it throughout the Northeast United States. If passed, it would also deter investment in the development of advanced, greener vertical aviation technologies by signaling a hostile economic and regulatory environment in the region.

New York State: A.00540

Summary of facts: Requires helicopters to be equipped with flight recorders, cockpit voice recorders, and terrain awareness and warning systems.

Industry impact: The bill violates federal preemption by mandating specific equipment.

New York State: A.02583 and S.1140

Summary of facts: Establishes a tax on noise from nonessential helicopter and seaplane flights in cities with a population of 1 million or more.

Industry impact: This bill would harm helicopter operators in New York by increasing operating costs. It would also set a harmful precedent for other states considering similar regulations, restricting urban air mobility.

Texas: H.B.20
Summary of facts: Creates the Applied Sciences Pathway Program, allowing high school students to earn both a diploma and a certificate in high-demand technical fields.

Industry impact: This bill could help address the aviation workforce shortage by training the next generation of aircraft maintenance technicians—a crucial area for the long-term sustainability of vertical flight ops.

Utah: S.B.96
Summary of facts: Directs the Utah Department of Transportation to conduct a public education campaign on advanced air mobility (AAM) covering use cases, economic benefits, state-driven initiatives, and implementation.

Industry impact: A positive step for AAM adoption, this bill could increase public awareness and acceptance of vertical flight technologies, foster investment, and encourage industry growth in Utah.

Washington: H.B.1084
Summary of facts: Provides excise-tax exemptions for businesses and consumers using unleaded aviation fuel, encouraging the transition away from leaded fuel.

Industry impact: This bill supports sustainability initiatives and aligns with broader federal and industry goals to transition to unleaded aviation fuel. While the tax exemptions are beneficial, ensuring a sufficient supply of unleaded alternatives will be key to a smooth transition for operators.

We are off to a busy 2025. We encourage VAI members to meet with their elected officials and establish relationships with them. Contact the Government Affairs team at Advocacy@verticalavi.org if you'd like help setting up those meetings.

Cade Clark *is VAI's chief government affairs officer.* ***Theresa Marr*** *is VAI's director of government affairs.* ***Katia Veraza*** *is VAI's manager of government affairs and regional relations.*

VAI BRIEFS

VAI Leads Collaboration on HEC Policy

AFTER NEARLY TWO YEARS OF COLLABORATING with VAI and rotorcraft operators, the FAA revised its policy on fall protection equipment used by utility line workers during human external cargo (HEC) operations. Announcing its decision in December 2024, the FAA said harnesses compliant with ANSI/ASSP Z359.11-2021 meet or exceed performance requirements and can be safely employed.

VAI urged the FAA to broaden the scope of the nationally recognized standard for HEC harnesses to address discrepancies between FAA and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations. The discrepancies posed significant compliance challenges for operators and utilities alike, including the possibility of requiring two separately approved harnesses during HEC operations.

"Without this policy change, it would have really slowed, if not stopped, HEC being performed across the US in support of the electric grid system," says Pete Anderson, senior manager, helicopter operations, at Pacific Gas and Electric Co., and chair of VAI's Utility Patrol and Construction Industry Advisory Council (UPAC). "VAI's ability to combine the efforts and voices of helicopter contractors and utility companies nationwide allowed us to work directly with the right people at the FAA."

The FAA's revised policy aligns with the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standard, which is accepted by OSHA, utilities, unions, and harness manufacturers. The FAA emphasized in its policy statement that the harnesses are subject to rigorous maintenance, inspection, and retirement protocols, ensuring their continued reliability and durability.

"This policy change is a testament to the importance of collaboration between industry and regulators," says James Viola, president and CEO of VAI. "By adopting the ANSI standard, the FAA has not only enhanced safety but also simplified the regulatory landscape for operators and utilities working to maintain our national power grid."

What's New at VERTICON 2025

IF YOU'RE READING THIS MAR. 10–13 in Dallas, Texas, then you're most likely reading this at VERTICON 2025. Welcome to the inaugural edition of our show!

While we have kept all the features that made our previous show, HAI HELI-EXPO®, the world's largest vertical aviation conference and trade show, VERTICON will feature new and expanded programming, education opportunities, and chances to connect with your industry.

Here's a look at some new and notable VERTICON events. You will find more information in the VAI Events app, online at verticon.org, or in your VERTICON 2025 Program & Exhibit Guide.

Maintenance Competition

New this year, The Competition at VERTICON 2025, sponsored by the nonprofit Aerospace Maintenance Council, celebrates aviation maintenance technicians and the critical role they play in our industry.

Three-member teams will test their knowledge and expertise in a series of eight maintenance events on the show floor, at Booth #12353. Come cheer on your favorite team on Mar. 11, and honor the winners at the awards ceremony, Mar. 12 from 10:30 am to 12:30 pm.

Exciting Speakers

Don't miss these speakers and their exciting stories! Best of all, you'll have two chances to hear them at the VERTICON 2025 Main Stage (Ballroom C2–C4):

Ethics, Bias & Things That Go Bump in an AI Night, with Paul Zikopoulos

How can AI be used in personal and business relationships? And how can we use AI and maintain trust in those relationships? Future-trends expert Paul Zikopoulos explains.

- Main Stage (Ballroom C2–C4):
  Wed., Mar. 12, 9:00 am – 10:00 am
- VERTICON Connect Q&A (Booth #7405):
  Wed., Mar. 12, 10:15 am – 10:45 am

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about education at
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Flying Sideways – Behind the Scenes, with Fred North
Ever wonder how they got that helicopter shot for a movie? Fred was there!

- Main Stage (Ballroom C2–C4):
  Wed., Mar. 12, 2:15 pm – 3:15 pm
- VERTICON Connect Q&A (Booth #7405):
  Wed., Mar. 12, 3:30 pm – 4:30 pm

Supersonic Survivor, with Brian Udell
If you can survive ejecting from an airplane at 780 mph, what can't you do?

- Main Stage (Ballroom C2–C4):
  Thu., Mar. 13, 9:00 am – 10:00 am
- VERTICON Connect Q&A (Booth #7405):
  Thu., Mar. 13, 10:15 am – 10:45 am

Education@VERTICON
Ready to learn? VERTICON 2025's schedule is packed with over 100 courses, sessions, and briefings.

Foundations Sessions (formerly Rotor Safety Challenge)
In these one-hour sessions, industry volunteers share their expertise to provide you with best practices, tools, and tactics you can apply back on the job. The expanded Foundations series goes beyond safety to include a wide variety of topics, such as advanced air mobility, business development, and cybersecurity.

All Foundations sessions are free for registered attendees and exhibitors. Take VAI's challenge to attend at least six Foundations sessions and receive a certificate of achievement.

Elevations Courses (formerly Professional Education Courses)
This year's series of in-depth education courses includes new offerings on recurrent pilot training for specific Bell and Airbus models, tactical flight officer training, and critical-care readiness training for air ambulance personnel. Elevations courses require a separate registration fee, but you'll also receive free passes to attend VERTICON.

Tech Briefings (formerly Manufacturer Technical Briefings)
These industry updates cover technical information and updated maintenance procedures on specific airframes, engines, equipment, and systems. All the briefings are free for attendees and exhibitors and offer inspection authorization renewal credit.

VAI/f-stop Photography

5 DOS AND DON'TS

Keep the Cap on Aviation Fuel Safety

Mistaken assumptions about your aircraft's fuel can be deadly.

By Zac Noble

IN GENERAL AVIATION, WE SEE MORE than 800 incidents each year due to fuel contamination, fuel starvation (fuel is available but not in the selected tank), and fuel exhaustion (completely running out of fuel). Follow these tips to remain vigilant about fuel monitoring and refueling—from preflight planning to the end of a successful flight.

1 **DON'T forget to visually check your fuel level before departing.** Fuel gauges aren't foolproof (see below). And always double-check your fuel caps prior to takeoff.

2 **DO trust your fuel gauges—but not completely.** Follow your gauges, but keep in mind they can fail, just like any other piece of equipment. Alternatively, when the levels displayed by your fuel gauge don't conform to what you expect, based on your recent refueling and run time, that can indicate another issue with the aircraft, such as a fuel leak. Always listen to what your aircraft is trying to tell you.

3 **DO know your fuel system.** If your ship has more than one tank, be sure you know how to switch to a full one when your first tank is empty. The time to find out how to do that isn't once you're in the air.

4 **DON'T assume the refueling station on your itinerary will be open.** Just because you can find a station's hours online doesn't mean that information is up-to-date. If you're leaving your normal area of operations, call ahead to see if your planned refueling point has fuel and will be open when you arrive.

5 **DO engage with the fuel provider if necessary.** Ask about filtering inspection intervals and don't be afraid to perform your own "white bucket" test or sample the tanks' fuel before putting it in your aircraft.

Zac Noble *is VAI's director of flight operations and maintenance.*

VAI BRIEFS

2024 Aerial Work Safety Conference Sees Record Attendance

THE VAI AERIAL WORK SAFETY Conference enjoyed the highest attendance in its history last year, with more than 400 members of the vertical flight industry gathering at the Boise Centre in Boise, Idaho, for the popular annual event. The conference, held Nov. 19–21, 2024, included VAI industry advisory council (formerly working group) meetings, educational presentations, vendor exhibits, one-on-one discussions with US government agency representatives, and plenty of networking opportunities.

Human external cargo (HEC) operations were a key focus on the first day of the conference, with approximately 150 people attending the VAI Utility Patrol & Construction Industry Advisory Council (IAC) meeting, where the foremost topic of discussion was the draft of the FAA policy statement for HEC. (For more on the policy, see "VAI Leads Collaboration on HEC Policy," p. 16.)

Also on Day 1, the VAI Aerial Firefighting & Natural Resources IAC and the VAI Restricted & Experimental Category Aircraft IAC met to discuss issues important to their sectors, including the use of unmanned aircraft systems in aerial firefighting and perceived deficiencies in guidance for processing restricted category-type certificates.

Day 2 of the event included presentations on various topics, including:

- How to mitigate stress, by Volo Mission CEO Kimberly Hutchings

A full crowd attended the popular "Meet the Regulators" presentation at the 2024 Aerial Work Safety Conference in Boise, Idaho. *(VAI Photo)*

- The FAA's instructions for continued airworthiness (ICA), with aviation attorney Sarah MacLeod
- Navigating the FAA medical certificate process, by Keith Roxo of Wingman Med.

Hutchings was blunt in her portrayal of the seriousness of stress in vertical aviation. "Our industry tolerates stress very well, but it doesn't talk about it," she told attendees. "Burnout is actually a medically defined condition."

In her talk, MacLeod emphasized doing your regulatory homework. "Know the rules, policy, and politics," she advised the audience. "And always question authority."

The second day of the conference also featured the annual "Meet the Regulators" presentation, where attendees asked a panel of FAA officials about issues such as the agency's delays in processing paperwork, which the panelists attributed in part to a lack of necessary documentation from applicants and workforce shortages.

Matthew West, president of Hawk AeroSafety, gave a presentation about the effectiveness of safety management systems (SMSs) and a positive safety culture in reducing hazards and accidents and building safety awareness among frontline employees.

A half-day briefing by the US Forest Service (USFS), which included a Q&A session with audience members, highlighted the third and final day of the 2024 Aerial Work Safety Conference. The conference often features presentations from the USFS, which has National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) and National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) offices in Boise. This setting allows representatives from firefighting companies to assess the previous fire season, learn about changes to USFS contracts, and hold in-person meetings with USFS contracting teams.

Eric Pacheco, senior pilot with the Los Angeles County (California) Fire Department, led the final session of the conference, examining why helicopter pilots continue to strike power lines and how to avoid them. Pacheco encouraged pilots to stay "on the clock," maintaining awareness of where wires are at all times, even encouraging the repetitive use of playful mantras like, "Where da wires at?"

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VAI/Dan Megna Photo

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Vertiport Experts Clint Harper and Ricarda Bennett

Industry consultant, attorney focus on promoting public benefits of AAM.

By Mark Huber

VERTICAL AVIATION'S LIFESAVING value again was on full display during January's Los Angeles wildfires (see "City on Fire," p. 32). But will that translate directly into public acceptance of advanced air mobility (AAM) and enable the build-out of a civil heliport/vertiport network in Southern California? Not right away, according to two experts intimately familiar with both the airspace and the political landscape in the area. But there is a path forward.

Stressing the potential of AAM's public benefit, as opposed to its private convenience, presents a route to wider acceptance, according to Clint Harper, a policy and infrastructure consultant at Harper4D Solutions, who has worked with the Los Angeles Department of Transportation on AAM issues. Community engagement is the key to making that happen, says Ricarda Bennett, an attorney, acoustics expert, and president of Heliport Consultants, a California-based heliport consulting firm. She is also a past chair of the VAI Vertical Flight Infrastructure Industry Advisory Council and a current member of the Los Angeles City Fire Department's Code Advisory Committee. POWER UP spoke to both of them in the wake of the L.A. fires.

VAI/Pete Rankin

POWER UP: ***What are the prospects for getting new vertiports approved prior to the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles? Several electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) manufacturers have expressed an interest in providing passenger service during the Games.***

Harper: It's very difficult to get a new facility approved. The community is dealing with helicopter noise, emissions, and other negatives, yet they lack access to the service. That dynamic makes it very challenging. Los Angeles has a lot of other priorities after the wildfires, but adding vertiports to existing airports is very viable and could definitely happen. But a newly built vertiport in the city is more challenging. There really isn't a goodwill dividend from the fires and the fact that helicopters played such a large role in beating them back. That's not going to translate into—all of a sudden—this cascade of public goodwill for vertiports.

Bennett: There's no impetus currently for more heliports for private use. However, if the heliport could be developed as a hub for both private and public use, there would be a benefit to the community. Temporary heliports could be established during the Olympics whose success might change public opinion as an example of what could be accomplished. The new eVTOL aircraft are significantly quieter than helicopters, and once they're approved and in operation, the public may become more accepting of the construction of new heliport and vertiport venues.

It might be feasible to have a few new heliports approved and constructed in time for the Olympics if the sites are identified and physically qualified this year and the discretionary

and environmental approval process starts this year. The feasibility increases if the helipads are constructed at ground level or on a one-story building, not on a multistory building. Expedited heliport permitting and construction is possible if these facilities are deemed an asset for the Olympics. In the last [L.A.] Olympics, in 1984, there were temporary landing zones near venues for emergencies and for the transfer of media and officials.

> **Los Angeles has a lot of other priorities after the wildfires, but adding vertiports to existing airports is very viable.**
> *- Clint Harper*

POWER UP: ***What other strategies could be employed to build public acceptance and support for heliports and vertiports?***

Bennett: We carefully analyze a city's land use and determine how the heliport could support its goals for the area. We create a special report that emphasizes the benefits of the heliport along with the environmental findings, such as the sound levels of ambient noise and the helicopter, as well as identifying flight paths that avoid noise-sensitive areas.

A heliport represents access for hospital-related emergencies, public safety, rescues from tall-building fires, business transportation, and private charters. If there's political will for the heliports, a media and meeting campaign could be initiated explaining the usage of helicopters and the benefits of having a heliport in the area. Community outreach to discuss neighborhood concerns is important. We meet with community groups to explain how helicopters work, and how pilots use noise-mitigation measures outlined in the Fly Neighborly program to lower helicopter noise exposure to the community. Sometimes we hold an open house with a helicopter at a high school for adults and children in the neighborhood.

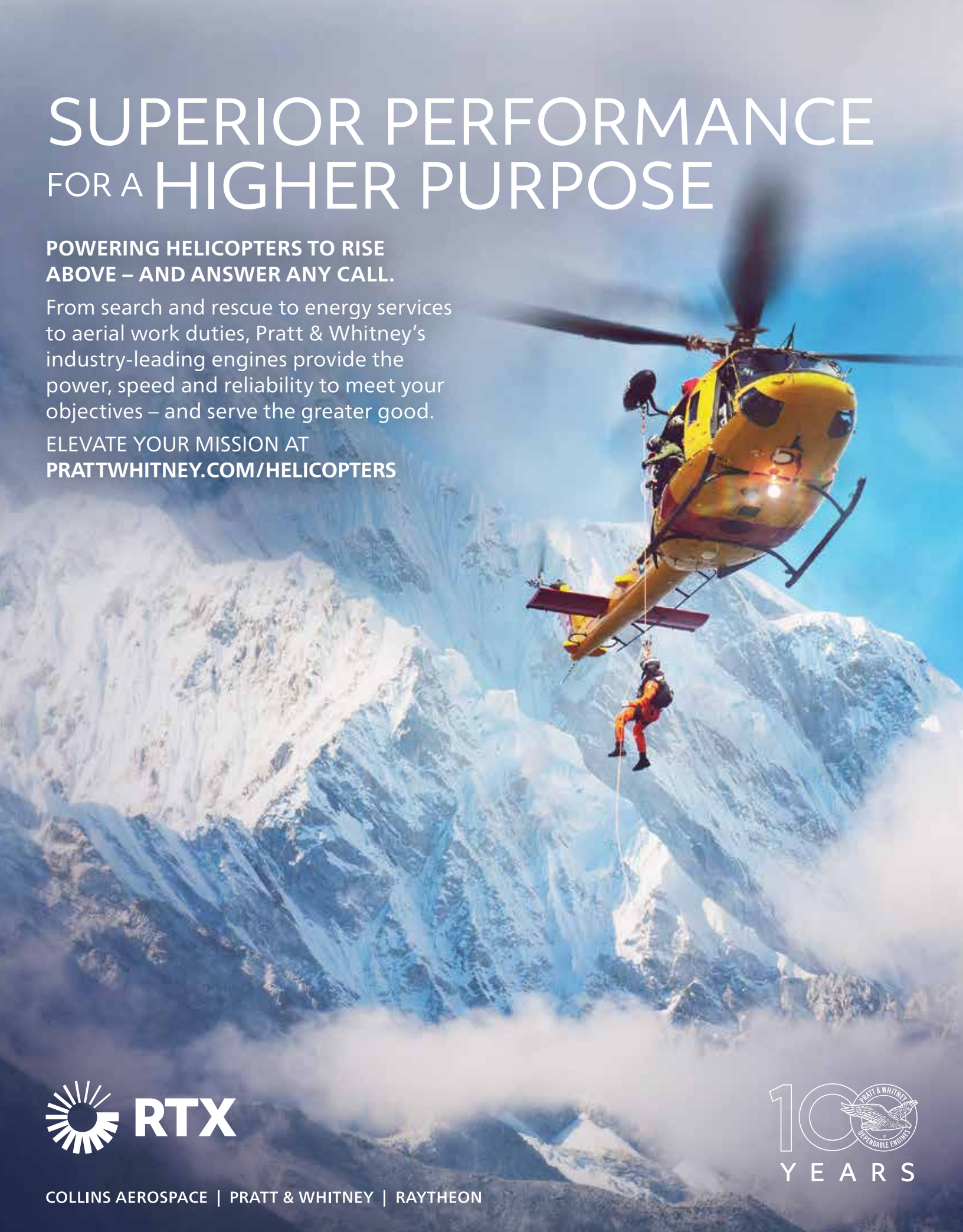
Harper: In 2023, I wrote a white paper in response to a US Department of Transportation request for information on AAM integration. The paper outlined the ability to integrate AAM into what I call "community resilience hubs" that combine multimodal transportation centers, energy hubs, and digital nerve centers that can function independently during grid and network failures and serve the community in the event of a disaster. They'd be able to independently power an emergency operations center and maybe even parts of the surrounding community. The AAM aircraft themselves could be used for quick-response autonomous firefighting or to fulfill public safety missions, such as monitoring neighborhoods after a disaster to discourage looting and delivering critical supplies.

