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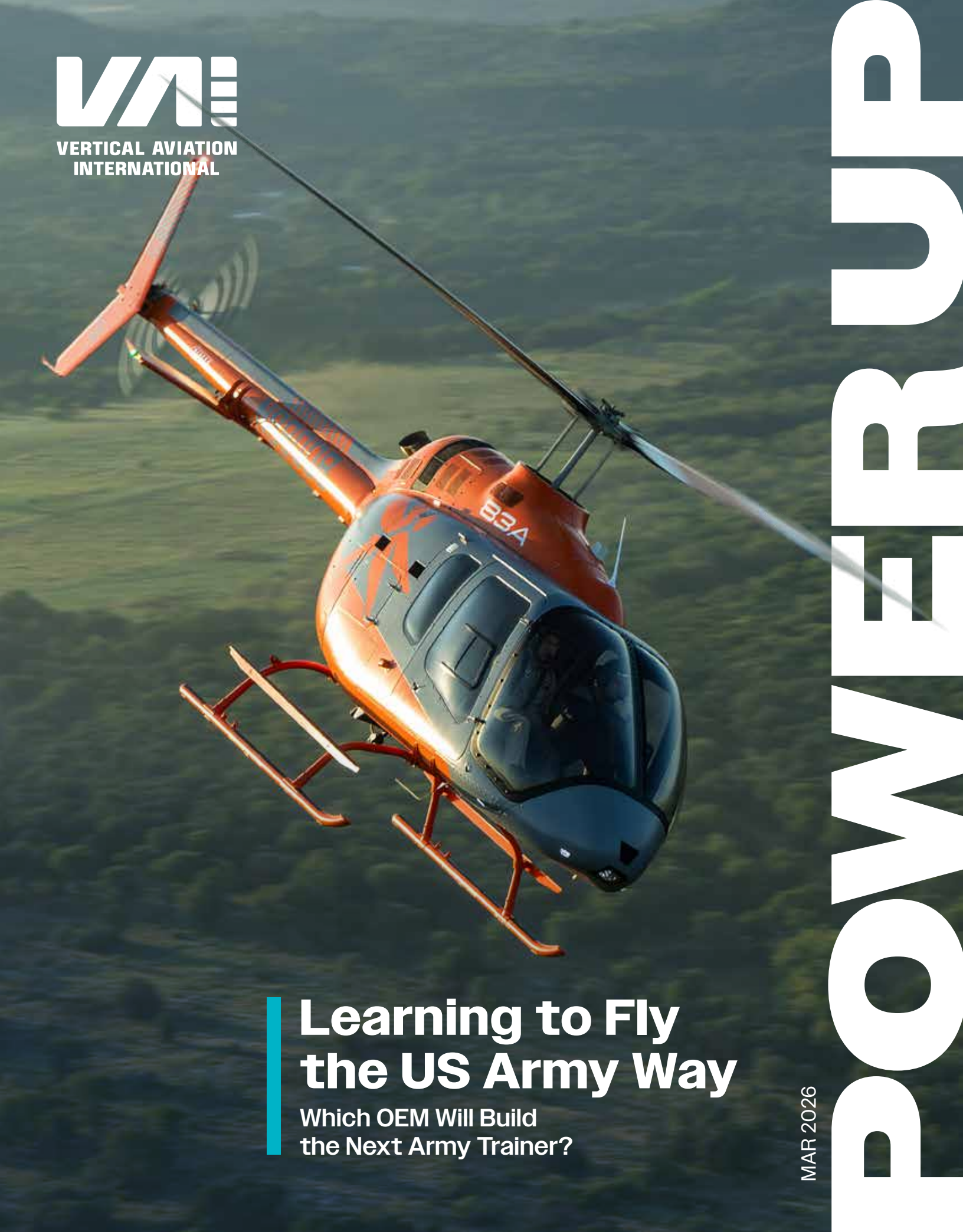

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DEPARTMENTS

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On the Cover

Sheldon Cohen, Photographer

This Bell 505, photographed Aug. 20, 2025, near Mineral Wells, Texas, USA, is that OEM's candidate to be the next trainer for the US Army. Read more about how the army is rethinking ab initio training for its helicopter pilots—and the aircraft they may be flying—in the article on p. 26.