As air taxis, eVTOLs probably won't put a dent in ground congestion, but they could fill in critical gaps within a transportation ecosystem. When you come in with real solutions that serve the community, you don't get the same kind of pushback you would just coming in with the air taxi approach. These solutions also include medical supply delivery, organ transport, emergency response, mid-mile cargo movement, last-mile package delivery, and regional air mobility.

POWER UP: ***What are some of the most glaring mistakes you see regarding rotorcraft and the L.A. basin?***

Bennett: These aren't in any particular order. One is pilots who don't learn how to fly neighborly to mitigate helicopter-noise exposure. If the FAA required fly neighborly training as part of the pilot licensing requirement, flight instructors would include it in flight lessons. Helicopter manufacturers should also teach it as part of their aircraft checks. Another problem is when pilots fly over popular venues near residential areas on a continuing basis, or when they ignore the two outdoor searchlight warning signals to stay away. Also, flying over outdoor events at places like the Hollywood Bowl or The Ford.

Mark Huber *is an aviation journalist with more than two decades of experience in the vertical flight industry.*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Apr. 7–9
ACSF Safety Symposium 2025
Air Charter Safety Foundation
Daytona Beach, Florida, USA
Learn more at acsf.aero/acsf-safety-symposium

May 12–16
NHA Symposium 2025
Naval Helicopter Association
Funner, California, USA
Learn more at navalhelicopterassn.org/symposium

May 19–22
XPONENTIAL 2025
Association for Uncrewed Vehicle Systems International
Houston, Texas, USA
Learn more at xponential.org

May 20–22
VFS 81st Annual Forum & Technology Display
Vertical Flight Society
Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA
Learn more at vtol.org/forum

Jun. 16–22
55th International Paris Air Show
SIAE
Le Bourget, France
Learn more at siae.fr/en

Jul. 14–18
APSCON Conference/APSCON Unmanned 2025
Airborne Public Safety Association
Phoenix, Arizona, USA
Learn more at publicsafetyaviation.org

Jul. 19–20
VFS 19th Annual Electric Aircraft Symposium
Vertical Flight Society
Oshkosh, Wisconsin, USA
Learn more at vtol.org/eas

Jul. 21–27
EAA AirVenture 2025
Experimental Aircraft Association
Oshkosh, Wisconsin, USA
Learn more at eaa.org/airventure

Oct. 14–16
2025 NBAA Business Aviation Convention & Exhibition (NBAA-BACE)
National Business Aviation Association
Las Vegas, Nevada, USA
Learn more at nbaa.org

Oct. 27–29
2025 Air Medical Transport Conference
Association of Air Medical Services
Omaha, Nebraska, USA
Learn more at aams.org/page/events

Nov. 17–20
EUROPEAN ROTORS 2025
European Helicopter Association and European Union Aviation Safety Agency
Cologne, Germany
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Dec. 7–9
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Shaver Lake, Fresno County, California, USA | Feb. 10, 2025

Fresno County Sheriff Air Support Unit | MD Helicopters MD 530F
Pilot: Deputy Michael Sill
Tactical Flight Officer: Deputy Timothy Jacobsen

Photo by Mark Bennett

CITY ON FIRE

The wildfires that decimated Los Angeles in January pushed aerial firefighting teams to their limits. These are some of their stories.

By Mark Huber

ON JAN. 7, 2025, DAN CHILD HAD A DECISION to make.

The chief pilot for Los Angeles (California) City Fire Department (LAFD) Air Operations was flying one of the unit's five Leonardo AW139 medium twin helicopters equipped with a 500-gal. fire-suppression tank. Driven by Santa Ana winds that would eventually gust to 100 mph that night, wildfires began breaking out across the city that morning, most notably the devastating fire in Pacific Palisades and, eight hours later, the Eaton Fire.

Child had lifted off at 10:30 am en route to a small fire in the Hollywood Hills. Five minutes later, he got a report about the beginning of the conflagration in the Palisades.

Winds were already gusting from 30 kt. to 40 kt. (and slightly higher in the mountains), but the AW139s were still able to make their water drops. But per the forecast, as the afternoon dragged on, conditions became "progressively worse," Child says. The turbulence was intense, and it became harder to control the helicopter.

The severe chop was setting off high– and low–rotor rpm alarms. The AW139, which pilots generally praise for its sports car–like performance, was flying more like a bus. "All kinds of red flags were just standing up for me," Child recalls.

Winds in the area continued to build, with reports coming in of gusts from 66 kt. to 89 kt. "The helicopter was just all over the place. I've never been in anything this bad, and I've been flying for 24 years," Child says. At 7:30 the night of Jan. 7, he got on the radio and stood down air operations for the night. "I think everyone was relieved," he admits.

Given the winds, it was increasingly difficult just to control the helicopter, forget about getting water on target. The wind shear was unpredictable. The danger was obvious. But standing down was not an easy call. The AW139s had been able to make about 8 to 10 drops an hour each since they launched that morning. Homes had been saved as a result.

Firefighters are trained to run to the danger. And all LAFD pilots must begin their careers as firefighters. "People call 911 and we come out and fix the problem," Child says. That January day, he had to decide if he was "a firefighter who is a pilot or a pilot who is a firefighter. The best thing I could do is be a pilot." And his pilot training told him to land. "I knew it was the right thing, and I felt a

Dan Child/LAFD Photos

HEAR
from three aerial firefighters who worked the L.A. fires

lot better after the fact."

The next morning, the LAFD's AW139s were back in the air. With their pilots donning night-vision goggles (NVG), the aircraft were particularly effective in the evenings.

The crews would fly for the next six consecutive nights and days.

All Hands on Deck

Mike Sagely was the first helicopter pilot on scene minutes after the Eaton Fire broke out at 6:18 pm on Jan. 7. The senior pilot for Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACoFD) Air Operations was flying a Bell 412. He describes what happened next.

"We hit wind shear and turbulence that was so severe that, for a short period of time, I really didn't have control of the aircraft. We went negative G. My transmission-pressure caution light came on. For a split second, I cavitated the main transmission or hit enough rough air to trip the pressure sensor."

His airspeed indicator read 85 kt. The GPS said he was doing 11 kt. across the ground. "My eyes didn't believe it," Sagely recalls.

Sagely, recipient of the 2024 VAI Salute to Excellence Pilot of the Year Award, was flying the helicopter coordinator or "helco" aircraft. The helco typically directs water drops by other rotorcraft and coordinates these efforts with firefighters on the ground. The department's Sikorsky Firehawks arrived on scene a few minutes later, but due to the high winds, they quickly opted to return to their base, Barton Heliport (KPAI), adjacent to Whiteman Airport (KWHP) in Pacoima.

> **The wind made firefighting virtually impossible. It was purely about saving lives and getting people out of there. So many houses were on fire.**
> ***—Mike Sagely, Senior Pilot, LACoFD Air Operations***

David Swanson/Getty Images Photo

"We made the decision almost immediately, based on conditions," says Sagely. But he and the battalion chief riding shotgun in the 412 stayed behind on the fire for a while to help identify its likely path and assist in coordinating evacuations. The wind—in the air and on the ground—made firefighting virtually impossible. "It was purely about saving lives and getting people out of there. So many houses were on fire."

Sagely stayed on scene until his fuel began to run low. Because of that and the ongoing danger involved, "it wasn't worth flying anymore. You can't second-guess yourself in that situation."

The next morning, LACoFD helicopters were back in the air. The department operates a mixed fleet that includes three 412s and three Sikorsky S-70i Firehawks. Pilots are cross-trained to fly both aircraft. The 412s are fitted with 360-gal. water tanks; the Firehawks are faster and have tanks that can hold 1,000 gal.

Over the course of four days, Sagely and his fellow department pilots would fly around 40 hours each. For the week, they made 1,100 water drops. One Firehawk made 131 snorkels over a 13.3-hour period. Sagely made 98 over the course of nine hours when he started flying drop missions on Jan. 9.

On Jan. 10, he started flying night drops. Even with NVG, nighttime firefighting is more difficult. "There's an uptick in concentration," Sagely explains. "You're scanning for hazards and tracking [electric transmission] wires. When you're in the middle of the action, it's easy to lose track of the hazards around you. We call it 'distraction hijack.' " Sagely flew both the Eaton and Palisades Fires.

Back at Barton, it was all hands on deck, with helicopters flying between 16 and 20 hours a day thanks to

rotating crews and a maintenance staff that stayed around the clock, performing a variety of regular inspections, both minor and major, as well as significant maintenance in the midst of the tumult, sometimes on the ramp in the middle of the night. Sagely says the department's maintenance staff during the fires "was just crushing it. Without them, there is no way we could have kept up the pace."

Terry Apodaca services a Sikorsky. *(Terry Apodaca/ LACoFD Photo)*

Working the Wrenches

Ruben "Mike" Perez and Terry Apodaca were 2 of 13 LACoFD helicopter mechanics on duty during the fires. With red-flag fire danger warnings up, several mechanics came in early Jan. 6 to make sure the helicopters were ready to go in time for the forecasted high winds the following day.

When the fires hit on the 7th, Perez "knew it was a pretty good fire" just based on what he could see from the Barton ramp. When the super-high winds moved in that night and the helicopters returned to base, dread set in. "This is going to be bad," Perez thought "It was kind of a helpless feeling." When he found out just how bad the following morning, he was "blown away." It was the beginning of some late nights.

Given the tempo of fire operations, the Firehawks were burning through scheduled inspections, including 40-hour inspections that can sometimes take days. The team would swarm the affected helicopter and knock it out within a couple of hours. And they added extra steps to mitigate the impact of flying all day—and sometimes all night—in smoke, such as engine washing.

"We wanted to keep the engines clean so they could perform at a high level," Apodaca says. And inspections after post-maintenance check flights were performed with extra rigor to detect any engine or gearbox leaks.

Aside from the inspections, other things popped up. A safety cable broke on a snorkel. A radio had to be swapped out when it became inoperative after soot and dirt got into the keys. The cause of caution lights, probably just turbulence, still needed investigation.

"We did very well on the maintenance side of the house. We created a plan, and we worked that plan," says Perez. "I think we were a little lucky, too," he adds, noting that nothing major happened to any of the ships, such as "an owl coming through the windshield. We didn't have anything unforeseen happen, and the aircraft held up well. I couldn't believe we were flying that much. It was rewarding and refreshing."

Mark Huber *is an aviation journalist with more than two decades of experience in the vertical flight industry.*

HeliOps/Ned Dawson Photo

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Chinooks Make South Korea Firefighting Debut

Global contracts ensure little downtime for aerial firefighting operators.

By Mark Huber

FROM FEBRUARY TO MAY 2024, Montana-based Billings Flying Service (BFS) sent five of its Boeing CH-47D Chinook tandem-rotor Category 1 helicopters to fight fires in the Republic of Korea (South Korea) under a contract with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs' Korea Forest Service (KFS). It was the first time the KFS had employed CH-47s on fires. The helicopters were each equipped with a 2,500-gal. Kawak internal tank and snorkel system that can refill in 48 seconds.

Forests cover more than 60% of South Korea and wildfires there in recent years have become increasingly destructive. The Uljin forest fire in 2022 burned for six weeks, consuming more than 50,000 acres and threatening a liquefied natural gas facility and a nuclear power plant. A combined fleet of 137 helicopters from the KFS, the South Korean military, and the US Army were required to extinguish the blaze.

BFS flew the helicopters to Seattle, Washington, where they were prepared for the two-week sea shipment to South Korea's Port of Busan. In Seattle, two days were required to disassemble the aircraft and pack the spares containers for shipping, with another two days in Busan to reverse the process. The spares packages included everything from major components to "extra nuts and bolts," according to Katrina Miller, BFS director of business development. Each aircraft went with a crew including two pilots, three mechanics, an English-speaking translator, and a parts-support assistant.

Miller says the main difference between fighting fires in the United States and Korea was the language difference. "Communications is one of the most critical components of a successful mission, which we understood. Our team retained highly skilled interpreters to perform at each base and remain with each aircraft team for the entirety of our assignment."

BFS currently operates six CH-47Ds in the restricted category and is in the process of integrating six more, acquired from the Netherlands Ministry of Defence, into its fleet.

Those aircraft are expected to become operational this summer. BFS successfully completed FAA flight testing for that portion of the certification process. Miller says the final steps for gaining approval are "forthcoming."

"We are thankful to have support from both FAA representatives and congressional constituents who all worked tirelessly to see this project through to completion," Miller says.

She adds that the CH-47s have performed well for the company, with a readiness rate exceeding 98%. "We were honored to partner with the Korea Forest Service during their 2024 fire season."

Korea Forest Aviation Headquarters

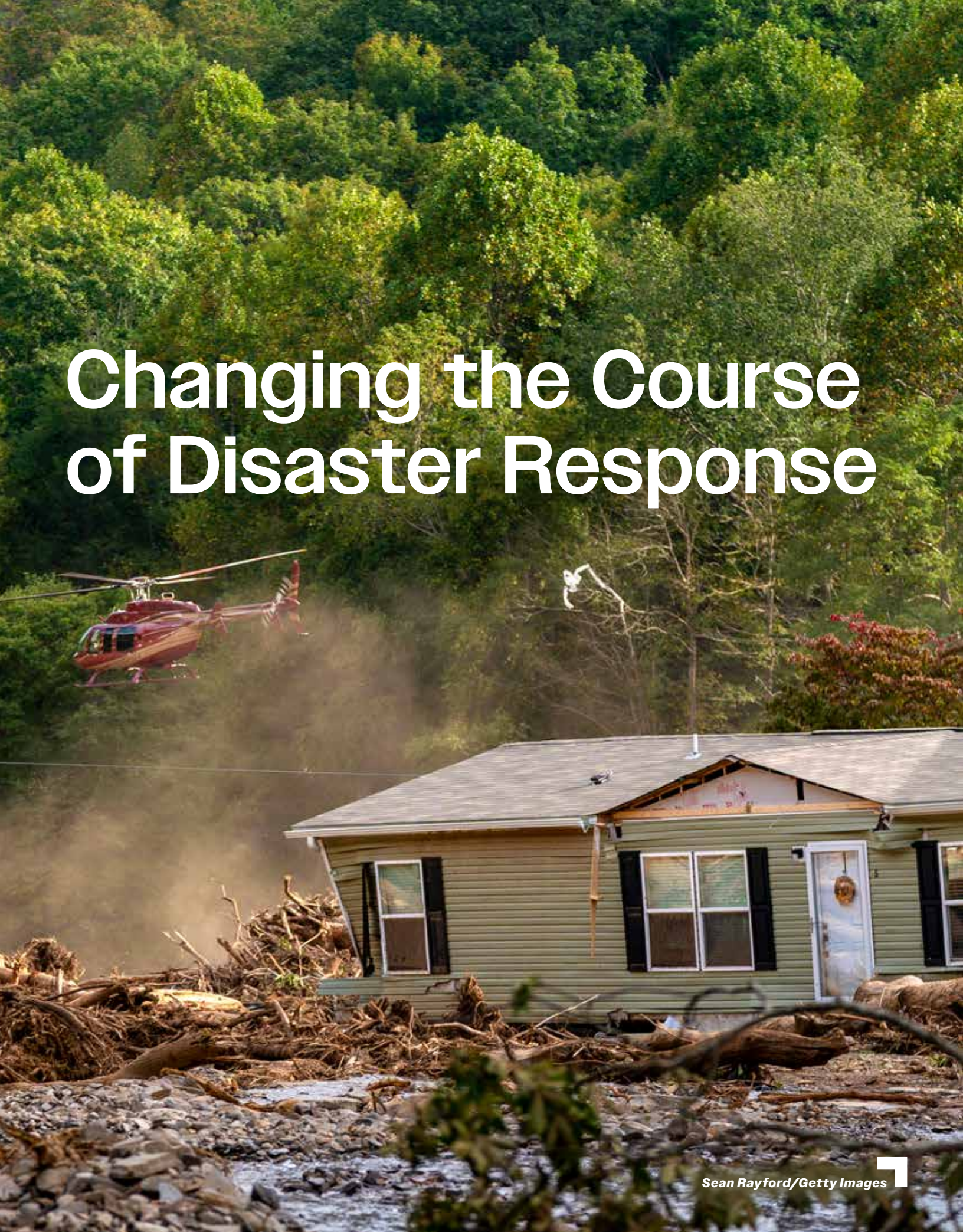
Mark Huber *is an aviation journalist with more than two decades of experience in the vertical flight industry.*

OPERATION HELO

Volunteers who brought relief to North Carolina after Hurricane Helene to form ongoing helicopter disaster relief organization.

By Mark Huber

Changing the Course of Disaster Response



Sean Rayford/Getty Images

WATCH
the powerful story of how Operation Helo began

STORMS SPAWNED BY HURRICANE HELENE decimated mountainous Western North Carolina on Friday, Sep. 27, 2024. Torrential rain dumped almost 3 ft. of water within 72 hours over parts of the area, sending rivers well over their banks.

The event destroyed 126,000 homes, generated 1,400 landslides, wiped out 6,000 miles of roads and more than 1,000 bridges and culverts, and downed power and communications grids as well as 160 water and sewer systems. More than 100 North Carolina residents died, and at least one dozen are still unaccounted for. Initial damage estimates top $60 billion. Thirty-nine of the state's 100 counties were designated as federal disaster areas.

With communications down and the roads out, the scope of the disaster took days to comprehend. But informal communication—some of it over social media—between private helicopter pilots and volunteers within the region quickly painted a dire picture. It prompted them, on an ad hoc basis, to stand up one of the largest private air forces in the history of the United States within two days, long before official help became available.

Over the next 11 days, more than 100 privately owned helicopters from as far away as Wyoming descended on the small airport in Hickory, North Carolina (KHKY). There, they set up a command center, field hospital, and relief-supply collection and distribution hub.

In a matter of days, Operation Helo (for "Humanitarian Emergency Logistics Organization") accomplished the near impossible. It flew 4,000 incident-free missions within a 5,273-sq.-mi. area, fielding 2,125 calls for help, setting up 167 helicopter landing zones, performing 450 evacuations, and delivering 523 Starlink satellite communications systems and more than 2 million lb. of much-needed water, food, medical, and other supplies to survivors otherwise cut off from the rest of the world.

The highly successful operation has produced a permanent, nationwide organization of volunteer helicopter pilots, owners, and others that will be formally announced at VERTICON 2025. At the group's core are the individual members of the nation's civil rotorcraft community who recognize the unique capabilities of their aircraft to provide lifesaving aid when nothing else can.

Calls for Help

Marty Fisher served as a presidential helicopter pilot for Marine Helicopter Squadron One (HMX-1) and is now the aviation director for Atrium Health in Charlotte, North Carolina. Atrium flies a fleet of Airbus helicopters and Pilatus PC-24 jets.

Two days before Helene hit, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) contacted Fisher to place one of the PC-24s on its emergency response plan for the storm.

A damaged bridge in Bat Cave, North Carolina, bears a handwritten "Don't Land" sign intended as a warning for relief helicopters. The dangers in areas rocked by natural disasters are not always obvious. *(Mario Tama/Getty Images)*

After the hurricane passed, however, FEMA wasn't being contacted for help because communications were down—so the jet sat in the hangar.

Atrium's activities in Western North Carolina are limited, and Fisher didn't hear much from the region until he received a text Saturday night, Sep. 28, from a helicopter operator who had flown into the area to conduct a wellness check and who was requesting helicopter delivery of medical supplies.

On Sunday morning, Fisher received another call for help from a different operator. The two calls convinced him that something very bad was happening in the mountains. Subsequent calls he received from volunteer fire departments, emergency medical services, and hospitals—many using satellite phones—confirmed it.

Atrium dispatched two helicopters to Hickory, one with a full air ambulance interior and the other, fresh out of maintenance, with an empty interior that could be used for supply drops. Arriving at the Hickory helicopter air ambulance base, the crews found it without power and communications. Fortunately, things were better on the other side of the airport. And that was largely the work of Matt McSwain and, at first, a small team of volunteers that eventually grew to a force of 700.

A US Army National Guard Airbus UH-72B Lakota hovers over a community on Sep. 30, 2024, near Black Mountain, North Carolina, where the Swannanoa River, swollen from rain from Hurricane Helene, reached a flood stage of more than 27 ft. The severe flooding left residents without power, water, or accessible roads. *(Sean Rayford/Getty Images)*

McSwain, a military veteran and helicopter pilot, owns a company that manufactures race car and bush airplane suspension components in Maiden, North Carolina. On Saturday morning, he received a call from a customer in Texas, Doug Jackson, who in 2017 formed the nonprofit fixed-wing aircraft charity Operation Airdrop. Jackson encouraged McSwain to investigate "things in the mountains."

McSwain took off from Little Mountain Airport (6NC1) in Maiden in his MD 500. He wasn't prepared for the hellscape he found: washed out roads and bridges; virtual spaghetti bowls of downed, entangled power lines and uprooted, twisted trees; flattened buildings and outsized debris clogging the swollen waterways. "It was barbaric," McSwain says.

McSwain quickly ascertained that airports immediately near the worst of the storm were either too damaged or lacked the infrastructure

A helicopter lands on North Carolina State Route 74 in Bat Cave, North Carolina, on Oct. 3, 2024. Storm damage to roads and bridges from Hurricane Helene left the community inaccessible to auto traffic for a week. *(Sean Rayford/Getty Images)*

to support large-scale helicopter operations. He landed at Hickory, about 40 miles away from the worst of the devastation, and asked the local FBO for a room. The FBO, unlike the air ambulance base across the field, still had power. He then called other helicopter operators in North Carolina, including the local Robinson dealer. By Sunday, Sep. 29, two days after the storm hit, the elements of an organization and a plan were in place.

Jackson, in Texas, headed up to Concord, North Carolina, with fixed-wing aircraft laden with supplies to set up operations. Compared with Hickory, Concord features a longer active runway and the airport is adjacent to a Walmart that was converted into a regional drop-off center for donated supplies for the storm's survivors. Planes would either deliver the supplies to the helicopters in Hickory or the helicopters would fly to Concord for pickup and distribution.

Email blasts and social media posts, largely on Facebook and Instagram, went out to area helicopter pilots. By early Sunday morning, 6 helicopters were on the ramp at Hickory. By Monday morning, there were 33.

One of them, a Robinson R44 Raven II, belonged to retired NASCAR auto-racing team executive Andy Petree. On Saturday morning, Petree, who lives in Lake Norman, North Carolina, and his wife were in the middle of an eight-hour car trip to Port Canaveral, Florida, for a long-anticipated vacation cruise. Petree's phone began "blowing up" with social media posts and phone calls from flying friends about the situation in the mountains.

Then Petree started getting texts from individuals asking for direct assistance. "We have to help these people," he told his wife. By Sunday, they'd canceled their cruise and were driving home. By Monday morning, he was flying missions out of Hickory, and by the end of the day, he'd been made chief pilot of rotorcraft operations for the relief effort.

Dangerous Flying

Petree says the flying was incredibly challenging: tight landing zones (LZs) peppered with fallen trees and power lines, all the variables and nuances of mountain flying, and washed-out and undermined roads with "SOS" carved into the roadside mud and "HELP" spray-painted on what little pavement remained by stranded survivors.

The R44s were particularly suited to the task and accounted for about 80% of the aid delivered

and evacuations, including a nursing home with 154 patients. “People couldn’t even walk out,” Petree recalls. “They had no food, water, or power for three days, and nobody even knew where they were.”

The pilots and their crews had to heavily improvise. “Almost all these missions would turn into another,” Petree says.

Delivery missions turned into evacuation missions. Petree personally evacuated a special-needs child. A distraught woman wanted help finding her husband who had been washed away. People who had lost everything still didn’t want to leave. The base at Hickory rerouted helicopters in flight. Flying days were long.

At night, Petree changed his own oil after debriefing. He flew 70 hours in 12 days. Stress levels were high. “It’s not your standard flying,” Petree says. Pilots had to approach the tight LZs—too small for military helicopters—slowly, and pay close attention to loads, power management, squirrely winds in the gorges, and obstacles. You needed another set of eyes in the cockpit.

Chris Zeitler was one of those spotters. A native North Carolinian and active-duty military member with special operations squad leader experience, Zeitler is also a fixed-wing student pilot, training with Total Flight Solutions in Louisburg, North Carolina. The fixed-wing and helicopter training center was sending helicopters to Hickory. Zeitler, off on a four-day pass—later extended— thought his experience would be useful and caught a ride in one of the R44s. “I didn’t know how bad things were until I got there,” he says.

An Advanced Tactical Operation

McSwain understood the value of Zeitler’s military experience and tapped him to head up tactical operations, setting up security at the airport and vetting volunteers, including those assigned to each pilot. His force grew to about 75, including 15 working security at the airport.

The volunteers who flew with the pilots functioned as a combination of tactical flight officer, crew chief, aircraft loader, rescue swimmer, medic, and liaison/recon specialist. Zeitler focused on individuals with previous military, firefighting, air ambulance, or law enforcement experience. He also flew along as the tactical officer on several missions during the first three days of operations. He characterized the destruction he saw as “insane,” such as the tour bus that floated through a church in the community of Bat Cave.

When a helicopter landed in a relief area, the tactical volunteer was responsible for identifying and engaging local leadership, generally the volunteer fire chief, and ascertaining the needs of each community, including critical medications. They coordinated critical actions such as road clearing, setting up helicopter landing zones, and marking them with VRM coordinates. They also delivered the donated Starlink systems, which allowed the local authorities to communicate with neighboring communities, further speeding relief efforts.

Each helicopter that was sent out carried two days of sustainment supplies for the crew in the event they got stuck somewhere. Petree’s wife made him a bag of peanut butter and jelly

sandwiches. He gave most away to survivors he met on his flights.

Help Flows In

Back at base in Hickory, by Monday night, Sep. 30, McSwain knew he had some urgent problems. He personally had guaranteed to pay for the fuel of any helicopter that showed up. The tab for the first full day of flight operations was already $61,000.

While people were showing up at the airport with fistfuls of cash, and the Rev. Franklin Graham, himself a pilot and the head of relief charity Samaritan's Purse, had offered to help, McSwain needed a way to process the donations and turn them into charitable contributions—legally. With the help of an attorney and language gleaned from the artificial intelligence app ChatGPT, Operation Helo officially opened for business on Tuesday, Oct. 1—a mere four days after Hurricane Helene devastated the area—as a 501(c)(3) federally tax-exempt organization. It raised $4.1 million within days. Also on that Tuesday, the FAA arrived in Hickory to help.

> **These are my neighbors, my brothers and sisters. They needed help and I felt compelled to go help them.**
> *—Chris Zeitler, student pilot*

Meanwhile, helicopters, supplies, and volunteers continued to pour in. Robinson Helicopter Co. sent parts kits. Mobile A&P maintenance technicians arrived to donate their services. Operation Helo took over the new FBO and the old terminal building with a museum and a restaurant. The restaurant, by virtue of its refrigeration equipment, became the pharmacy. A field hospital was established and handled a wide variety of injuries and even delivered a baby.

An emergency operations center (EOC) fielded distress calls and dispatched missions. Calls came in via a dedicated phone line and through email and social media. A team created mission cards with as much information as possible—the physical address, coordinates, and any salient medical information. The cards were triaged based on urgency and coordinated with maps of the area. And, courtesy of the FAA, each mission was given a transponder code from an available pool of 40, drawn from a fishbowl like a lottery ticket.

When a mission was completed, the code went back in the bowl. Pilots picked up a card and a code and headed for deactivated Runway 1/19 at Hickory that became a giant helicopter ramp, home to up to 60 at any given time. The runway hosted a true cornucopia of different rotorcraft types—from R44s to K-Maxes to Chinooks and everything in between.

Altogether, 103 private helicopters participated in the effort over the course of two weeks. Tracking software displayed each flight on EOC computer screens in real time. Pilots followed dedicated in and out routes and attended daily morning and evening briefings.

On Oct. 2, Ivanka Trump flew in on a Gulfstream jet packed with 300 Starlink systems donated by Elon Musk. The next day, two Massachusetts National Guard CH-47s arrived, officially to conduct "training missions." Other military helicopters from several other states also appeared to do "training." All received missions and codes from the EOC.

"It was the craziest thing I've ever seen in my life," says McSwain. "We were telling Black Hawks and Chinooks what to do and where to go."

Area military commanders were augmenting Zeitler's force of tactical flight officers with "volunteers," also ostensibly out on passes.

McSwain leveraged his auto racing contacts to recruit some of the top Formula Drift drivers in the United States, who began arriving midweek. Operation Helo began working with them to start forging roads into the mountains, keeping them supplied with intelligence and air drops.

On Thursday, Oct. 3, the FAA informed McSwain it was throwing up a 30-mile-wide national security temporary flight restriction (TFR) over the area to accommodate the visit of then–President Joe Biden. It would have shut down operations at Hickory for an entire day. McSwain objected and convinced the FAA to limit the TFR area to 10 miles. "We kept flying," he says.

And the donations kept coming. During the second week of Operation Helo, an Amazon executive in Charlotte called and wanted to know what was going on in Hickory—Amazon had 61,000 packages to deliver there, enough cold-weather clothes to fill four semi–tractor trailers and 29 box trucks.

Operation Helo partnered with Charlotte's Elevation Church to conduct one of the largest cold-weather clothing drives in the state's history. As flight operations wound down, Operation Helo had burned through more than $800,000

worth of aviation fuel but still had money left. It spent it on purchasing and delivering 182 camper trailers to families who lost their homes in the disaster.

A Template for the Future

Months later, Zeitler reflected on his time in Hickory. "These are my neighbors, my brothers and sisters. They needed help and I felt compelled to go help them."

The experience has convinced Zeitler to get a helicopter add-on rating once his initial fixed-wing flight training is completed. "I'm definitely a big fan of rotary-wing now."

McSwain marvels at the volunteers who came to Hickory. "It was the craziest experience of my life. The talent pool that showed up to help us was insane." They slept in their aircraft, on the FBO floor, in hangars, and in their cars. And they are ready to do it again.

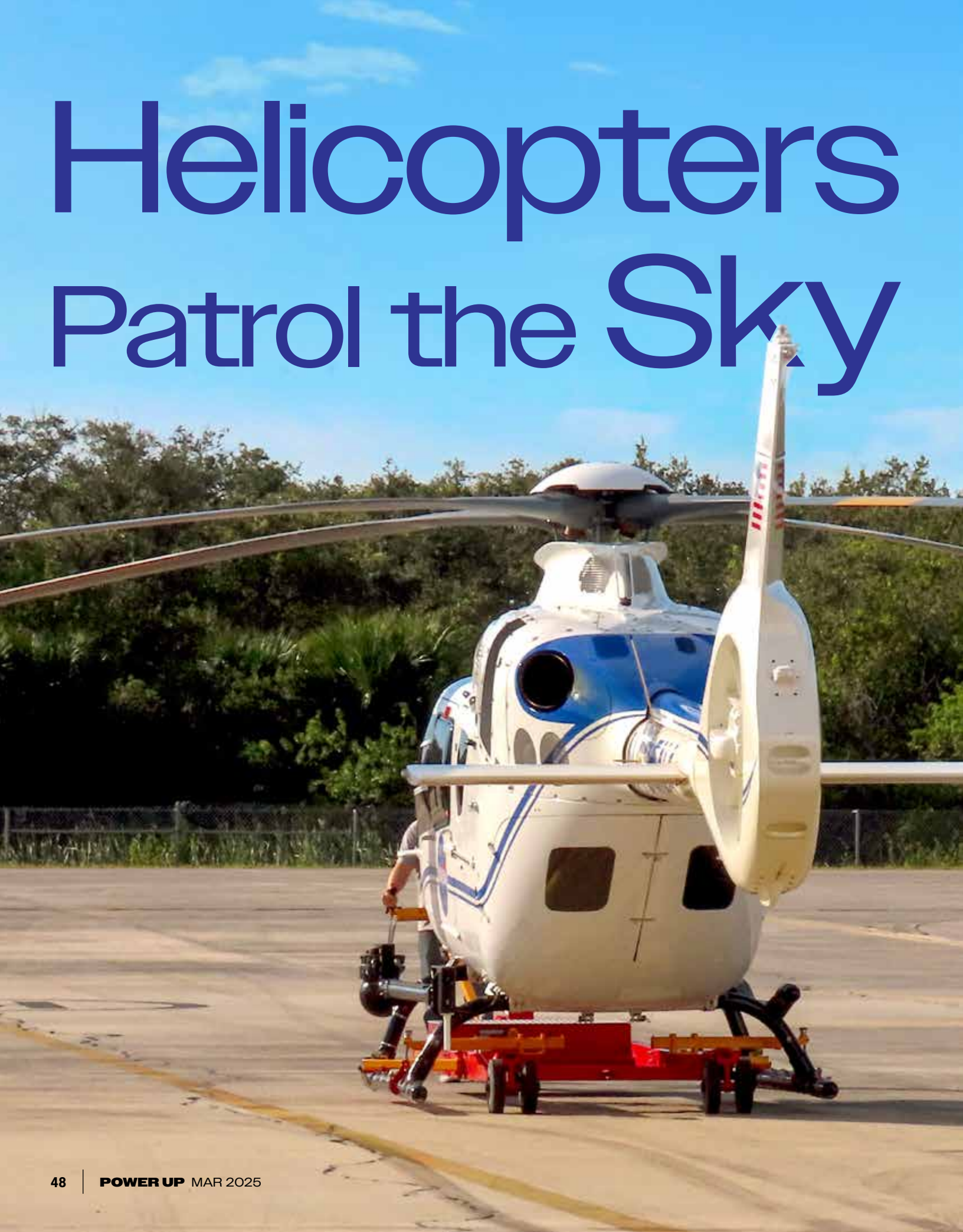
"It felt like we had done something meaningful," says Petree. "If Operation Helo has any more missions like this, I'm going to be available." He may get that chance. Working with the Robinson Helicopter Co., McSwain intends to make Operation Helo a permanent, nationwide organization. "We intend to be at every natural disaster that we can."

Robinson and Operation Helo are developing a training syllabus and course for volunteer relief pilots. "It's going to change the way the country responds to disasters," Robinson CEO David Smith tells VAI. The goal is to create "a network of prepared pilots who are ready for disasters."

Smith envisions in-person courses that teach flying into various types of disaster aftermath, including floods, mudslides, wildfires, and earthquakes. The training "is going to be an enjoyable experience. The next time the country, their neighbors, need their help, they will be better prepared. Once people do this, they are bonded like brothers."

Mark Huber *is an aviation journalist with more than two decades of experience in the vertical flight industry.*

Helicopters Patrol the Sky



at Kennedy Space Center

Pilots perform multiple missions for NASA complex.

By Justin Bachman

APART FROM THE RUMBLE OF A rocket launch every few days, Kennedy Space Center (KSC) is a peaceful, sprawling complex located within Florida's Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, located on a barrier island between the Florida coast and the Atlantic Ocean.

The 144,000-acre spaceport is the largest field center in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). It stretches roughly 34 miles from north to south and is the primary site for US government and commercial rocket launches. Security is always tight, both on the ground and from the sea

VAI/Michael Howard Photography

SEE
how the KSC's helicopters were built

Pilot Stephen Lee (right) is also chief of aviation maintenance at NASA's Kennedy Space Center (KSC). One of the three Airbus EC135 helicopters (below) flown by KSC Flight Operations. *(VAI/ Michael Howard Photography)*

and air, with KSC security staff, the US Coast Guard, and personnel from the adjacent Cape Canaveral Space Force Station on duty at all times.

The task of monitoring this sprawling campus from the air falls to a cadre of NASA pilots who fly three Airbus EC135 helicopters on security patrols and a variety of other missions. The fleet is tasked with perimeter checks and other duties, including flights to monitor rocket launches and to record Hollywood-quality, 8K video that NASA uses to support spaceport operations or edit into news coverage and social media posts.

Stephen Lee, the center's aviation maintenance chief, is a pilot at KSC, the only one of NASA's 10 field centers to have helicopters, known officially as KSC Flight Operations.

"I feel very blessed to be here," Lee says on a recent sunny morning, standing inside the hangar with a fleet of Airbus birds kept gleaming with weekly washes and post-flight touch-ups.

For the KSC, the EC135 fleet replaced older Bell UH-1H Huey II helicopters and provides a versatile platform that can seat two pilots—but also operate with a single pilot—and carry as many as five passengers. It can be converted to an air ambulance within about 10 minutes while providing durability and modest maintenance loads, Lee says.

As part of a 2020 agreement for three new aircraft, NASA and Airbus Helicopters signed a 10-year support contract that includes maintenance and several Airbus personnel assigned to the KSC.

Multiple Missions

During a launch, the military range east of the KSC is a strict no-go zone for aircraft, vessels, and humans owing to the potential for an anomaly that could send lethal debris blasting across the launch zone. The twin-engine EC135s fly as far as 70 miles offshore during patrols. The team also supports NASA's astronaut-return missions from the International Space Station, when SpaceX Crew Dragon capsules splash down off the Florida coast.

Beyond these roles, the KSC fleet is called upon for periodic search-and-rescue missions to find campers and hikers lost in the wildlife preserve. The flight team also provides medical evacuation during emergencies, overflies prescribed forest burns in the area, and keeps watch for boaters entering restricted waters during rocket launches.

The team conducts random security sweeps across the KSC both day and night. “This is a federal facility, so we have to protect it,” Lee says. “Telling the [media] story is always good, but that will never trump the security” aspect of the Flight Operations mission.