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March 2026 | Vol. 2 No. 3
A Quarterly Publication of Vertical Aviation International

POWER UP

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Postmaster: Send all address changes and correspondence to:
POWER UP Magazine
1920 Ballenger Ave., 4th Flr., Alexandria, VA 22314-2898
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Charting the Future of Our Industry

The VAI Board of Directors is seeking leaders.

By Rick Kenin

GREETINGS FROM YOUR BOARD of directors. If you're in Atlanta at VERTICON 2026, please reach out—VAI's annual conference and trade show is a great place to connect with us (and if you've missed VERTICON this year, you can always reach out to board members virtually).

Some people will tell you that VAI = VERTICON, just like our old identity, Helicopter Association International, or HAI, was synonymous with HELI-EXPO. Well, a lot has changed in your association over the past decade. The board members' engagement with VAI—and with the challenges of our industry—extends far beyond VERTICON.

Besides rebranding to become *the* association for the entire vertical aviation industry, we have diversified our presence to include industry and area-specific events: the Aerial Work Safety Conference, the Air Tour Safety Conference, EUROPEAN ROTORS, and new in 2026, the Southeast Asia Aviation Safety Conference. Additionally, the VAI Advocacy Team has engaged on a wide array of regulatory and legislative measures in the United States, Europe, and at the United Nations International Civil Aviation Organization. The list of our member benefits continues to grow, with safety programs, member discounts, and support for small businesses.

Another change over the past few years may have gone unnoticed by some members: the intent and makeup of your board of directors. Ten years ago, when HAI was largely focused on managing a trade show, the board was similarly heavily engaged in how that trade show succeeded. But in 2020, our association undertook a course change when the board began

RICK KENIN is the 2025–26 chairman of the VAI Board of Directors, as well as the chief operating officer of transport for Boston MedFlight, a nonprofit air ambulance organization based in the Northeastern United States. Rick holds an ATP license for fixed-wing aircraft with multi-engine and jet type ratings, and a commercial rotorcraft license with instrument rating.

designing a strategic plan that it would direct and oversee.

Today, the VAI Board is responsible for developing, refining, and managing the success of five strategic initiatives. Key to this process is forecasting the future of the vertical flight industry—and the part VAI will play in that future. One thing that stands out is the global integration of our industry. While previous boards had a US-focused approach to our industry, the current board understands that an inclusive international perspective lifts all of us higher.

Now comes the sales pitch: Have you considered joining the VAI Board of Directors? The VAI Board seeks thought leaders from our industry to consider and act for the industry on a strategic level. While the direct benefits are not financial (all board members serve as volunteers), few other positions offer the opportunity to influence an entire global industry.

Here are a few facts about what the board is and what it does.

Board size and makeup. The VAI Board of Directors comprises individuals who are elected by the association's operator members. In 2024, to better represent all industry segments, the board changed the bylaws to add two board seats, bringing the number of voting members to 11. Operator members are now organized into three classes by fleet size—small, medium, and large—and each class is represented by three board seats. Two additional directors represent government, military, and public-service operators.