On a cloudless late Thursday morning in early December, a Falcon 9 rocket shook the quiet for several minutes to send a SiriusXM commercial satellite on its journey to a geostationary orbit. This particular launch involved no NASA helicopter air support, although commercial space launch operators have the option to hire the NASA team.

Blue Origin, for example, opted to contract with NASA to provide helicopter assistance for its debut launch operations for the New Glenn rocket. The new, heavy-lift model from billionaire Jeff Bezos’s space company took its first flight from the KSC on Jan. 16, with the space center’s full flight crew and two of its three Airbus helicopters providing clearance of the hazard area and detailed imagery support.

Inspired by *Airwolf*

Lee, 44, joined NASA in October 2022 after a military career as a helicopter maintenance technician and US Army UH-60 Black Hawk pilot, serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. He’s also been a helicopter pilot with the Army National Guard for more than a decade.

Lee grew up in Long Beach, California, and cross-enrolled at San Diego State University as part of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) ahead of his planned army career. He followed in the military footsteps of his father, who was drafted to serve in the Korean War.

Like many children of the 1980s, Lee was fascinated by the CBS series *Airwolf*, which featured a modified Bell

NASA views the Airbus EC135 as a versatile aircraft that can perform a wide range of missions, including security patrols, search and rescue, aerial video of rocket launches and landings, and habitat monitoring. *(VAI/Michael Howard Photography)*

222 posing as an armored, supersonic stealth attack helicopter. Lee doesn't hesitate to grin broadly, and nod, when asked about a connection between the TV series and his interest in pursuing a career with helicopters.

When it comes to the various models of helicopters Lee has worked on or flown, he says, "I do have a special place for my Black Hawk," the workhorse twin-engine UH-60 helicopter the US Department of Defense has acquired by the thousands since the model entered into service, in 1979.

Chasing an Asteroid

One of the more memorable missions of Lee's NASA aviation career came in September 2023, when he and a colleague supported the return of an asteroid sample that NASA identified in a remote spot in the Utah desert. The mission included a three-day journey from the KSC to the Defense Department's Utah Test and Training Range, west of Salt Lake City, with refueling stops every two to three hours.

The novel scientific exploration—dubbed OSIRIS-REx (Origins, Spectral Interpretation, Resource Identification, and Security-Regolith Explorer)—was NASA's first to land a spacecraft on an asteroid, called Bennu, collect samples from the surface, and return them to Earth.

The effort began with a launch from the KSC in September 2016, with the collection spacecraft (also named OSIRIS-REx) settling briefly on the asteroid in October 2020 and obtaining 4.3 oz. of material. After a nearly three-year, multibillion-mile journey back to Earth, the spacecraft ejected into the atmosphere a capsule containing the Bennu samples before being sent on a new mission to explore another asteroid, Apophis, in 2029.

On the day of the asteroid sample's return, Sep. 24, 2023, Lee and his NASA colleague Andre Karpowich flew the camera-equipped Airbus to record the capsule's descent and the parachute deployments needed to slow the capsule from more than 27,600 mph to its 11 mph touchdown velocity. The pair also flew the safety technician to the landing site to ensure that "all systems were safe before the recovery team could [approach]," Lee says.

Patrolling Earth and Sky

Aside from rockets, the KSC's home, the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, hosts more than 1,000 species of plants, 117 species of fish, 68 amphibian and reptile species, 330 bird species, and 31 mammal species. The nearby Indian River Lagoon makes up part of the refuge.

Since NASA acquired the land in the early 1960s, the area's beaches, marshes, and dunes have been protected from development, providing habitat for a wide range of plants and wildlife. Its 43 miles of beaches are a critical nesting place for endangered sea turtles, with people on the ground helping document the number of turtle nests created annually. "It's just a beautiful area," Lee says. "If you're a nature lover, this is the place to be."

KSC strives to be "a responsible partner" in maintaining the habitat and works with other agencies in monitoring wildlife health, with KSC Flight Operations a key part of that work, says Messod Bendayan, a communications strategist who supports the KSC Communications Office.

Lee enjoys the variety of work the Flight Operations team does. "I'm in the air watching rockets launch, telling that story one day," Lee says, recounting the variety of his piloting missions, including a space capsule recovery in the Utah desert. "On another day, I'm counting bald eagles."

Justin Bachman *is a professional writer specializing in aviation news and analysis.*

THE IMPORTANCE OF VAI ADVOCACY

How VAI advocacy is impacting the future of vertical aviation.

By Bailey Wood

VERTICAL AVIATION INTERNATIONAL (VAI) stands at the center of a dynamic and rapidly evolving sector that encompasses helicopter manufacturers, operators, suppliers, and the growing field of advanced air mobility (AAM) aircraft. As the voice of this diverse industry, VAI's commitment to advocacy is not just beneficial but critical. This article explores why advocacy is indispensable for VAI members to navigate regulatory landscapes, drive industry innovation, and secure a sustainable future in vertical flight.

Navigating Complex Regulatory Environments

The vertical aviation industry operates within one of the most heavily regulated sectors globally. These regulations evolve as technology, public policy, and societal expectations change. VAI's advocacy efforts are vital in shaping these regulations to ensure they are conducive to industry growth while maintaining the highest standards of safety and efficiency. By actively participating in the regulatory process, VAI works with regulators to craft realistic, achievable, and beneficial rules, aligning operational and manufacturing guidelines with current and future capabilities.

Protecting and Investing in Infrastructure

VAI is deeply involved with preserving and encouraging investment in vertical aviation infrastructure because these efforts are fundamental to the industry's growth. Robust infrastructure supports the safe and efficient operation of vertical flight operations, including helicopters and AAM aircraft like electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) aircraft. This infrastructure is not only vital for current operations, such as disaster response, but also crucial for fostering innovation, attracting investment, and ultimately shaping the future of global mobility.

Promoting Industry Growth and Sustainability

VAI's advocacy is crucial for promoting the growth and sustainability of the vertical aviation sector. The association's efforts to communicate the economic and social benefits of vertical flight to policymakers and the public can lead to supportive government policies, including funding for technological research and infrastructure development. For the emerging advanced air mobility segment, VAI's advocacy is particularly critical in securing a regulatory framework to allow for AAM's potential, encompassing everything from urban air mobility solutions to long-range eVTOL aircraft.

Fostering Innovation and Technology Adoption

As new technologies transform vertical flight, advocacy ensures innovation stays at the forefront of industry evolution. VAI plays a key role in advocating for laws and regulations that promote the advancement and implementation of new technologies safely and efficiently into the national airspace. By representing the industry's interests, VAI can work with regulators and other stakeholders to accelerate the adoption of next-generation technologies, such as improved safety systems, autonomous flight systems, and powerplant technologies including electric and hydrogen fuel cell. Such progress is essential for the industry's ongoing competitiveness and relevance.

Enhancing Safety and Public Confidence

Safety is paramount in aviation. VAI's advocacy of safety is accomplished by serving on international and US regulatory and standards groups and contributing to the ongoing safety dialogue to ensure that all vertical-capable aircraft are represented in the world's airspace. This global dialogue is critical as VAI engages with lawmakers to educate them about the unique capabilities of vertical aviation aircraft, which require tailored safety practices for the execution of each different mission set. VAI also collaborates with regulatory agencies to move aviation safety forward. By promoting these high safety standards and the industry's commitment to upholding them, VAI plays an essential role in bolstering public confidence in vertical aviation, particularly in newer sectors such as AAM.

Building Strategic Alliances and Partnerships

VAI's advocacy extends beyond interfacing with governments and regulators. Advocacy cannot be done in a vacuum, and coalitions and partnerships are critical, not only for uniting the industry but in achieving meaningful results in our advocacy work. Our partnership outreach involves building strategic alliances with global stakeholders to develop harmonized standards, share best practices, and leverage our strengths to advance the entire industry.

In an era marked by rapid technological advancements and regulatory challenges, VAI has notably enhanced its scope and influence through a proactive approach to advocacy and policy engagement. The organization's strategic initiatives have fostered significant advancements, particularly within the governmental realm, ensuring the protection and growth of the vertical aviation industry.

International Outreach and Collaboration

Always with a watchful eye on the global industry, VAI continues to strengthen its partnerships and collaboration with standards and regulatory organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA). As an example, to raise the visibility and representation of the global vertical aviation industry at ICAO, what was once known as the International Federation of Helicopter Associations (IFHA) was transitioned to, and is now recognized as, VAI. Efforts like this aim to unite the international vertical aviation community through an effective governance model for regional associations and with the foundational goal to achieve harmonized standards and safety protocols.

Strategic Legislative Engagements

Early in the year, VAI engaged with the US Congress on the pivotal 2024 FAA Reauthorization Act. VAI collaborated extensively with legislators to ensure that the bill includes measures to effectively tackle the shortage of pilots and maintenance technicians, streamline regulatory processes to facilitate the advancement of AAM, and implement policies to support and promote vertical aviation. Overall, these initiatives will strengthen our industry and foster innovation and efficiency.

Additionally, VAI has been at the forefront of advocating for streamlined regulatory processes to facilitate the advancement of AAM and support policies promoting vertical aviation.

Regulatory Achievements

VAI's collaboration with the FAA has led to significant regulatory achievements. In late 2024, the agency issued a revised policy for the harnesses used for fall protection by utility line workers when performing human external cargo (HEC) operations. This decision ensures uniformity, enhances safety, and promotes operational compliance with existing local, state, and federal safety rules.

VAI urged the FAA to adopt the nationally recognized standard for HEC harnesses to address discrepancies between FAA and Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) regulations for full-body harnesses. Previously, these differences created a fragmented operational framework, posing significant compliance challenges for operators and utilities alike.

As we share the skies with unmanned aircraft systems (UASs), we must safeguard all low-altitude (<500 ft. agl) airspace users. Soon, the FAA will issue rules for beyond-visual-line-of-sight (BVLOS) operations of UASs. This is a policy area that we are monitoring closely.

VAI fully supports integrating UASs into the national airspace, and we are committed to ensuring that these operations reach their full potential in a safe and organized manner. We have made it clear that we support performance-based standards that deconflict the airspace. To do so, aircraft, no matter the size, must be able to detect one another (either visually or through technology) and avoid one another. Long-established right-of-way rules set a clear hierarchy that all aircraft follow. All pilots are responsible for a safe flying environment.

The FAA recently introduced a new rule to support the next wave of air mobility in the United States. The Special Federal Aviation Regulation (SFAR) on powered-lift pilot certification and operation details the qualifications and training requirements for pilots and instructors of powered-lift aircraft, such as air taxis and cargo drones. It creates a new category for these vehicles and sets the foundation for their safe inclusion in the US National Airspace System. Due to the precedence of international civil aviation authorities following the FAA's lead, this policy is expected to have global effects.

The SFAR simplifies certification for pilots of powered-lift aircraft, particularly those aircraft with single pilot controls, as part of a new framework to aid the first group of these pilots and instructors. Following feedback from VAI, the FAA has adopted a flexible, performance-based approach to some operational rules, enhancing the efficiency of powered-lift operations. The rule also updates several regulations, including changes to practical tests for aircraft requiring type ratings, and revises training standards for rotorcraft instructors and training centers.

VAI members are instrumental in advancing air mobility, and this new FAA regulation provides the essential guidelines for safely integrating these innovative aircraft into the airspace.

Protecting Air Tour Operators

A critical area of VAI's advocacy has been protecting the interests of air tour operators. With the FAA and National Park Service implementing air tour management plans (ATMPs), VAI has remained vigilant against further bureaucratic overreach to restrict airspace access to the national parks.

VAI is critically concerned not only about the transparency of the process used by the FAA and the National Park Service (NPS) to draft ATMPs, but also about the operational

safety, economic impacts, and public access restrictions imposed by the ATMPs. Top concerns include:

Industry's voice excluded. The agencies did not include the National Parks Overflights Advisory Group (NPOAG), a group established by the National Park Air Tour Management Act of 2000 so that crucial stakeholders, including general aviation and commercial tour operators, could provide advice and counsel with respect to commercial air tour operations over and near national parks.

Access to airspace at risk. The ATMPs limit or eliminate helicopter operators' access to airspace over national parks, setting a precedent for other agencies or government bodies to challenge access to airspace in other settings.

Operational safety in jeopardy. Without input from the NPOAG into the development process, the ATMPs produced by the NPS and FAA include many safety-of-flight concerns.

Unexamined economic impact. The ATMPs for some parks eliminate ALL air tours; others cut air tours by 50% or more, making air tour businesses economically unfeasible. Yet the NPS and the FAA failed to sufficiently account for the economic impact on commercial air tour operators, their employees and vendors, and the communities in which they live and work.

Loss of a workforce pipeline. The air tour industry provides a vital workforce pipeline to the rest of the vertical aviation industry. Our entire rotorcraft ecosystem—which is already struggling with a shortage of skilled personnel—will be impacted by the loss of jobs in the air tour sector.

Unequal public access. By eliminating or severely reducing air tours, the NPS and the FAA are discriminating against all those who choose to experience US national parks through aerial sightseeing, including seniors, the young, and persons with disabilities. A one-size-fits-all ideology is not how we should decide how the public can visit their national parks.

State and Local Advocacy Successes

At the state and local levels, VAI has been instrumental in safeguarding airspace and infrastructure. Notable successes include legally challenging Hawaii Act 311, which imposed undue reporting burdens on air tour operators in court. VAI's victory in this case set a precedent affirming federal jurisdiction over airspace, which has implications beyond Hawaii, providing a deterrent against state overreach in aviation regulation.

In addition to legal victories, VAI's grassroots efforts led to the preservation of the West 30th Street Heliport in New York City, a vital infrastructure for the city's vertical aviation operations. This campaign, led by VAI Northeastern US Regional Representative Josh Rousseau, mobilized over 96,000 emails to legislators, showcasing the power of community engagement in advocacy.

Continuous Advocacy and Updates

VAI keeps its members and stakeholders well informed through biweekly updates via its online VTOL Advocate newsletter, covering all pertinent government relations activities. This consistent communication ensures that all involved parties are aligned and can actively participate in shaping the industry's future.

Future Directions

VAI continues to develop and engage on various advocacy initiatives. Recent activities include opposition to restrictive legislation in New York City and other state capitals, engagement with Congress, and involvement in international regulatory discussions that will shape the future of vertical flight globally.

VAI remains dedicated to advancing the vertical aviation industry through robust advocacy, strategic policy engagement, and active participation in regulatory processes. By continuing to influence policy and regulation at all levels, VAI ensures that the vertical aviation community is well positioned to meet future challenges and capitalize on emerging opportunities.

Bailey Wood *is VAI's director of strategic communications.*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BELL

VAI's seventh president provided transformational leadership.

By Gina Kvitkovich

VAI/PJ Barbour Photo

James Viola Moves On to GAMA

JAMES A. VIOLA JOINED HELICOPTER Association International (HAI) as president and CEO on Jan. 16, 2020, thrilled to be charged with leading the trade association for the global helicopter industry. Five years later, as he moves on to become president and CEO of the General Aviation Manufacturers Association, he leaves HAI, now Vertical Aviation International (VAI), transformed.

Learning to Lead

A lifelong aviator, Viola learned to fly in the US Army, eventually flying more than 70 types of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft. He finished his military career with the rank of colonel and a stint at the Pentagon, where he was responsible for coordinating ongoing US Army aviation operations around the world.

He next joined the FAA as an aviation safety inspector in 2008. In 10 years, Viola rose through the ranks to become director of safety assurance for US general aviation (GA), which encompasses all civil aviation other than scheduled airline service. He is also an enthusiastic GA pilot, flying both airplanes and helicopters as often as his schedule and the weather will allow. Impressed by his resume and vision for the association's future, the HAI Board of Directors chose Viola after an international search.

Weathering the Storm

Ten days after Viola joined HAI, and one day before the opening of the association's annual conference and trade show, nine people, including basketball legend Kobe Bryant, were killed in a helicopter accident in Calabasas, California.

The attention on the helicopter industry was intense, as the national and international media came to HAI HELI-EXPO 2020, held that year in nearby Anaheim, in search of answers. Viola's experience in both managing aviation safety and directing aviation safety policy enabled him to be a credible defender of an industry under the spotlight.

When the US National Transportation Safety Board released its report on the accident on Feb. 9, 2021, it concluded that the accident was caused by the pilot's unintended entry into instrument meteorological conditions (UIMC), which in 2019 accounted for 33% of fatal helicopter accidents in the United States.

In a statement released the next day, HAI echoed the NTSB's focus on the human factors behind most aviation accidents. As Viola said at the time, "HAI continues to promote a 360-degree approach to reducing accidents, one that addresses culture, processes and training, and the appropriate use of technology to reduce aviation risk."

HAI also supported the industry's drive to reduce the number of UIMC-related accidents, partnering with the US Helicopter Safety Team, Airbus, and Frasca International to create the *56 Seconds to Live* video and training course. The video, which has been viewed more than 80,000 times, educates pilots about the risk posed by UIMC. The training course and additional materials outline ways to avoid or, if necessary, recover from UIMC.

Soon after Viola took office, he was faced with another crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic. As the virus spread rapidly throughout the world, Viola had two tasks. Responsible for association operations, he switched HAI employees to remote operations and instituted financial controls, aware that the pandemic would most likely lead to widespread economic disruption (in fact, the association was forced to cancel its 2021 conference and trade show).

Viola also knew that HAI, with contacts throughout the global aviation community, was needed more than ever by its members. He was determined to use modern technology

to connect the industry and allow information to flow and collaboration to grow.

Viola began holding regular video calls with leaders of national helicopter associations to discuss local conditions. This group developed into the association's International Partnership Program (IPP). Viola also began a series of monthly video messages for members, *Viola's Flight Report* (VFR), as well as the VAI Webinar series, which hosts speakers on topics important to the industry.

Staying the Course

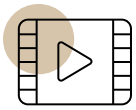
In addition to helping HAI weather two nearly simultaneous destabilizing events within the first 90 days of his term as president and CEO, Viola still delivered on his original vision, which included growing the association's international footprint and increasing its value to members.

Enhancing communication and collaboration within the international aviation community is an ongoing theme with Viola, who recognizes the global nature and interdependencies of the aviation industry. In addition to founding the IPP, which has provided several examples of fruitful collaboration by its members, Viola was an early champion of the Vertical Aviation Safety Team (VAST), a public–private initiative that links manufacturers, safety organizations, regulators, and volunteer regional safety teams from the global vertical aviation industry. Meanwhile, the association's working groups have been transitioned into industry advisory councils, which provide a channel for regular communication between the association and its member interest groups.

HAI also strengthened its ties with the European Helicopter Association and has for the past several years produced the EUROPEAN ROTORS VTOL show and safety conference.

Viola is also passionate about serving the association members, closing each VFR or President's Message with the request for members to

An avid pilot, Viola flies as often as possible. "If I can fly once a week, at least, that's great. If I haven't flown in a month, I'm miserable," he says. *(VAI/PJ Barbour Photo)*



VIEW
the myriad of missions
helicopters can perform

contact him with their ideas about how VAI could provide them with better service. Under his leadership, the association has introduced dozens of member benefits, including health insurance, tuition discounts, and legal resources.