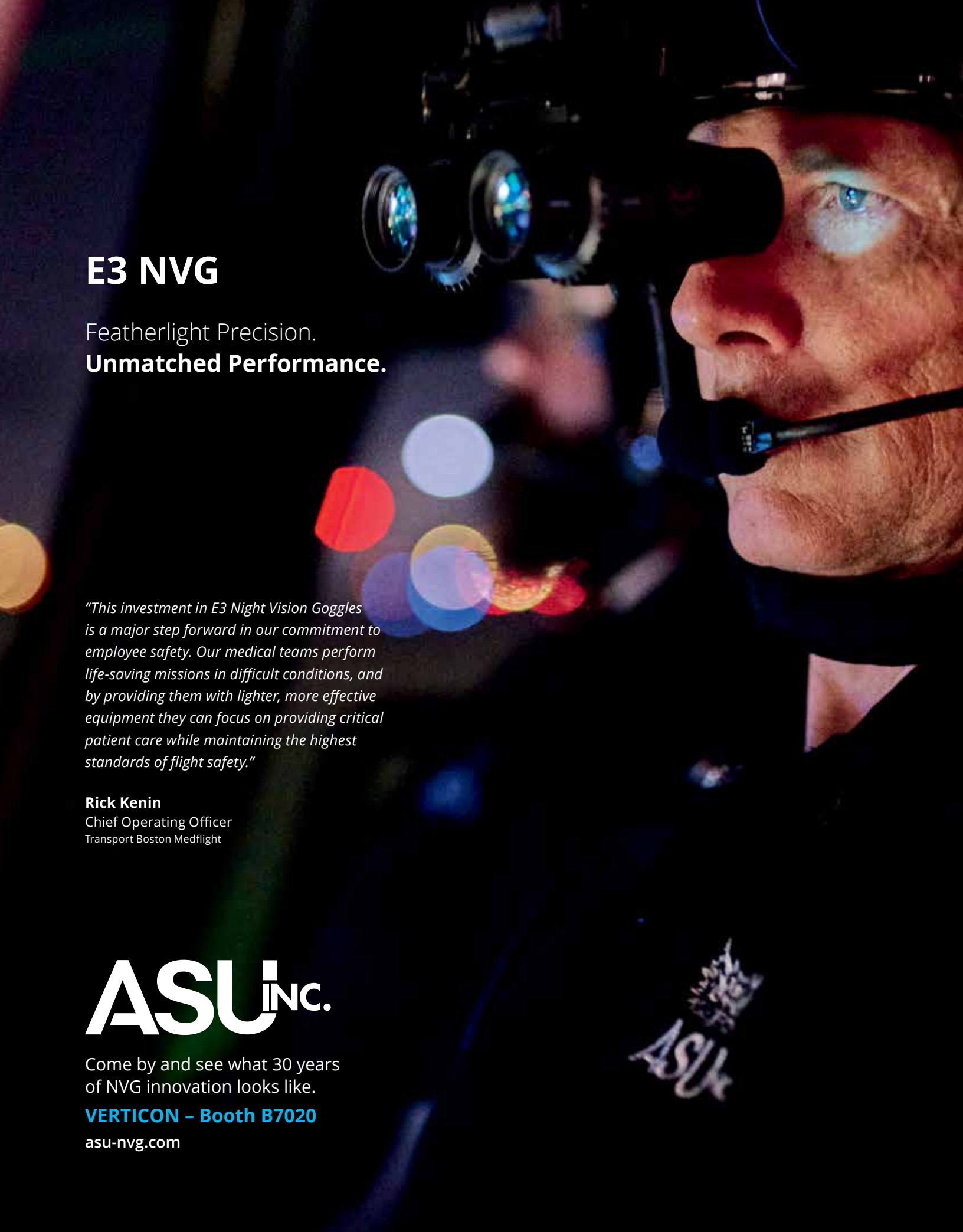
Board activities. We meet as a board three times a year: at VERTICON, at VAI's Virginia headquarters, and at one virtual meeting. During the meetings, which typically take place over two days, we hear from VAI staff about their work to implement those five initiatives, followed by discussion and redirection to hone the strategic intent. Board members also individually engage with VAI's industry advisory councils (IACs) to hear directly from our members about their concerns.

Becoming a board member. The path to a seat on the VAI Board typically starts years before any election, with participation in VAI IACs (or committees or working groups, as some member groups were previously named). Having leadership experience in both the industry and the association is key for anyone aspiring to a board seat. While we value a foundation in aviation operations and maintenance, the board's work also requires individuals to possess an all-encompassing, strategic view of the industry. If you're the kind of person who is always looking beyond … beyond today, beyond the mission, beyond what's next … then this is your opportunity to do that for your industry.

> **If you're the kind of person who is always looking beyond … beyond today, beyond the mission, beyond what's next … then this is your opportunity to do that for your industry.**

As you read this, VAI members will have just concluded a board election. But in one way, the timing is perfect! Start thinking now if you'd like to get more involved with your industry by joining an IAC or running for a board seat. Information on the nomination and election process will be posted in VAI Daily in late 2026, with the election taking place in February 2027 to choose candidates who will fill board vacancies in July of that year. If you have more questions, seek out a board member or email president@verticalavi.org.

Thank you for your continued membership and participation in VAI. I look forward to seeing all of you in Anaheim next March for VERTICON 2027.



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Our Path to 2030

VAI's goal: to be the safety-led voice uniting our global, diverse industry.

By François Lassale

SINCE STEPPING INTO THE ROLE OF VAI president and CEO in October, I've been listening—really listening—in hangars, at our VAI safety conferences, at EUROPEAN ROTORS and EASA, and everywhere the real work of vertical aviation happens.