VAI has partnered with several organizations to bring members the latest safety programs and technologies at significant discounts, including the Aircraft Electronics Association, the Air Charter Safety Foundation, and the latest partners, Cirro by AirSuite and GPMS. Recognizing the diversity of the industry, VAI has intentionally sought out a variety of partners to provide assistance in implementing a safety management system (SMS) that fits the member's needs, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach.

"I will not—and can never—lose my passion for vertical aviation. It is part of my DNA.

Becoming VAI

In December 2023, HAI celebrated its 75th anniversary. But behind the scenes, Viola and the HAI Board of Directors were working on a plan to take the association in a new direction.

On Feb. 26, 2024, that direction was revealed: the association took on the name of Vertical Aviation International, embracing the global community that builds, flies, maintains, operates, supplies, and supports all vertical aviation aircraft. This strategic shift in focus anticipated the FAA October 2024 announcement of the powered-lift aircraft category, a major step forward toward these aircraft becoming operational in the US National Airspace System.

Viola, who has been flying helicopters since the early 1980s, is adamant that the association's support for the helicopter is unwavering. "As part of our 75th anniversary celebration, we identified 44 missions that helicopters perform—most of which cannot be accomplished by any other aircraft. And that is going to be true for decades to come," he says.

Viola goes on to explain that the expanded industry will result in a stronger, more capable vertical aviation community. "Vertical flight—whether that is from a traditional helicopter, an electric power-lift aircraft, or some other aircraft—delivers unique capabilities. As new aircraft and technologies come to the flight line, aircraft operators will have more tools to choose from. Operational efficiency is about using the right tool for the job."

Under Viola's leadership, VAI has invested in its advocacy program, expanding the staff to include a director of regulatory affairs, an assistant director of state government affairs, and regional representatives for the Western and the Northeastern United States. And that investment has paid off: VAI has scored several victories on behalf of its members, including enabling HAI members who were Part 135 operators to receive $396 million in COVID-19 relief and a recent campaign to block attempts to close the 30th Street Heliport in New York City. The association is also expanding its ability to advocate for the global industry: VAI is now recognized by the International Civil Aviation Organization as the representative of the worldwide vertical aviation industry, enabling it to advocate for harmonized regulations and elevated safety on the global stage.

Ever the collaborator, Viola is quick to credit the support of those around him for these accomplishments.

"The Board of Directors have been exceptional stewards of the association. Their focus on developing a strategic plan for the association gave the staff clear direction on priorities, allowing us to move forward."

Viola is equally complimentary about his staff. "VAI members can be assured: I am leaving the association's day-to-day operations in good hands. These able, smart, and dedicated people are passionate about helping you to succeed. I have worked with several high-performing teams in my career, and the VAI team is one of the best."

On to GAMA

Viola's service at VAI will conclude on Mar. 15, 2025, and he starts at GAMA the next day. Meanwhile, the VAI Board of Directors has initiated the search for his replacement.

In his new role as president and CEO of GAMA, Viola will be involved in many of the same issues that occupied his time at VAI: advancing aviation safety, promoting general aviation and its many economic and social benefits, and advocating for a regulatory scheme that fosters a safe, efficient, sustainable, and prosperous industry. But, he says, vertical aviation can always depend on him as a friend and advocate.

"I will not—and can never—lose my passion for vertical aviation. It is part of my DNA. For any issue that comes across my desk, if there is a way I can contribute to this industry's further growth and success, you can count on me."

Gina Kvitkovich *is VAI's senior director of communications.*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SALUTE to EXCELLENCE
POWERED BY VAI

Honoring the Best in Vertical Aviation

Every year, through our Salute to Excellence Awards, VAI recognizes a number of outstanding members of the vertical flight community for going above and beyond in their work. Whether in a single instance or throughout a career, these aviation professionals from around the globe remind us to always aim for excellence.

On the following pages, VAI celebrates our 2025 honorees for their extraordinary contributions to aviation and the example they set for the entire vertical flight community.

Nominations for the 2026 Salute to Excellence Awards, to be celebrated at VERTICON 2026 in Atlanta, will be accepted beginning in June 2025. Visit verticalavi.org for more information.

Communications Award

For creative distinction in disseminating information about the vertical aviation industry

Paul Kennard

European Editor
Antares magazine
Puriton, Somerset, England

"Aviation is an industry where we should be learning from everybody else's mistakes. There are no shortcuts."

Paul Kennard uses his extensive experience in military and civil helicopter operations and what one nominator called an "honest, direct [and] analytic style of writing" to tackle thorny issues in aviation. He questions authority and policy and is resolute in uncovering and highlighting the facts.

Kennard was captivated by aviation at an early age. He joined the Royal Air Force (RAF) Air Cadets in his native England at 13, won an RAF scholarship to learn to fly at 17, and was flying solo aerobatics by 19. After receiving an honors degree in history from the University of London, Kennard joined the RAF. Upon graduation from flight school, he was recommended for single-seat fighter jets, but with the then-recent collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the world was changing and he was instead assigned to helicopters.

"It didn't take long in training to realize how magical these machines are," Kennard recalls. "I did very well in training and was allowed to choose which aircraft I wanted. I chose the Chinook."

Kennard spent the next 15 years building 2,000 hours flying the CH-47. His military roles included training captain and tactical instructor during deployments in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He later conducted operational test and evaluation flights for new equipment.

His final RAF posting entailed running future technology programs that included unmanned aircraft systems (UASs), degraded visual environment mitigation, and midair collision–avoidance system development.

Upon leaving the military, Kennard started his own consultancy supporting high-tech rotorcraft and aerospace projects for industry, NATO, and governments. He also began to write.

"One of the reasons I left the [RAF] was that I had this unfortunate predilection for speaking truth to power, which never goes well in a strict hierarchy," he explains. "Integrity is doing the right thing, even when nobody else is watching. So I started writing. It became cathartic because it enabled me to get the message out to head off false narratives, particularly [in regard to aviation] accidents."

Kennard takes issue with the 24/7 news cycle's compulsion to hastily identify the cause of an accident after it occurs, leading to the regular scapegoating of pilots. He began writing to highlight other, often overlooked causal factors, such as fatigue and operational pressures. Kennard has also written about the UAS and electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) sectors and their integration into the broader aviation ecosystem.

"Aviation is an industry where we should really be learning from everybody else's mistakes," Kennard says. "There are no shortcuts. If you try and shortcut aviation, she'll kill you. … We've been doing this for 120-odd years, and we've buried hundreds of test pilots in that time. There's a time to be bold, and there's a time to be pragmatic. I'm dedicated to giving voice to the latter."

As another person writing to support Kennard's nomination for this award noted: "There has never been a questioning of his facts, the robustness of his analysis, and the readability of his writing style."

W.A."Dub" Blessing Flight Instructor of the Year Award

For upholding high standards of excellence in flight instruction

Ken Obi

Owner and Flight Instructor
Orbic Helicopters
Camarillo, California, USA

When Ken Obi came to the United States at age 19 in 1979, he wanted to be a cowboy. With no experience handling livestock, the non–English speaking Japanese native started his journey with a host family in Washington, D.C., where he helped with housework while attending an English-language school. Six months later, Obi landed a job on a horse ranch in Santa Ynez, California, where he hoped to gain cattle-tending skills.

After eight months on the ranch without a day off, Obi began to reevaluate his career choice. "It was a lot of work and not what I'd envisioned," he says of mucking out stalls, brushing horses, and doing basic cleaning and repair work around the ranch.

Obi relocated to Los Angeles, where he worked for a Japanese film company and a Japanese exporter as he researched options for his future. During that time, he took a demo flight in a Schweizer 300. He had found his calling.

For six years, Obi slowly earned his private and commercial rotorcraft ratings and began building flight time. In 1987, he got a call from his flight school. Japanese flight training was a booming business, and the school needed a Japanese-speaking flight instructor to help train and support incoming students from the island nation. The school covered the cost of Obi's flight instructor training and put him to work immediately. He flew almost every day, up to eight hours a day, falling in love with flight instruction.

Then, suddenly, the company's Australian owner was deported because of an expired visa. With an empty company bank account, Obi tried to keep the school going for the students, spending his own money. The students kept coming, but rather than continue with the old business, in 1990 Obi founded Orbic Helicopters in Van Nuys, California.

"It was never my goal to own a flight school," Obi says. "It's really hard and no fun. But I really enjoy flying helicopters and teaching students. It was the flying that kept me going all this time."

While flight skills are important, Obi believes teaching students to use their judgment and develop a safety mindset is paramount. He purposefully kept the school small so he could work directly with students to instill these important values.

"A flight school is not an easy way to make money, though it is important for supporting the industry," Obi says. "Everyone has to start somewhere, and to keep our industry safe it's important to have good flight schools that [foster] a safety mentality and teach safe habits."

Obi used to keep track of the students he signed off for checkrides. He stopped counting at 450 10 years ago. He's sure he's flown with half as many more since then. Now in his mid-60s, he continues to teach and pass along his extensive knowledge at Orbic's current home in Camarillo, California.

"I still enjoy flying helicopters, and I still don't enjoy running a business," he says with a laugh.

> "To keep our industry safe, it's important to have good flight schools that [foster] a safety mentality and teach safe habits."

HILL AIR CORPORATION

Award Sponsor

Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award

For outstanding aeronautical decision-making, crew resource management, and/or coordinated actions

Elijah Hobbs

Chief Pilot
Jack Harter Helicopters
Lihue, Hawaii, USA

"I was starting to consider a place to land before the oil temperature spiked, when all of a sudden the engine quit."

On the afternoon of Feb. 27, 2024, Elijah Hobbs was flying a routine Napali Coast tour on Kauai, Hawaii, in an MD 500 with four passengers when he smelled smoke. Having recently completed a safety course that included oil cooler–belt failures, the chief pilot at Jack Harter Helicopters figured the belt might be the cause.

"As a precaution, I was starting to consider a place to land before the oil temperature spiked, when all of a sudden the engine quit," Hobbs recalls. "Clearly, it wasn't the belt—it was everything. When I heard the horn, I immediately started an auto to Honopu Beach, a very small beach surrounded by rock. I really had to focus, as there was a couple-hundred-foot sea cliff if I went too long and rocks and boulders about the size of the aircraft if I was too short."

Hobbs got only half of a Mayday call out when the rotor rpm began climbing. He returned his full attention to landing and avoiding the rocks. The beach sand was uneven, causing the helicopter's uphill skid to make contact first. The force of the aircraft rocking hard onto the downhill skid then sheared off the landing gear. The aircraft then rolled onto its nose before coming to rest on its side.

Hobbs quickly cut power to the helicopter and activated the fuel-shutoff valve. He helped the two female passengers who'd been sitting next to him get out of the helicopter.

"When I looked back, both the male passengers popped their heads up out of the side of the aircraft," he recalls. "The relief was so overwhelming that everyone was alive and moving. I remember thinking, 'We all survived. It's all going to be OK.' "

Hobbs's attention turned to one of the female passengers who was complaining of back pain. He had her lie still as he tried to contact his team. The antennas had sheared off the aircraft in the hard landing, but because his company uses satellite communications as emergency backup, Hobbs was able to reach his team and call for a medical airlift. He focused on keeping his passengers informed and comfortable as they waited for their rides back to the airport.

A medical helicopter airlifted the injured passenger to the hospital, and a company aircraft came for the remaining passengers. Hobbs stayed behind until a helicopter returned for him.

An Idaho native, Hobbs learned to fly in his home state in 2009, building time as a flight instructor before moving to the Hawaiian Islands. Today, he credits his 11,000-plus flight hours and intimate knowledge of Kauai with the positive outcome that February day.

"I hope my story encourages others to take their training seriously," he says. "Practice and repetition lead to good outcomes. It could have been a lot worse had I not had that outlook and training."

VERTICAL AVIATION INTERNATIONAL

Award Sponsor

Humanitarian Service Award

For outstanding service in using rotorcraft to provide aid to those in need

Rotorforce New Zealand, Helicopters Hawkes Bay & No. 3 Squadron of the Royal New Zealand Air Force

Hastings and Wellington, New Zealand

"There were so many helicopters operating all in one relatively small area. Airborne coordination was critical."
– Chris Ross

Cyclone Gabrielle hit New Zealand's North Island in mid-February 2023, leaving a wake of destruction not seen in a century. The Hawke's Bay region on the east side of the island experienced the worst of the storm. Record flooding, mudslides, and powerful winds took out homes, bridges, power lines, and cell towers, leaving people stranded without means of communication.

Helicopter operator Rotorforce New Zealand, based at Hastings Aerodrome (NZHS) in Hawke's Bay, contracts for the local electricity network. On Feb. 13, before the storm hit, CEO Joe Faram prepared his aircraft to respond to the coming weather event.

He didn't have to wait long to deploy them.

Before sunrise on Feb. 14, the power company called Faram for help. Driving to the aerodrome, he realized the cyclone was worse than he'd anticipated: the airfield was surrounded by water. Before he could even launch his Airbus H125, Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ), the country's chief firefighting and emergency services body, called for an aircraft for recon flights.

"It was still raining, and there was poor visibility," Faram recalls. "I only had to go 20 miles, but I struggled to recognize where I was. Everything was underwater, and landmarks were lost. It was unfolding right in front of us."

Faram brought the FENZ team to his hangar. Meanwhile, unable to reach his other pilot on the phone, Faram flew out to retrieve him, returning to the airfield so he could launch in an MD 500 and join the rescue work. Faram then helped locate Jimmy Guerin, CEO of Helicopters Hawkes Bay, a commercial operator experienced in firefighting. Also based at Hastings Aerodrome, Guerin was able to deploy additional helicopters in the effort.

Across the region, people were stranded on their roofs. In some cases, the rushing water was up to the gutters.

The helicopters worked all day, lifting people to higher ground where police and ambulance services were waiting, or back to the safety of the airfield. With comms down, the helicopters also served as communications relays, picking up radio calls for help and calling them in to FENZ and local police.

Back at Faram's hangar, FENZ set up base and was soon joined by an ambulance service. When the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) arrived around noon, Faram gave them space to operate as well.

The RNZAF brought three NH90 helicopters and immediately began rescues that required winches while the smaller aircraft continued rescuing and transporting victims. Many of the rescues were harrowing, requiring pilots to hover with one skid over the moving water.

"The Hawke's Bay rescue was a true team effort," says Chris Ross, commanding officer of the No. 3 Squadron of the RNZAF. "There were so many helicopters operating all in one relatively small area. Airborne coordination was critical for safe and efficient rescues. The work we safely did in those first few days was remarkable."

All the aircraft flew until dark that first day, Feb. 14, together with rescuers using inflatable boats, saving an estimated 400 people. By the second day, aircraft were also transporting supplies, food, and medicine. Subsequent days' work included repairs to power lines, cell networks, and roads. The overall air support went on for eight solid weeks.

"We do appreciate the recognition, but we did it because we were in a position where we could help," Guerin says of the Humanitarian Service Award. "I'd like to think anyone would do the same."

POWER UP MAGAZINE

Award Sponsor

Law Enforcement Award

For contributions to the promotion and advancement of rotorcraft in support of law enforcement activities

Air Tactical Group, Public Security Department of Pernambuco State, Brazil

Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil

For several days in late May 2022, multiple months' worth of regional rainfall fell in Brazil's northeast state of Pernambuco. In the state's capital, Recife, and surrounding areas on the Atlantic Ocean, the floods and landslides created catastrophic damage that claimed more than 130 lives and left more than 6,100 people homeless.

On May 28, one of the heaviest rainfall days, the Air Tactical Group of the Public Security Department of Pernambuco State (Grupamento Tático Aéreo de Pernambuco, or GTA) in Recife was grounded due to low visibility, having VFR-only Airbus AS350s and an H125. That morning, a flight nurse ran over to the base from an air ambulance airplane requesting help because the ambulance couldn't make it to the airport through the flooding. After determining they could assist safely, the crew airlifted the critical patient to a hospital.

"That was just the beginning," recalls GTA Assistant Chief Lt. Col. Heitor Martins. "We had to wait about two hours at the hospital for the rain and low ceiling to pass before we returned to base. We called in all our pilots and crews—about 15 people total at the time—to help with rescues to keep our three aircraft flying."

As the rain cleared, a post-apocalyptic landscape of water and mud emerged. Thousands of people were stranded on roofs, in trees, and on isolated high ground.

The GTA started rescuing people, in one case returning time and again to one house with 19 people on the roof. With rescue baskets attached to the aircraft, GTA crews were able to lift 63 people from their roofs in the first few hours. They also assisted firefighters in rescuing thousands more by guiding and transporting fire department personnel and equipment.

The group's half a dozen pilots and its mechanics and crews worked around the clock, taking short breaks, first rescuing and transporting people to safety and the hospital, then delivering critical food, water, medicine, and other supplies to communities in the hardest-hit areas that had become completely cut off by the destruction. The GTA also partnered with the not-for-profit organization Vizinhos Solidários, delivering additional food, water, clothes, and bedding to isolated communities.

The critical humanitarian work continued for a month as the group's aircraft made up for lost roads and bridges.

"It was very heavy work and unique for our unit," Martins says. "We'd only recently been reorganized from military police to an integrated team of military firefighters, military police, and civil police under the Office of the Secretary of Public Security [Secretaria de Defesa Social] in Pernambuco."

The GTA's work didn't go unnoticed. Due in large part to the group's considerable support during what turned out to be the state's worst natural disaster on record, the GTA received a boost in funding. Its fleet has since grown to three Airbus AS350 B2s, one H125, two H130s, and four airplanes. Additionally, the unit recently took delivery of its first twin-engine IFR helicopter, an Airbus H135.

"The [rainfall] event showed the government how important our unit could be in this type of scenario," Martins says. "We can do much more now with IFR capabilities."

As the rain cleared, a post-apocalyptic landscape of water and mud emerged. Thousands of people were stranded on roofs, in trees, and on isolated high ground.

POWER UP MAGAZINE

Award Sponsor

Golden Hour Award

For distinguished and outstanding service utilizing rotorcraft in air medical transport

Toll Ambulance Rescue Helicopter Service

New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, Australia

"The mission complexity we face every day requires a standardized crew that can respond to every task." – Dr. Sarah Coombes

Not only has Toll Ambulance Rescue Helicopter Service conducted thousands of golden-hour missions, where providing trauma victims with rapid access to medical treatment has been shown to improve outcomes, but the organization has been instrumental in expanding the delivery of critical care to communities in Australia's New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

Toll operates eight standardized Leonardo AW139 single-pilot IFR and night-vision goggles–capable helicopters from four bases throughout the Southern Zone of NSW and the ACT. The operator maintains an impressive average response time of under 10 minutes during the day and under 20 minutes at night.

While Toll serves as operator, the medical service comprises three teams: NSW Ambulance, ACT Ambulance, and NETS (Newborn and Paediatric Emergency Transport Service). Together, they perform more than 3,000 critical-care missions a year on land and over water, including full-service air ambulance support, search-and-rescue operations, and interhospital transport. Most flights carry a critical-care doctor and paramedic except when a specialist doctor and nurse are needed for interhospital transfers of neonates and small children.

By the end of 2024, Toll Ambulance Rescue Helicopter Service had flown more than 32,000 hours since it began providing air ambulance support in 2017.