Our association is at a clear point of inflection. The VAI Board of Directors initiated changes in governance to ensure its members represent small, medium, and large vertical aviation operations equally. They defined five strategic initiatives to guide our work, and we rebranded from our old identity, Helicopter Association International, to reflect a rapidly expanding and diversifying fleet.

At the same time, the vertical aviation industry is changing fast, with growing interest in electric and hybrid propulsion systems, and autonomous operations. Regulations are being adapted to accommodate the new aircraft and technology that are coming to the flight line. In this environment, our industry needs a trusted, unifying voice to speak for them. VAI must be that voice.

This moment brings both opportunity and risk. Leadership transition creates uncertainty even when the fundamentals are strong. We stand at a convergence of internal change, industry-wide evolution, and external pressure to prove our value.

My view is simple: VAI must not only navigate this inflection point—we must define it. If we don't, others will set the narrative, priorities, and standards for our community.

I also see real strength in VAI. The staff remains steady and committed. External perception in our value and commitment remains strong. Our future success depends on clarity, consistent communication, and disciplined execution. This is the time to sharpen our five-year focus and unlock VAI's full potential.

FRANÇOIS LASSALE began his aviation career as a jet and helicopter pilot in the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force, followed by operational and executive assignments around the world, including Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America. Prior to joining VAI as its president and CEO in 2025, François was COO of HeliOffshore, promoting aviation safety in global offshore energy production, and then CEO of SGi Group, based in Indonesia.

VAI stands at a convergence of internal change, industry-wide evolution, and external pressure to prove our value.

The industry is asking for specific things, and those asks are reasonable. Members want a trusted advocate not only in Washington but worldwide. They want a unifying, informed voice that can steer the global integration of helicopters and advanced air mobility. They want standards and safety leadership. They want a member experience that feels relevant, inclusive, and valuable. My task is to ensure VAI meets those needs.

My leadership approach is grounded in respect for what VAI already is. I'm not here to reinvent; I'm here to accelerate. I lead through clarity, visibility, and safety-focused integrity, while bringing trust, coordination, and strategic momentum. I also believe in a disciplined definition of leadership. My job isn't to be the loudest voice—it's to make VAI the most respected one. And I'll do that by amplifying the great voices already at VAI, from our staff to our members and volunteers across the world.

Financial resilience matters as much as vision. VERTICON remains a cornerstone of VAI's programs, but we must diversify revenue to reduce risk concentration and fund year-round value for our members. We're currently creating our vision board for what "good" looks like in 2030, in line with our five strategic initiatives. Financial resilience is crucially important to the association because it will support sustained advocacy, safety programs, standards work, and member services aligned with VAI's strategic initiatives.

I also want VAI to become the global knowledge source for vertical aviation. That means producing an annual report on vertical aviation's impact and building a hub for anonymous data sharing.

The single most important thing that our operators can do is to share information and data in an aggregated, de-identified, protected way. This data will be used to strengthen safety leadership, improve operational learning, and support better policy outcomes with credible evidence. If we lead with facts and shared learning, we raise performance across the sector.

Finally, I want VAI to earn global influence in policy and standards through recognized collaboration on recommended practices.

The outcome of all our efforts: a safety-led, data-driven, financially resilient, and tech-enabled VAI that speaks for a unified international vertical aviation community. Our progress toward that goal will show in how you, our members, describe us. If you say, "They listen. They lead. They deliver," then we are on the right flight path. ■

Ongoing Policy Issues Shape Industry

Part 108, helicopter route review reflect breadth of regulatory activity affecting vertical aviation.

By Theresa Marr and Katia Veraza

AS HIGHLIGHTED IN THE PREVIOUS TWO "Advocating for You" columns, a pair of critical regulatory concerns continues to frame our industry this year: the FAA's proposed Part 108 rule, Normalizing Unmanned Aircraft Systems Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) Operations, and a nationwide review of helicopter routes at major US airports.

Part 108 Rulemaking

One of the most significant regulatory actions currently underway is the FAA's Part 108 rulemaking, which establishes a framework for BVLOS operations in the US National Airspace System. The rule has implications for multiple

VAI/William Barrilleaux Photo

airspace users, including operators of crewed and uncrewed vertical flight aircraft operating in low-altitude environments.

During the initial 60-day public comment period, nearly 3,100 comments were submitted to the FAA rulemaking docket. VAI contributed a detailed, 19-page set of comments informed by operational experience and safety considerations, and more than 100 VAI members endorsed those comments and resubmitted them to the FAA.