With an integrated standardized model, Toll crews train together and maintain clinical, operational, and aviation currencies together. Pilots and aircrew officers train alongside critical-care paramedics, doctors, and flight nurses multiple times a year. With a deeply complex range of missions, the entire operation benefits from an integrated and holistic approach.

"We provide the widest range of services in the world, and the mission complexity we face every day requires a standardized crew that can respond to every task," says Dr. Sarah Coombes, executive director of NSW Ambulance Aeromedical Operations. "Our mission reviews inform our training, and our training informs our next mission in a constant learning cycle. The standardized aircraft, procedures, and operations make the job smoother and safer."

This degree of teamwork enables Toll Ambulance Rescue Helicopter Service to provide lifesaving support within the golden hour, as it did for a bushwalker bitten by a snake in November 2024. That day, as the effects of the venom took hold, the victim described the serpent to the aeromedical coordinator. By working with a snake-venom expert, the team narrowed down the potential culprits.

The crew picked up the appropriate antivenom treatments, flew out, and winch-inserted the medical team into the bush. A rapid clinical assessment enabled further discussion with a toxicologist and the correct antivenom was administered. The patient was then winched into the AW139 and received ongoing critical care during transport to a hospital with a toxicology service. Thanks to Toll Ambulance Rescue Helicopter Service's readiness and preparation, he made a full recovery.

POWER UP MAGAZINE

Award Sponsor

For outstanding contributions to the promotion of rotorcraft safety and safety awareness

LifeFlight of Maine

Bangor, Maine, USA

In November 1993, a fatal accident caused Maine's helicopter air medical services program to close, leaving it as the only US state without dedicated medical helicopters. After fuel starvation was named as a key cause of the accident, emphasis was put on finding a replacement service with a safety model designed for the typical low-altitude, off-site operations required by helicopter air ambulance services.

Not just any safety model would do, however, given the demographic, environmental, and geographic challenges Maine presents. In addition to being the country's second-most rural state by population distribution and the state with the greatest percentage of people 65 and older, Maine has the most complex and hostile aviation weather of any US state other than Alaska. Extreme temperatures, dense forests, coastal and inland mountains, and the Labrador Current's dense fog create considerable operational challenges.

In 1998, LifeFlight of Maine was founded as a nonprofit charitable organization by air medical services veteran Tom Judge with the help of then–Gov. Angus King and state health-care leader Dr. Norm Dinerman.

Judge and Dinerman created a system and culture dedicated to safety, removing institutional hurdles such as pressure from leadership to fly. "Three to go, one to say no" became the mantra for flight crews. Transparency; honesty; safety briefings, committees, and training; post-incident safety reviews; and uncompromising standards throughout were coded into the DNA of the program and persist to this day.

When LifeFlight of Maine started, the state had virtually no infrastructure for air medical services. Only 2 of Maine's 36 hospitals had helipads, and both were in rural locations. There was no communication system that connected air medical services in the state, the limited instrument flight infrastructure was confined to larger airports, northern Maine had limited refueling options, and only a handful of aviation weather systems, all located at large airports, were available to air medical crews.

LifeFlight of Maine's team built a "safety envelope" around its employees and patients, raising private and public funding to build infrastructure as well as influencing new policy at the state and federal levels to support low-altitude aviation. Private foundations and Maine's commercial sector provided funding support for a handful of hospital helipads.

Working with the Maine Department of Transportation, LifeFlight received state legislature support and three voter-approved transportation bonds supporting aviation infrastructure. Further state and federal funding over the years helped expand airports and their systems as well as increase the number of weather stations.

The result is more far-reaching than a single air medical program; it's a successful air medical *system* that safely supports the state's emergency management needs. Today, Maine has comprehensive air medical infrastructure, including 33 hospital and 10 community helipads, over 800 predesignated emergency-landing areas, 120 remote-access landing zones, 16 automated weather observing systems, 35 weather cameras, a statewide communications system for all emergency communications, more than 100 helicopter instrument procedures at hospitals and on islands, multiple new LPV runway procedures for alternates, and an RNP 0.3 low-altitude helicopter IFR route network covering the entire state.

LifeFlight also made a safety investment in twin-engine IFR helicopters. Today, it 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.

> LifeFlight of Maine's founders created a system and culture dedicated to safety, removing institutional hurdles such as pressure from leadership to fly.

Maintenance Award

For significant and distinct contributions to helicopter maintenance

George Quackenbush

Helicopter Aviation Maintenance and Safety Advisor
Santiago, Chile

The constant state of danger trained him to remain alert, trust but verify, observe details most people miss, and fight complacency that could be fatal to the entire crew.

ROLLS ROYCE

Award Sponsor

Central California native George Quackenbush began learning aviation maintenance when a stint after high school fixing cars didn't present enough of a challenge.

At an early age, Quackenbush learned from his father how to repair automobiles and later helped his brother build a hot rod. When he was 15, he purchased a Model A Ford and a separate engine, putting them together and trading the car to his brother for a motorcycle.

By the time Quackenbush reached high school, his maintenance skills were so advanced that he was chosen best in his school's auto maintenance troubleshooting program and went on to compete in regional, state, and national troubleshooting competitions.

"I tried repairing cars after high school, but I got bored and wanted something more challenging, precise, and interesting," he says. "I decided to repair aircraft."

Unfortunately, Quackenbush ran out of funds after only one year in the aviation maintenance training program at California's Reedley College. It was 1967 and the draft for Vietnam was in full force. He was recruited by the US Army and signed up for its helicopter component repair program. After graduating at the top of his class, he shipped off to Vietnam as a helicopter mechanic.

During his military tours, Quackenbush was quickly promoted, becoming a sergeant in 17 months and the lead mechanic in the hangar. But again, he wanted more of a challenge. He asked to join the prestigious Viking Armed Helicopter Platoon of the 121st Assault Helicopter Co.

After a rigorous initiation period, Quackenbush earned his place and over the next nine months adopted the platoon's high levels of ethics, loyalty, and commitment. The constant state of danger trained him to remain alert, trust but verify, observe details most people miss, and fight the complacency that could be fatal to the entire crew.

When Quackenbush left the army, he returned to a country in political and cultural turmoil. He kept to himself as he completed his A&P training. He then landed a mechanic job in Peru supporting offshore oil exploration. Over the following years, he lived in and worked across Latin America and for two years in Iran with Bell as an inspector and instructor.

In addition to being an exceptionally skilled mechanic, Quackenbush put his Viking-learned skills and Bell training to work mentoring and supporting others in the industry. As VP of Latin America for Air Services International, he helped the company grow through his technical skills and thoughtful customer service.

Quackenbush's appreciation for aviation safety intensified after he took a course in helicopter accident prevention at the University of Southern California. "That course absolutely focused me," he recalls. "I used it to greatly increase our safety record with the Mexican police and others."

He later attended Gordon Dupont's course on the maintenance Dirty Dozen, which he credits for further fostering a focus on safety in his work as a mechanic and instructor.

Quackenbush is humble about his accomplishments, crediting his life's work to doing what's right, doing more than is expected, sharing knowledge, assisting where needed, and finding friends and mentors who share his strong values: pride, honor, loyalty, sacrifice, commitment, and an appreciation for life.

Pilot of the Year Award

For outstanding achievement as a helicopter pilot

Mike Roederer

Chief Pilot, Air2
Pembroke, New Hampshire, USA

"Mike saw everyone on a job as part of his team and their safety as his responsibility. That was the kind of person he was." – Diana Roederer

Mike Roederer was known in the industry as a man of integrity and extraordinary character. From the time he started flying helicopters in 1983 to his final position as chief pilot of Air2 before retiring in 2022, Roederer, who died last year, focused on safety, quality, and team support.

Winco pilot and VAI Board of Directors member David McColl describes Roederer as a caring person who looked out for everyone, whether they were under his charge or not. He mentored McColl as he did so many other pilots, instructing and coaching him in longline operations and emphasizing what he called "the golden rule of piloting": the pilot in command is the final authority on the conduct of a flight. Roederer told his pilots they should call him whenever they felt they were being pressured to fly in unsafe conditions, and he'd back them up

Roederer's widow, Diana Roederer, watched her husband step in again and again, ensuring that safety always came first and that anyone on a job could ground a flight for safety reasons.

"It wasn't just his pilots who needed him from time to time," she recalls. "Sometimes a lineman would have a concern and their superiors didn't agree. The lineman would tell the pilot, who would call Mike, and Mike would shut down the operation until the safety concern was resolved. He saw everyone on a job as part of his team and their safety as his responsibility. That was the kind of person he was."

Roederer learned to fly airplanes in 1979, switching to helicopters in 1983. He taught in Southern California before he landed a Bell 206 heli-logging support-pilot position in Ketchikan, Alaska. From there, he joined the team at Columbia Helicopters, flying the 107 Vertol and building considerable experience in heli-logging, firefighting, and search-and-rescue operations around the country.

In 1999, he returned to California to be near his then-young grandchildren, working for a small helicopter operation performing firefighting, animal surveys and captures, and construction. He moved on to Helimax in 2001 to fly similar US Forest Service contract and longline work.

Roederer landed at Air2 in 2005. There, he flew power-line construction, maintenance inspections, power-line patrol, firefighting operations, and hurricane response efforts for 17 years. It was there he met and mentored McColl and so many others, earning their respect through his desire to put his team first.

"Mike was really humble," his wife says. "For instance, he didn't like that he was in a hotel when his crews were out in tents. He went and got himself a tent and gear and stayed out with his crew." She explains this practice once saved the lives of his crew.

In 2003, while fighting a fire in California, Roederer experienced a hydraulic failure and landed in a field. He chose to stay with the helicopter overnight, awakening to thick smoke. He woke his team and got them and the fuel truck off the hill before the fire consumed the area.

After having been diagnosed with congestive heart failure the previous year, Roederer passed away surrounded by his family on Jul. 9, 2024.

POWER UP MAGAZINE

Award Sponsor

Harold Summers Legacy Award

For outstanding contribution and selfless service to the worldwide vertical aviation industry

Allan Overbey

Project Manager, GEMS Inc., Washington, D.C., USA

When Allan Overbey retired after more than 26 years in the US Air Force, he was recruited by FAA contractor Global Engineering & Management Services (GEMS) for his surveillance systems–acquisition experience. The FAA was investigating technologies, including ADS-B, that could provide air traffic control (ATC) and others with more information about aircraft movement, and the agency tasked GEMS to help.

After many years of research and development, the FAA decided in 2006 to deploy an ADS-B program, and Overbey was asked to oversee its initial implementation in helicopter operations in the Gulf of Mexico to prove the program's value. His mission: achieve initial operational capability by December 2009 as a first step in potential nationwide deployment.

To meet that goal, Overbey needed to convince helicopter operators to install ADS-B equipment in their aircraft and pay transportation costs to FAA personnel and contractors. He likewise needed to persuade oil-and-gas companies to install and support FAA-provided weather systems, VHF communications, and ADS-B ground stations on their platforms, again at their own cost.

With no contacts in the helicopter or oil-and-gas industries, Overbey attended meetings of the Helicopter Safety Advisory Conference, an organization coordinating safety efforts among operators and Gulf energy producers, where he met Ann Carroll and Harold Summers, the VP of government affairs and director of flight operations, respectively, at VAI, then known as HAI (Helicopter Association International).

"What hit me hardest at that meeting was learning the FAA did not have a very good track record of delivering services to local helicopter operators and the oil-and-gas industry," Overbey recalls. "There was a trust issue. I made it my mission to change that."

What also solidified Overbey's resolve was his first helicopter flight in the Gulf. The pilot was forced to scud-run between clouds in marginal VFR conditions with no ATC radio communication and no onboard traffic warning system.

"I learned hundreds of these flights happened like this every month, and it made me really nervous," he remembers. "We had to get an ATC system in the Gulf."

Overbey spent the next three months earning trust, building relationships, and selling the idea of investing in ADS-B to helicopter operators and oil-and-gas companies. Summers and Carroll, both now deceased, introduced Overbey to company leaders in the two industries. Summers also taught him helicopter vernacular, operations, and history, mentoring him along the way.

Considerable additional support came from PHI Americas Director of Operations and 2025 VAI Lifetime Achievement Award winner Pat Attaway (see p. 78), who ensured PHI's involvement in the program and encouraged others' participation as well.

Thanks to Summers, Attaway, and other industry members, Overbey met his December 2009 deadline. As a result, Gulf operators were able to substantially close the separation between aircraft from 100 nm to 5, thereby increasing the number of flights while improving the level of safety. In 2009, the Houston Air Route Traffic Control Center managed 9,742 IFR helicopter operations in the Gulf of Mexico. In 2024, that number was just shy of 32,000. The success of the Gulf pilot program laid the foundation for the implementation of ADS-B throughout the US National Airspace System by 2020.

"I thought I had a great career in the Air Force, but this experience was one of the greatest satisfactions of my working career," Overbey says.

> "I learned hundreds of [dangerous] flights happened like this every month, and it made me really nervous. We had to get an ATC system in the Gulf."

VERTICAL AVIATION INTERNATIONAL

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Lifetime Achievement Award

For long and significant service to the international vertical aviation community

Pat Attaway

Director of Operations,
PHI Americas
Lafayette, Louisiana, USA

Thanks to Attaway's leadership and contributions, the industry sector supporting offshore energy production has moved toward safer practices and standards.

Pat Attaway joined PHI in 1990 and advanced from line pilot to senior manager and director over the next three decades. His responsibilities included overseeing 14 bases and 350 pilots along with operations and standards in several countries, including Australia, Cyprus, Ghana, Israel, New Zealand, and Trinidad and Tobago. He also oversaw PHI's air medical operations. As a contract manager, he fielded the first use of the Sikorsky S-92.

Today, as PHI Americas' director of operations, Attaway is responsible for operational control and budgetary, personnel, and management oversight for the company's oil-and-gas operations in the Gulf of America (also known as the Gulf of Mexico). His colleagues credit him with being a stabilizing influence during a period of realignment in the entire offshore industry.

Thanks to Attaway's leadership and contributions in two groups dedicated to improving safety in offshore operations—he is a former chairman of the Helicopter Safety Advisory Conference and of the Operational Effectiveness Workstream within HeliOffshore—the industry has moved toward safer practices and standards, including the adoption of ADS-B technology.

"When I look back on my career in aviation, I've been blessed to be associated with so many excellent professionals, some I've been able to influence in a positive way, others who've had a positive influence on me," Attaway says.

His interest in helicopters was sparked in college while he worked summers on offshore energy platforms for Louisiana's oil-and-gas industry. The job gave him the resources to pursue a personal interest in skydiving and the professional opportunity to ride in Bell 47s and JetRangers.

Later, when he shared this information with Navy recruiters, they asked him if he wanted to be a pilot. "I said yes, and that was the start of my career in aviation," Attaway recalls.

He spent nearly eight years in the US Navy as a ship-based helicopter pilot and instructor in the Kaman SH-2F Seasprite, an aircraft used for anti-submarine and anti-ship operations.

Attaway credits his time in the navy with instilling in him the professionalism, work ethic, and practical knowledge critical for safe offshore operations. This includes a deep appreciation for two-pilot crews.

"While I have a significant amount of time flying single pilot, my most satisfying flights were always flying as part of a crew. I've always enjoyed teamwork in the aircraft," Attaway says. "Any flight when things were challenging and we performed well gave me a great sense of accomplishment."

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For long and significant service to the international vertical aviation community

René Closter

Founder and Chairman,
Luxembourg Air Rescue
Findel, Luxembourg

As a paramedic early in his career in Luxembourg, René Closter realized the acute need for faster patient transport when a 6-year-old boy's foot was detached in a traffic accident. The appendage was packed in ice for retransplantation in France, but with no air ambulance available, the trip took four hours by ground—too long for the foot to be saved. The episode motivated Closter, who began his public-service career with the City of Luxembourg's fire brigade in 1973, to make a difference.

After government officials turned down his idea for a local air ambulance service, Closter remortgaged his house for the initial collateral to form Luxembourg Air Rescue (LAR) in 1988 with one rented helicopter. In 1995, he became the organization's CEO, serving in that position until May 2021.

Under Closter's leadership, LAR grew to a 24/7/365 organization with a fleet of two ground ambulances, seven helicopters, and five jets. Today, LAR is supported by more than 185,000 individual subscribers as well as private donations. Over the past 37 years, the organization has flown more than 70,000 missions, saving countless lives in the process.

LAR's work isn't confined to Luxembourg. In 2007, the organization won a contract for the exclusive transport of human organs in France. It has also flown medical supplies into Kosovo and participated in postdisaster rescue efforts in Pakistan and Iran. LAR's work during the recent COVID crisis earned it the 2020 Adenauer-de Gaulle Prize for its exceptional contribution to Franco-German cooperation.

At age 45, Closter received his helicopter license and joined LAR's pilot roster. During his career, Closter personally participated in more than 14,000 rescues in Luxembourg as well as numerous humanitarian missions worldwide.

In addition to his duties at LAR, Closter has served as VP of helicopter air ambulance service DRF Luftrettung and as a technical advisor for the national rescue services of the Luxembourg government. After his time as a firefighter earlier in his career, he worked in the international financial services industry, attaining senior management positions in Hong Kong, London, New York, and Dubai.

In recognition of his public service, Closter was appointed Knight of the Crown of the Order of Adolphe of Nassau, Officer in the Order of Civil and Military Merit of Adolphe of Nassau, and Officer in the Order of the Crown of Belgium.

Closter's colleagues credit his unwavering belief in the power of aviation to save lives with revolutionizing emergency medical services in Luxembourg and beyond.

During LAR's 30th anniversary celebration in a packed hangar in May 2018, Closter told his staff and supporters, "The foundation of today's success took—and still takes—determination, passion, endurance, expertise, and hard work. Our people make the difference. If you can dream it, you can do it."

Closter's colleagues credit his unwavering belief in the power of aviation to save lives with revolutionizing emergency medical services in Luxembourg and beyond.

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Lifetime Achievement Award

For long and significant service to the international vertical aviation community

Thierry Couderc

VP, European Helicopter Association
Paris, France

His work has harmonized safety regulations across Europe, helping to foster compliance while safeguarding the industry's ability to innovate and grow sustainably.

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Thierry Couderc's illustrious career spans more than three decades, highlighted by outstanding contributions to both military and civil aviation and to the vertical aviation industry across Europe.

Couderc's career began in the French Navy, where he spent a significant portion of his 25 years of service in aviation. There, he conducted flight tests for new equipment and tactics on combat helicopters, enhancing operational safety and effectiveness.

In his dual capacities as VP of the European Helicopter Association (EHA) and, since 2007, executive director of the French helicopter association Union Française de l'Hélicoptère (UFH), Couderc has been instrumental in bridging the needs of the French rotorcraft community with those of the broader European landscape. He has steered the UFH through regulatory changes as well as operational challenges, ensuring its adaptation to European Union Aviation Safety Agency standards. His leadership has helped the French helicopter community remain competitive while meeting complex regulatory and environmental challenges.