Following the close of that comment period on Oct. 6, 2025, VAI participated in more than 30 follow-up engagements with congressional offices and other stakeholders to convey member concerns raised during the rulemaking process.

The FAA on Jan. 28, 2026, reopened portions of the Part 108 docket in response to extensive stakeholder feedback, including input from VAI and its members (see "Part 108, Round 2," p. 50). The reopened comment period, which ran through Feb. 11, 2026, focused on electronic conspicuity and right-of-way, two issues that are central to safe operations in shared low-altitude airspace.

The FAA indicated that additional public input was needed to ensure that these provisions would be workable across a mixed environment of crewed and uncrewed aircraft and to help inform development of a final rule that supports safe integration for all airspace users.

During the reopened comment period, VAI drafted remarks responding to the FAA's targeted technical questions regarding electronic conspicuity and right-of-way and distributed them to its membership, encouraging members to submit and endorse VAI's comments alongside their own. This approach helped ensure that operational perspectives from across the vertical aviation community were clearly reflected in the docket as the FAA considers development of a final rule.

Helicopter Route and Chart Updates

Separately from the Part 108 process, the FAA has initiated an annual nationwide review of helicopter routes and charts. The agency has completed an

internal audit of existing helicopter charts and is now in the process of notifying affected air traffic facilities of required updates. The FAA has indicated that the goal is to complete all helicopter chart updates by October 2026.

Based on its assessment, the FAA has identified 11 initial priority areas for helicopter chart updates: Los Angeles, California; Dallas–Fort Worth, Texas; New York, New York; Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Houston, Texas; the Baltimore, Maryland–Washington, D.C., region; the Grand Canyon; the US Gulf Coast; and Las Vegas, Nevada. The FAA has noted that prioritization may evolve and that facilities may work multiple locations in parallel, provided all required updates are completed by the October 2026 deadline.

Part 108 has implications for multiple airspace users, including those operating in low-altitude environments.

One of the most closely followed helicopter route updates has been Route 12 in the Baltimore–Washington region. Route 12 was relocated north of the I-95 corridor to increase separation from fixed-wing arrival and departure flows at Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport (KBWI). Although the updated helicopter chart continued to depict Route 12 with a 500-ft. mean sea level ceiling, portions of the route were identified where aircraft would operate at or near surrounding terrain. The revised routing also placed aircraft in closer proximity to ground structures and over densely populated residential neighborhoods.

These terrain and obstacle considerations were identified after the route had been charted and entered into operational use, prompting additional review and coordination. Following safety concerns raised by VAI and helicopter operators, Route 12 was temporarily closed to allow for further evaluation.

As this edition of POWER UP went to press, a safety risk management panel for the Route 12 modification was scheduled to be formed Mar. 5, 2026, with a related helicopter route chart update planned for Mar. 19, 2026.

Looking Ahead

Together, the Part 108 and helicopter route updates reflect the breadth of policy and regulatory activity currently affecting vertical aviation operations. From the development of new frameworks for BVLOS operations to ongoing reviews of helicopter routes and charting practices, VAI continues to engage with regulators and policymakers to ensure that operational realities are understood and considered as changes move forward. VAI will continue to monitor these processes closely and keep members informed as rulemaking, chart updates, and safety reviews progress.

Theresa Marr *is VAI's senior director of government affairs.* ***Katia Veraza*** *is VAI's assistant director of state government affairs and regional relations.*

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VAI BRIEFS

VAI, Robinson, EAA to Launch Vertical Lift Center

VAI JOINS THE EXPERIMENTAL AIRCRAFT Association (EAA) and Robinson Helicopter Co. to announce that vertical aviation technology will make a grand entrance at the new EAA Vertical Lift Center during EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2026, scheduled for Jul. 20–26 at Wittman Regional Airport (KOSH) in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

EAA AirVenture Oshkosh, billed as the world's largest annual gathering of aviation enthusiasts and aircraft, features more than 10,000 aircraft and over 500,000 attendees. In addition to rotorcraft, aircraft on display include home-built airplanes, warbirds, vintage aircraft, ultralights, and seaplanes. Daily air shows, workshops, films, demonstrations, and more are also on tap during the weeklong event.

The Vertical Lift Center, located within AirVenture's Aviation Gateway Park, will feature helicopters and emerging vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) aircraft. In addition to aircraft displays, the area will include programming focused on public education, industry recruitment, and technology.

"Vertical aviation is entering a period of fast growth and real change, and the new Vertical Lift Center at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh gives us a high-visibility place to show the public where this sector is headed," says François Lassale, president and CEO of VAI. "VAI is proud to partner with Robinson and EAA to highlight the full

After making its first public flight at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2023, Wisk's Cora aircraft returned in 2024. *(VAI/Dan Sweet Photo)*

spectrum of vertical lift, from today's rotorcraft operations to emerging VTOL technologies, while inspiring the next generation of pilots, maintainers, and engineers who will power this industry upward."

David Smith, president and CEO of Robinson, concurs. "The future of flight is vertical, and EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh is an ideal stage to sponsor and showcase the innovation happening across our industry," he says. "As the demand for skilled engineers, A&P mechanics, and test pilots reaches an all-time high, Robinson is committed to supporting education and careers across vertical lift."

Adds Ren Scott, EAA VP of business development, sales, and events: "The EAA Vertical Lift Center focuses on this unique segment and its potential. Working with Robinson and VAI brings the expertise in this area that connects the rotorcraft and vertical lift communities with the international visibility available only at Oshkosh."

VAI BRIEFS

VAI Aerial Work Safety Conference

In early December, the 2025 VAI Aerial Work Safety Conference brought the aerial firefighting, aerial work, and restricted-category operations sectors to Boise, Idaho, USA, for three days of learning and networking. Attendees had the opportunity to hear from VAI President and CEO François Lassale (top left) and provided feedback on their challenges (top right). Some sessions at the popular event were standing room only (bottom). *(VAI/Bailey Wood Photos)*

FOR MEMBERS ONLY

VAI SMS Program

Network of SMS partner providers helps operators at all levels.

By Chris Hill

SAFETY MANAGEMENT systems (SMS) are no longer a future concept; they're today's operational reality. With the FAA's expanded Part 5 SMS rule now in effect, many commercial operators face near-term compliance deadlines, while other operators around the world are outpacing the United States through well-established regulatory safety frameworks. Whether mandated, encouraged, or voluntarily adopted, SMS has become the common language of modern global aviation safety.

Across the VAI membership and the broader vertical aviation industry, we can observe the full spectrum of SMS maturity. Some operators have fully operational SMS programs deeply embedded

The wide variety of missions conducted by helicopters requires a robust safety management process to effectively manage risk. Here, an NHV Airbus 175 conducts hoist training in Østerild, Denmark. *(VAI/Roelof-Jan Gort Photo)*

Investing time and resources into SMS isn't just about regulatory compliance. It's about resilience, professionalism, and long-term operational success.

in their daily decision-making processes. These organizations aren't asking if SMS adds value: they're smart; they figured that out a long time ago. They've evolved to focus on continuous improvement for themselves and the aviation industry.

Others are well on their way. They understand that investing time and resources into SMS isn't just about regulatory compliance. It's about resilience, professionalism, and long-term operational success. They know that SMS is an enabler, not a burden, and they're steadily building systems that support safer outcomes.

Then there's the remaining group. Sigh. Some call them the "unreachables." I prefer "late adopters" or "reluctant followers." Unfortunately, this group is large. It includes far too many operators now facing imminent FAA Part 5 SMS compliance declaration requirements. While some remain confused about what SMS implementation requires, others are dubious of its value. At this stage, the divide is stark: operators who resist SMS are increasingly left with only two explanations for their inaction: ignorance of what SMS truly is or indifference toward the risks their operations impose on crews, passengers, and the public. To characterize this attitude as alarming is charitable at best. I prefer to call it negligent.

Refusing to adopt SMS is a dangerous game of chicken. Yes, of course, there's regulatory risk in being found noncompliant under current or updated rules. But the far greater risk is operational: continuing to fly without a structured way to identify hazards, manage risk, and verify that controls are working. In today's environment, that's not just outdated, it's indefensible.

That's why we developed the VAI SMS program. For the past several years, we've assembled a proven network of skilled SMS partner providers designed to meet operators where they are, regardless of size, geography, or SMS maturity. These partners offer a wide range of solutions, from foundational coaching and practical software tools to gap analyses and side-by-side support, to deliver bespoke SMS wellness programs tailored to your operation.