At the EHA, Couderc plays a crucial role in shaping the European rotorcraft sector. His work with the Council of European Aerospace Societies Rotorcraft Committee and the European Safety Promotion Network Rotorcraft has harmonized safety regulations across Europe, helping to foster compliance while safeguarding the industry's ability to innovate and grow sustainably.

Couderc is widely admired for his ability to balance regulatory requirements with operational realities while strengthening the voice of the rotorcraft community in key forums. He recently led efforts to stop French government attempts to impose confiscatory taxes for on-demand charter flights, increase heliport fees, and restrict flight activity. He also warned policymakers not to expect privately owned helicopters to be available for public emergencies if they aren't regularly "allowed to operate commercially under realistic economic conditions."

Couderc's advocacy extends beyond regulations to include support for inclusivity in aviation, exemplified by his dedication to disabled pilots, particularly his work with deaf pilots at the Aero-Club des Sourds de France. He is also active in the Fédération Française d'ULM, a group for the French ultralight aircraft community.

With over 5,200 flight hours, including 720 flight test hours, to his credit, Couderc's accomplishments demonstrate his technical expertise and unyielding commitment to aviation excellence.

Lifetime Achievement Award

For long and significant service to the international vertical aviation community

B. S. Singh Deo

VP, Rotary Wing Society of India
Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

Retired Indian Air Force Wing Commander B. S. Singh Deo has dedicated more than 55 years of service to the vertical flight community, after a childhood interest in aircraft modeling sparked his love of aviation.

Singh Deo excelled early on in his pursuit of an aviation career. Upon graduating from India's National Defence Academy in 1968, he received the Chief of the Air Staff Medal for being first in his class as well as the Best Pilot Trophy, qualifying him to fly VIP government personnel, including heads of state and the prime minister.

At the Indian Air Force Flying Instructors School in 1975, Singh Deo was awarded the nation's Best Flying Instructor Trophy. Two years later, he qualified as a test pilot, winning the Best Test Pilot and Chief of Air Staff Trophies. Building on this experience, he was appointed to the Aircrew Examining Board, which tests military pilots across India.

After retiring from the air force, Singh Deo worked for Malaysian Helicopter Services, where he was a technical pilot from 1992 to 1995. In January 1997, he joined Bell Helicopter as managing director for South Asia. During his 21-year career with the company, he received the Bell CEO Global Award and twice won Bell's Best Executive Award for the Asia-Pacific region. Singh Deo also helped establish a licensed production facility in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, for the manufacture of advanced composite fuselage sections of the Bell 407.

Singh Deo, recipient of the Vayu Sena Medal from India's president for meritorious service in military and civil aviation, is a member of the Aeronautical Society of India, where he has served as VP and on the Governing Council. As VP of the Rotary Wing Society of India, which functions as the country's regional vertical aviation safety team, Singh Deo conducts helicopter safety classes and seminars. He has also given seminars on aviation safety for the UN World Food Programme in Nepal and guest lectures at various schools to encourage students to pursue aviation careers.

An experienced pilot with flight time in five types of fixed-wing aircraft and 14 different helicopters, Singh Deo frequently shares his aviation experience with young aviators. One of his favorite stories occurred early in his career as a VIP helicopter pilot, flying an Mi-8 with the Indian Air Force in 1974.

His crew had just delivered a high-ranking passenger and lifted off for the nighttime ferry flight back to base in "black hole" conditions, flying on instruments without the ability to reference the ground and maintaining only sporadic radio contact with air traffic control.

Singh's first instinct was to continue the flight rather than admit that he and his crew were lost and likely off course. Then he remembered a flight safety poster that said, "Swallow Your Pride, Save Your Hide." He called air traffic control, confessed the situation, and received a direction finder steer to get back on course.

"It was a-near-90-degrees turn to the left and nearly 30 minutes flying before we landed safely with near-empty fuel tanks," he recalls. Singh Deo says the experience taught him that "flight safety messages are pearls of wisdom gained from many pilots' experiences that could save your life."

"Flight safety messages are pearls of wisdom gained from many pilots' experiences that could save your life."

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POWER UP 2025 Photo Contest Winners

POWER UP magazine is not even a year old, but the photo contest is marking 13 years showcasing the best photos sent in by people throughout the rotorcraft community. Enjoy!

Grand Prize Winner

Christian Postl

Enzesfeld-Lindabrunn, Niederösterreich, Austria

Mitigating the risks posed by whiteout when operating off-site in snowy conditions requires frequent training, as demonstrated here by a crew from Austrian air ambulance operator ÖAMTC. It also makes for a prize-winning photo.

Category: Vertical Flight Aircraft at Work

Pablo Guillermo Anaya Barron
San Nicolas de los Garza, Nuevo Leon, Mexico

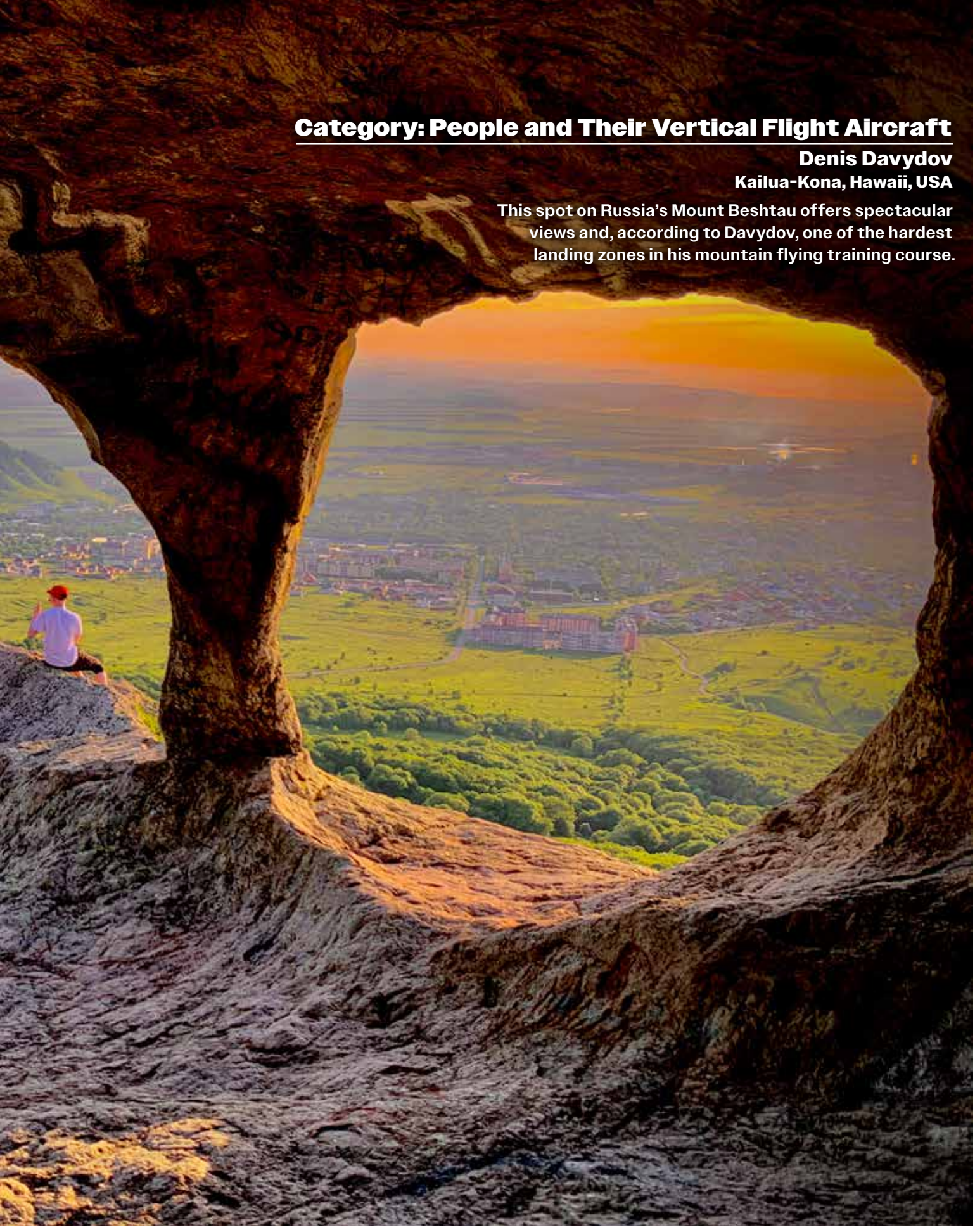
Shooting an aircraft in flight from another aircraft in flight (or air-to-air photography, as it's known) requires quick reflexes and a deep understanding of how aircraft move. With this photo of a sleek Bell 407GX speeding over the landscape near Monterrey, Mexico, Barron demonstrated he has both.

Category: Vertical Flight Aircraft in the Military

Kris Christiaens
Temse, Oost-Vlaanderen, Belgium

A Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk from the Swedish Air Force performs at an air show. Although deployed here "for show," flares are a countermeasure against antiaircraft missiles.


RA-04144



Category: People and Their Vertical Flight Aircraft

Denis Davydov
Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, USA

This spot on Russia's Mount Beshtau offers spectacular views and, according to Davydov, one of the hardest landing zones in his mountain flying training course.

Category: Wrench Turners

Christian Postl

Enzesfeld-Lindabrunn, Niederösterreich, Austria

Postl, who also won this year's Grand Prize, focuses our attention on the concentration of this HeliAir maintenance technician working on an Airbus H135 Fenestron.


hellair

Category: How We Serve

Scott Seager
Kalispell, Montana, USA

People observing first responders in action often ask, “How do they do that?” Training is the answer, as documented by Seager’s photo of a 2024 training event where the crew of a Bell 429 operated by the Flathead County (Montana) Sheriff’s Office practiced inserting a rescue specialist into a remote area.

Category: Digitally Enhanced Photos of Vertical Flight Aircraft

Stig Hestad
Førde, Vestland, Norway

After towing this Leonardo AW169 out to prepare for a sea pilot transfer mission, Hestad made excellent use of the aircraft's reflection in rainwater that had ponded on the tarmac. He's had lots of opportunities to get this shot: Bergen is known as the rainiest city in Europe.

Split-Second Save

Pilot's experience, skill enabled him to counter low-altitude downdrafts, preventing a more serious accident.

By David Jack Kenny

A **SAYING POPULAR AMONG OLD-TIME** airline pilots held that the first thing to do in an emergency was to wind the clock on the instrument panel. Avoiding hasty decisions reduces the risk of making a bad situation worse by hurrying to do the wrong thing.

Not all emergencies, though, offer the luxury of time, particularly the time provided by altitude. When terra firma that's already uncomfortably close suddenly starts rushing closer, only a reaction that's both immediate *and correct* offers the chance to prevent a bad situation from quickly becoming a great deal worse.

The helicopter at the accident site.
(NTSB Photo)

The Mission

On the evening of Aug. 31, 2022, a wildfire was discovered on the south side of Mount St. Helens in the Cascade Range in southwest Washington state. A Sep. 7 update from the US Forest Service reported that the fire, "currently estimated to be about four acres in size ... is located above a cliff, so fire personnel are only able to engage the fire on the upper portions of the slope due to the steep, rocky terrain. ... Fire crews have been successful using helicopter bucket drops ... to slow the fire's spread."

The fire's behavior was described as "smoldering and creeping," but a week later an update from the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center estimated that the blaze, named the Kalama Fire, had grown to 112 acres. The operator of a Bell 205A-1 under contract to provide fire-suppression services was called in.

The Aircraft

The 205A-1, manufactured in 1976, was fitted with a 240-gal. Bambi Bucket adjusted to load 90% of its 2,130-lb. maximum capacity. The aircraft's two-bladed main rotor and conventional two-bladed tail rotor were powered by a single Ozark Aeroworks T5317B turboshaft engine rated for 1,150 shaft horsepower.

The aircraft had flown 23,070 hours as of Sep. 7, and its last inspection was completed four days and 28 flight hours earlier. The operator held FAA certificates to operate under FAR Parts 133 (rotorcraft external load), 135 (commuter and on-demand charter), and 137 (agricultural application).

The Pilot

The 49-year-old commercial pilot was rated for single- and multiengine airplanes, single-engine seaplanes, and gliders in addition to helicopters. Some 2,774 of his 6,100 flight hours had been logged in rotorcraft, including 89 make and model hours divided between training, utility work, and longline operations on wildfires. The remainder of his helicopter time included air tours, utility work, and mountain flying in Bell 206 and Airbus AS350 helicopters.

On Jun. 3, 2022, he was issued a US Department of Agriculture/US Department of Interior Interagency Helicopter Pilot Qualification Card authorizing him to fly external load; water/retardant, bucket; helitack/PAX transport; low-level and reconnaissance missions; and flights in mountainous terrain.

The Flight

The pilot arrived to begin the contract on Monday, Sep 5. On Tuesday, he flew three fuel cycles of about 2.25 hours each, dipping water from Merrill Lake about 2 miles south of the fire. The fourth flight was scrubbed due to a malfunctioning avionics master bus switch.

By noon on Sep. 7, the switch had been replaced and the pilot went back to work, making about 10 more drops before returning to the airport in Kelso to refuel. He described the flights and in particular the helicopter's performance as "unremarkable." He specifically mentioned that the helicopter was refueled from the same truck used after the previous flight.

The NTSB's probable-cause report took the somewhat unusual step of commending the pilot's response to the emergency.

By the time he took off again, winds had shifted to the north, creating what he later described as "lots of wind currents and 'weird' turbulence, but nothing of concern." To approach into the wind, he followed a racetrack course, turning from a downwind leg over the east side of the lake into a curving right approach at 60 kt. and 350 ft. above ground level before slowing and descending to a 140-ft. hover over the lake's north end. The first four circuits were likewise uneventful.

As he began to raise the bucket after the fifth dip, though, "all hell broke loose." According to the investigator's record of a phone interview conducted two days later,

He could not specifically hear any engine tone change or "hiccups", but instead began to experience heavy airframe vibrations. The helicopter was way too "angry" for him to be able to focus on the gauges, and he just seemed to "fall out of the sky". He had a powerful sense of sinking and an uncommanded yaw to the left. At that point he did not know if it was an engine failure, and he lowered the collective control.

He could not specifically deduce what caution lights were illuminated, but was sure the master caution light was on, and then a short time later the low rotor RPM horn. He pulled the collective control about 50-60 ft agl and in an effort to guide the helicopter towards the shoreline he lowered the collective control again and pushed the cyclic forward. He has been flying for almost 30 years, and these were all instinctive reactions.

He then got a "ground rush" sense and pulled the collective up. The helicopter landed flat and hard with violence. Everything by that time had stopped, including the engine. He turned off the fuel valve, and the battery, and the helicopter then started rolling to the right. He undid his seatbelt, and removed his helmet to reduce his size, and egressed. He sustained minor injuries and declined to be taken away by ambulance.

The helicopter came to rest on its right side in shallow water with the tail boom folded under the cabin and one main-rotor blade bent upward. None of the kayakers, firefighters, or helitack crew at the lake that afternoon witnessed the accident.

The Explanation

The pilot told investigators that he believed the "engine rolled back … because so many of the panel lights had lit up, and because of the way the helicopter was performing."

Data recorded at five-second intervals by the helicopter's measured gas temperature (MGT) gauge, however, didn't suggest an engine failure. Instead, a series of nearly identical cycles of temperature variations between about 550°C and 730°C (1,022°F and 1,346°F) was consistent with the sequence of dips, dumps, and returns to hover during both the previous flight and the preceding circuits of the accident flight.

On the final circuit, the MGT rose to 710°C (1,310°F) before abruptly dropping to 150°C (302°F) just 15 seconds before recording ended, consistent with sudden engine stoppage at the moment of water impact.

The manufacturer's detailed examination of the engine found "no indications of fire or uncontainment"; the compressor section could be rotated by hand. Internal damage was likewise consistent with a sudden stoppage, and the chemical composition of debris found inside the engine matched that of the main-rotor blades.

A 5 mm–wide fragment of aluminum honeycomb material found at the root of the second-stage turbine rotor appeared to match that used inside the main-rotor blades. There was no evidence of malfunction or failure prior to impact.

The pilot's statement mentioned that "the area was notorious for downslope katabatic wind." The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) developed a

High-Resolution Rapid Refresh profiling model that indicated that during the time leading up to the accident, winds shifted from 4 kt. out of the south-southwest to 14 kt. from the northwest. The model didn't account for any effects of outflow from the fire.

These findings led the NTSB to conclude that "rather than losing engine power, the helicopter likely encountered strong downdrafts that caused a rapid descent. The pilot attempted to release the bucket … and while he was ultimately able to do so, until release it was being dragged through the lakebed, thus hindering the helicopter's maneuverability."

The probable cause of the accident was therefore found to be the helicopter's encounter with downdrafts during a low-altitude hovering maneuver while dipping for water.

The Takeaway

The NTSB's probable-cause report took the somewhat unusual step of commending the pilot's response to the emergency. Given his perception of a power loss, "his actions under such a circumstance were appropriate."

The board further noted that "water dip operations required that the single-engine helicopter be flown at a low height and speed such that it was operating within the 'AVOID' range of its height-velocity envelope. In this range, a safe landing couldn't be guaranteed following an engine failure.

"The pilot was able to demonstrate the presence of mind and helicopter control to maneuver towards the shore with limited altitude and time, and therefore avoid a more significant impact."

The pilot's success in following the famous principle of legendary combat, test, and air show pilot Bob Hoover to "fly the thing as far into the crash as possible" further corroborates its wisdom.

David Jack Kenny *is a fixed-wing ATP with commercial privileges for helicopter.*

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An Opportunity to Enhance Safety

Safety rating system concept offers method for evaluating rotorcraft safety technologies.

By Chris Hill

THE VERTICAL AVIATION SAFETY TEAM (VAST), a public–private organization of international regional safety teams, safety authorities, and other vertical flight industry stakeholders, in November introduced the concept of a rotorcraft safety rating system, an initiative aimed at enhancing the safety profile of helicopters without undermining current rigorous certification standards. As someone who's spent years working in and advocating for rotorcraft safety, I see this project as an opportunity to foster meaningful progress.

When I first heard the idea of a safety rating for rotorcraft, I felt a mix of excitement and concern. Could this work? Would it be fair to all stakeholders? Would it help save lives? The

VAI/Mark Bennett

answers weren't immediately clear, but one thing was certain: to continue advancing safety, we must be willing to innovate, collaborate, and even take a few risks along the way.

Why a Safety Rating System?

The concept of a safety rating system isn't a panacea. It won't solve every safety challenge, nor will it erase the doubts of skeptics. But I'd like to focus on what it *can* do. A safety rating concept offers a starting point for deeper conversations, an invitation for collaboration, and a framework that celebrates safety-enhancing technology as an alternative to the status quo.

The VAST white paper "Investigation of a Rotorcraft Safety Rating Concept" lays out the foundational assumptions underpinning the group's rotorcraft safety rating concept. First and foremost, it acknowledges that all certificated helicopters meet the baseline safety requirements set by regulatory authorities such as the FAA and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency. In other words, certificated helicopters are inherently safe.

The VAST rotorcraft safety rating concept doesn't seek to undermine this baseline but rather to highlight additional safety measures—technologies and practices that go beyond certification—as opportunities to enhance safety. The VAST Rotorcraft Safety Rating Concept Special Working Group, which devised the system, also acknowledges that:

- Safety technologies must be transparent and comprehensible.
- The system should incentivize enhancements in both new and in-service helicopters.
- Future technological advances should seamlessly integrate into the rating framework.
- Human factors play a pivotal role in aviation safety and must never be excluded from frontline operational risk-management considerations. A wide body of investigative research and evidence validates the assertion that human-factor deficiencies play a key role in nearly every aviation accident and incident. The VAST working group saw no need to replicate these well-supported studies.
- Instead, the rotorcraft safety rating concept focuses solely on

safety-enhancing technologies, some of which have demonstrated the capability of mitigating safety risks linked to common human-factor deficiencies.

By excluding human factors from the scope, the working group recognized the immense complexity of these elements while affirming their importance. This is not to sideline the relevance of human factors but to maintain focus on the rating system's intended purpose.

The rotorcraft safety rating concept is designed to:

- **Encourage safety enhancement:** The system aims to incentivize operators and manufacturers to adopt safety-enhancing technologies by providing a transparent and structured evaluation of safety technologies.
- **Facilitate industry discussion:** The rating system serves merely as a proof of concept, encouraging further evaluation, validation, and verification by stakeholders.
- **Incorporate future innovation:** The framework is flexible enough to integrate emerging safety technologies as they become available.

The concept draws inspiration from similar rating systems in other industries, such as the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's New Car Assessment Program (NCAP). Like the NCAP, the rotorcraft safety rating focuses on both accident prevention and survivability, with an initial weighting of 60% for prevention and 40% for survivability. In fact, the rotorcraft rating system evaluates helicopters based on these two primary categories:

- **Prevention** includes technologies that reduce the likelihood of accidents, such as terrain-awareness systems, collision-avoidance systems, and autopilot features.
- **Survivability** comprises features that enhance safety during and after an accident, such as crash-resistant fuel systems, energy-absorbing seats, and bird-strike protection.

Certificated helicopters are inherently safe. The VAST rotorcraft safety rating concept highlights technologies and practices that go beyond certification as opportunities to enhance safety.

Using the bowtie analysis method, the VAST working group identified specific threats, preventive controls, and recovery measures for both categories. Technologies were assessed for their impact on safety, their availability, and their ability to integrate into existing aircraft systems.

The Road Ahead

Implementing a rotorcraft safety rating system isn't without its challenges, including:

- **Cost and complexity:** Unlike the automotive industry, where crash testing is feasible, the long life cycle of helicopters (often 40 to 50 years) complicates direct comparisons and empirical testing.
- **Diverse missions and equipment:** Helicopters operate in varied environments and missions, requiring the rating system to account for mission-specific configurations and equipment.
- **Bias toward newer aircraft:** The system may appear to favor newer models, despite efforts to accommodate upgrades and retrofits in older helicopters.
- **Public perception:** Clear communication is essential to prevent misconceptions that older certificated helicopters are unsafe.

I understand and respect the concerns raised by releasing the rotor safety rating concept "into the wild." Some fear the rating system could unfairly penalize legacy aircraft or be weaponized in ways never intended. Others question its objectivity or long-term usefulness. These are valid perspectives, and I acknowledge the potential flaws of such a system. No framework is perfect, and this concept is no exception.

However, I believe in the potential for this rating concept to serve as a springboard—a starting point for deeper collaboration and broader acceptance of safety-enhancing technologies. It's not about dictating a solution but offering a framework inviting industrywide and sector-specific discussion and adoption. Together, we can refine and improve the rating system and ensure that it serves its intended purpose: making rotorcraft operations safer.

The VAST working group offers several recommendations for follow-on actions by industry stakeholders:

- **Operators:** Evaluate the applicability of the rating system to current fleets and consider installing available safety enhancements. Engage with VAST to provide feedback and refine the concept.
- **OEMs:** Continue developing and promoting safety-enhancing

technologies, ensuring their accessibility for both new and legacy aircraft.

- **Insurance providers:** Explore incentives for operators who adopt safety technologies or recapitalize aging fleets when safety technology upgrades are infeasible.
- **Industry associations:** Deliver educational resources to promote the benefits of safety enhancements and consider actively advocating for, refining, and administering the rating system.

Moving Safety Forward

This concept, despite its imperfections, represents a meaningful opportunity to move our industry forward. The path ahead will require validation, refinement, and ongoing collaboration. It will also require an open mind and a willingness to embrace change. The goal isn't perfection but progress—incremental steps that bring us closer to a safer, more innovative future.

It's easy to cling to the status quo, to resist change, and to let fear of the unknown hold us back. But progress requires courage—the willingness to try, fail, learn, and improve.

This rating system isn't about replacing the excellent work done in certification and regulation. It's about adding another layer of transparency and opportunity. It's about asking, "How can we do better?" and having the humility to listen to every stakeholder's voice.

Let's take this journey together. Let's embrace the potential, address the challenges, and build a safer future for rotorcraft operations. We can use this concept as a foundation for greater collaboration and a shared commitment to safety.

I invite you to review the white paper, share your thoughts, and be part of this important conversation. Send your feedback to info@vast.aero.

Chris Hill *is VAI's senior director of safety.*

Quite the Treat

A visit to Chevron's Tahiti Platform made me appreciate our members in offshore energy production.

By Zac Noble

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I DECIDED I WANTED to visit an offshore oil platform in the Gulf of America (also known as the Gulf of Mexico) to learn more about one of the many missions helicopters perform: offshore energy industry transport and support.

My predecessor at VAI, the late Harold Summers, was heavily engaged with operators from the Gulf and understood the oil-and-gas industry there as well as anyone, and possibly better than most. Despite Harold's support for my proposal, I never managed to make the trip.

Last year, as I prepared to attend the October 2024 Helicopter Safety Advisory Conference (HSAC) meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, VAI President and CEO James Viola told me he'd like to come with me to the conference and visit an oil platform while we were there. Wow! The stars were aligning.

I reached out to Billy Majeau, a colleague I knew could help me get the boss on a helicopter to a platform. Billy, a true mission-focused professional, didn't let me down.

VAI member Chevron volunteered to take us to its offshore Tahiti Platform, approximately 140 nm out in the Gulf.

We soon found out that you don't

simply say, “I want to fly to an oil platform.” There are things that need to be done first, including training.

One of those requirements is completing a course in tropical helicopter underwater escape training (T-HUET) using a compressed air emergency breathing system (CA-EBS).

I wasn’t sure what the boss’s response would be to the required training—his schedule is very full at all times. But when I told him we’d need to complete it, his response was golden. “See you there!” he said.

That’s an example of the outstanding leadership VAI has enjoyed during the five years James Viola has been our CEO. He wants to know what our members do and learn their pain points so that VAI can help resolve them—everything an association should do for its members.

On Our Way

With our pathway established, Jim Viola and I, Billy Majeau, and Jamal Wilson of the FAA met a day before the HSAC at Shell USA’s Robert Training and Conference Center in Robert, Louisiana. The facility’s training program is provided by Maersk Training, whose team of professionals is top-shelf. Maersk conducts a variety of safety-focused, mission training scenarios for the offshore industry.

The next day, we joined oil-and-gas professionals at the Oct. 9–10 HSAC meeting. The conference, which convenes several times a year, is attended by management-level representatives of many Gulf operators to discuss everything from maintenance to flight operations.

One HSAC meeting regularly focuses on integrating enhanced weather-station products

The Tahiti Platform (far left) viewed on arrival and approach to landing. The Maersk Training team (left, in black shirts) conducted the T-HUET session for us (L to R in red shirts: Jamal Wilson, FAA; James Viola, VAI; Zac Noble, VAI; and independent engineer Billy Majeau). *(VAI/Zac Noble)*

Our Leonardo AW139 arrives to take us back to shore. The helideck team does a fantastic job of ensuring that each passenger is properly seated and buckled in before departure. *(VAI/Zac Noble)*

into the Gulf's weather boxes. As part of this effort, VAI has partnered with the FAA and, most recently, flight-app company ForeFlight to provide better, more accurate information for safer helicopter operations.

Tahiti Platform

Our visit to the Tahiti Platform was quite the treat, with the trip starting out from South Lafourche Leonard Miller Jr. Airport (KGAO), also known as Chevron Galliano Airbase, which is an impressive operation. Getting on the flight was very similar to a modern airline experience—stepping on weight scales, obtaining an electronic boarding pass, and passing through security. There was even a passenger waiting area where people waited for flights to their respective platforms.

The flight to Tahiti Platform took about an hour in one of Chevron's AW139s. Upon arriving on the platform, we received a safety briefing and a tour of the facility. We were afforded the opportunity to ask questions of the platform crew and really get to understand life on the job. We had lunch with a few of the crew, and a few more came in to eat and chat with us while we ate.

The crew were obviously teammates and family. After all, they spend as much time on the platform as they do back home, with duty cycles of 14 days on/14 days off. (Aircrews also rotate on cycles of 14 days on/14 days off.) They work in an isolated environment and train constantly for emergency situations and possible evacuation. Their professionalism would make anyone proud. It made me proud to spend time with them.

Thousands of times in our lives, we pull up to the fuel pump and fill our cars, never thinking about where the gas comes from. Now, I think about the Tahiti Platform all the time, especially when I'm at the gas station.

Many thanks to Chevron and Jose "JJ" Jaramillo, manager of aircraft operations, and Brian Holley, chief pilot, for accommodating VAI for this wonderful educational opportunity. Jim Viola and I have new appreciation for everyone working the oil platforms around the world, regardless of who their parent company is.

Zac Noble *is VAI's director of flight operations and maintenance.*

Valérie André

World's first female helicopter rescue pilot broke barriers to become a military pilot and neurosurgeon.

VALÉRIE ANDRÉ, THE FIRST WOMAN TO achieve the rank of brigadier general in the French military during an armed forces career that saw her deployed as a doctor, parachutist, and helicopter pilot, died Jan. 21, 2025. She was 102.

André's destiny as a pilot was set at the age of 10, when she met acclaimed pilot Maryse Hilsz. Hilsz had just completed a nearly 13,000-mile journey from Paris, France, to Saigon, Vietnam, and back. André regularly visited the Strasbourg aerodrome after that, eventually taking her first fixed-wing flight lessons at 17 years of age in summer 1939.

After graduating from medical school in 1947, André enlisted in the French Military Medical Corps and volunteered to serve in French Indochina as a doctor.

Following helicopter flight training in France, André flew her first of 129 rescue missions in Vietnam on Jan. 22, 1951, earning the respect of all who served with her. She went on to serve in Algeria as both a medical rescue and troop transport pilot and chief medical officer for the Reghaïa air base near Algiers. By this time, she had graduated to flying the more sophisticated Sikorsky H-34 and Sud Aviation Alouette II. When she returned to France in 1962, André continued serving in the French Army as a medical officer assigned to air bases throughout the country.

André, who received numerous commendations and medals of honor for her service, remained in the French Army, rising to the rank of colonel in 1970 and a brigadier general in 1975—the first woman to achieve the rank in the French military. In 1982, André was promoted to medical inspector general.

During her career, André lobbied for gender equality for women pursuing military medical careers. As a result of her efforts, women now represent over half the medical corps' personnel.

Top: Charles Morgan Evans Photo; Bottom: Valérie André Photo. Used with permission.

Pete Riedl

Longtime Robinson engineer, board member played an integral role in shaping the design of the company's helicopters.

PETE RIEDL, AN ENGINEER and longtime leader at Robinson Helicopter Co., died Jan. 28, 2025.

For nearly 40 years, Riedl played a pivotal role at the company. As Robinson's VP of engineering for two decades, he was instrumental in shaping the design and development of every helicopter the OEM produced. After his partial retirement in 2024, Riedl joined the company's board of directors. His leadership in engineering, regulatory advocacy, and mentorship shaped not only his company but also the broader rotorcraft community.

"As a Robinson R44 owner, I am struck by how Pete's designs successfully balanced the needs of the pilot, safety, reliability, and elegance," says VAI President and CEO James Viola. "His contributions have left an indelible mark on the industry, ensuring safety and efficiency for generations of pilots and operators."

Company founder and industry icon Frank Robinson hired Riedl on Feb. 3, 1986. His first assignment involved leading the design and testing program for what would become the R44 helicopter, the world's best-selling general aviation helicopter. Following the success of the R44, Riedl spearheaded the development of the R66, Robinson's first turbine aircraft.

Kurt Robinson, the company's former president and CEO and son of Frank, worked alongside Riedl for most of his career. "Pete was a brilliant engineer, leader, and a friend," he says. "Throughout his career, Pete worked tirelessly on behalf of Robinson and the aviation industry with regulatory agencies worldwide to enhance and improve helicopter design and flight regulations. His efforts have made, and will continue to make, our industry safer."

VAI President and CEO James Viola (left) takes delivery of his Robinson R44 from Pete Riedl at the Robinson factory in Torrance, California, Mar. 7, 2024.

Nick Sabatini

Former New York Police Department Aviation Unit officer served as FAA associate administrator for aviation safety.

NICHOLAS "NICK" SABATINI, a respected leader and champion of aviation safety, passed away Nov. 26, 2024. He was 88.

Serving as the associate administrator for aviation safety at the FAA until his retirement in 2009, Sabatini significantly advanced safety standards throughout the industry.

Sabatini's career began with the US Army, where he served at Fort Knox, Kentucky, from 1956–1958. After fulfilling his military duties, he joined the New York Police Department (NYPD) in August 1958. He transitioned to the NYPD Mounted Unit in 1960 and the Aviation Unit in 1966, where he served until retiring in 1976.

After serving with honor in law enforcement, Sabatini joined the FAA, ultimately ascending to the role of associate administrator for aviation safety on Oct. 15, 2001. For more than seven years, he adeptly oversaw the certification, production approval, and continued airworthiness of aircraft, impacting nearly 7,300 commercial airlines and aircraft operators. Through his leadership, he transformed the aviation safety organization, implementing International Organization for Standardization (ISO) certification, enhancing customer service, and championing voluntary safety programs.

Even after retirement, Sabatini remained active in promoting aviation safety, starting his own consulting company. He also served on the Helicopter Association International Accreditation Program of Safety Standards Board.

In 2018, Nick received the Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award at EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in recognition of more than 50 years of service as a pilot. The award celebrated his technical expertise, professionalism, and contributions to aviation safety.

Sabatini's collaborative approach to addressing critical safety issues earned him recognition and awards, including an International Air Transport Association Nuts and Bolts Award in 2003.

"Nick Sabatini leaves behind a legacy defined by innovation, dedication, and a profound commitment to aviation safety," says James Viola, VAI president and CEO and a close friend of Nick's. "Colleagues and friends throughout aviation will remember his impact, and I hope they will find comfort in knowing that he lived life with passion and purpose, embodying his high values and standards."

Sabatini is survived by his wife, Bonnie; his sons, Stephen and Christopher Sabatini; and two grandchildren.

Alamy/Greg Whitesell

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Bell 214 transmission bearing
Los Alamitos, California, USA
VAI Member — Manufacturers & Suppliers

Photo by Mark Bennett

When Bearing Inspection Inc. joined Timken in 2005, they brought with them 50 years of experience inspecting and overhauling critical antifriction bearings. This ball bearing from a Bell 214 transmission is just one of the thousands of aerospace products Bii (as they bill themselves) handles every year.

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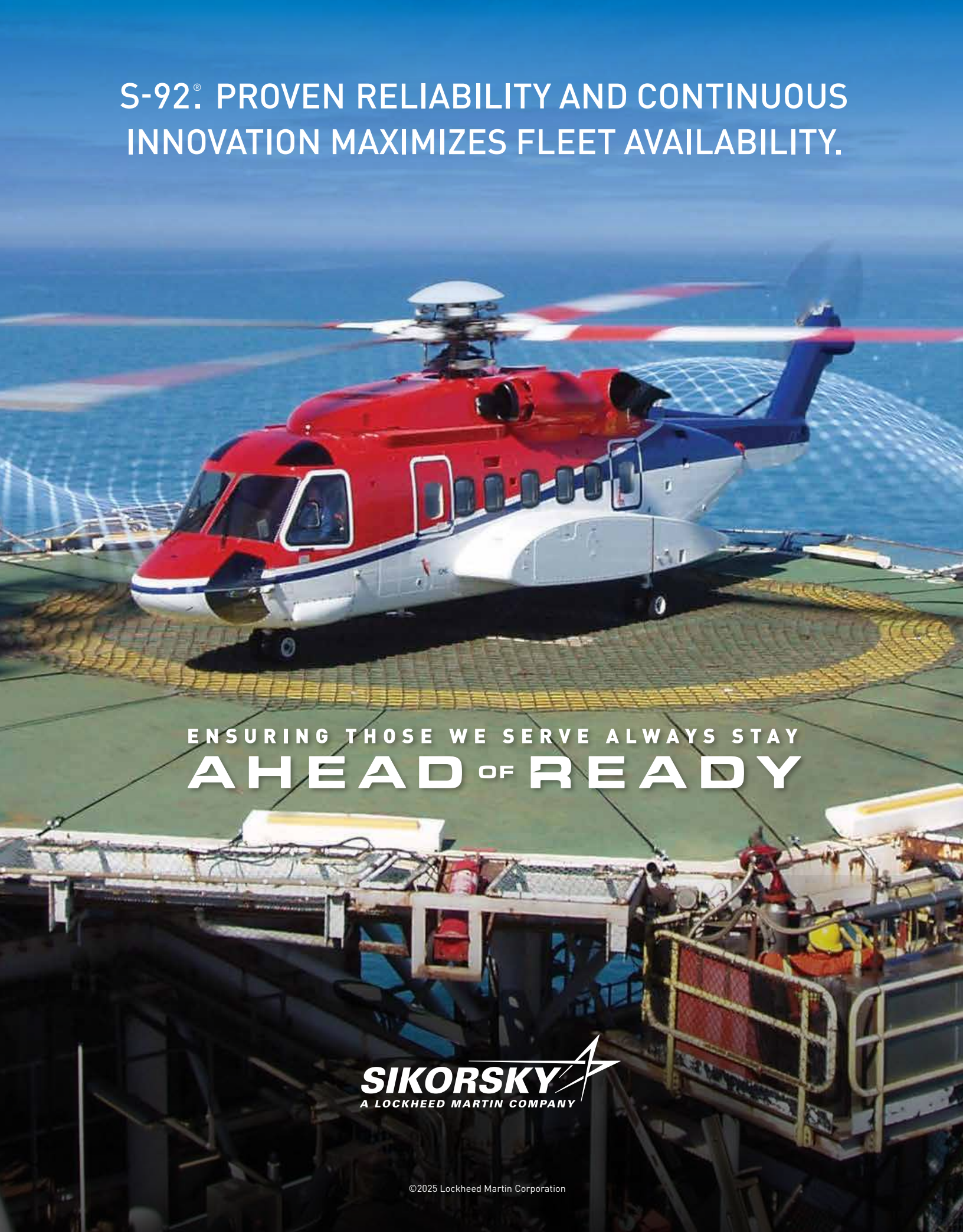
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