The program comprises six SMS partners:

- Air Charter Safety Foundation
- Aircraft Electronics Association
- Baldwin Safety & Compliance
- PRISM SMS by Argus SGS
- WYVERN Ltd.
- Cirro by Airsuite.

Each is prepared to offer scalable, credible pathways to compliance and, more importantly, to meaningful safety performance solutions.

To learn more, visit verticalavi.org/safety/sms.

Chris Hill *is the senior director of safety at VAI.*

VERTICAL AVIATION CALENDAR

Upcoming Events

Apr. 7–9
2026 ACSF Safety Symposium
Air Charter Safety Foundation
Daytona Beach, Florida, USA
Learn more at acsf.aero/acsf-safety-symposium

Apr. 14–19
Sun 'n Fun Aerospace Expo
Lakeland, Florida, USA
Learn more at flysnf.org

May 5–7
Forum 82
Vertical Flight Society
West Palm Beach, Florida, USA
Learn more at vtol.org/forum

May 11–14
XPONENTIAL 2026
Association for Uncrewed Vehicle Systems International
Detroit, Michigan, USA
Learn more at xponential.org

May 27–29
VAI 2026 Southeast Asia Aviation Safety Conference
Vertical Aviation International
Sanur, Bali, Indonesia
Learn more at verticalavi.org/saasc

Jun. 2–4
2026 International Powered Lift Conference
Vertical Flight Society
West Palm Beach, Florida, USA
Learn more at vtol.org

Jul. 11
Rotors 'n Ribs
Vertical Aviation International
Goshen, Indiana, USA
Learn more at rotorsnribs.com

Jul. 13–17
APSCON/APSCON Unmanned 2026
Airborne Public Safety Association
Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA
Learn more at publicsafetyaviation.org/apscon

Jul. 20–24
Farnborough International Airshow 2026
Farnborough International Ltd.
Farnborough, England, United Kingdom
Learn more at farnboroughairshow.com
Visit VAI at Booth #4800

Jul. 20–26
EAA AirVenture 2026
Experimental Aircraft Association
Oshkosh, Wisconsin, USA
Learn more at eaa.org/airventure
Visit VAI at Booth #363

Sep. 16–18
AirMed World Congress 2026
European HEMS and Air Ambulance Committee
Munich, Bavaria, Germany
Learn more at airmed2026.com

Sep. 19
12th Annual Girls in Aviation Day
Women in Aviation International
Worldwide event
Learn more at wai.org/giad

Oct. 5–7
Vertical MRO Conference
MHM Publishing
Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada
Learn more at verticalmro.com

Oct. 20–22
NBAA-BACE
National Business Aviation Association
Las Vegas, Nevada, USA
Learn more at nbaa.org/events

Oct. 26–28
2026 Air Medical Transport Conference
Association of Air Medical Services
Fort Worth, Texas, USA
Learn more at aams.org/page/events

Nov. 3–5
Heli Japan 2026 and 12th Asian Australian Rotorcraft Forum
Vertical Flight Society
Gifu, Gifu Prefecture, Japan
Learn more at vtol.org/arf2026

Nov. 16–18
Vertical MRO Conference
MHM Publishing
Irving, Texas, USA
Learn more at verticalmro.com

Nov. 30–Dec. 3
EUROPEAN ROTORS 2026
European Helicopter Association and European Union Aviation Safety Agency
Lyon, France
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Pilot: Officer Nicholas Pearson
Tactical Flight Officer: Officer Matthew Goff

Photo by Mark Bennett, Jun. 12, 2025

New training model aims to cut costs while producing more proficient aviators.

US Army Helicopter Pilot Training

WHAT'S

NEXT

By Mark Huber

Leonardo Photo

PENDING LEGISLATIVELY mandated congressional evaluation, later this year the US Army is expected to award the contract for its Flight School Next (FSN) rotary-wing pilot training program. This program is a significant departure from the service's more recent training models, which historically have used government-owned, government-operated aircraft. The FSN program embraces a contractor-owned, contractor-operated (COCO) business model that more closely resembles that of FAA Part 141 civilian flight schools.

Training Costs, Training Effectiveness

From 1993 to 2000, the army trained more than 25,000 pilots and flew more than 1.9 million hours in its fleet of 181 single-engine, analog-cockpit Bell TH-67 Creek aircraft, a variant of the Bell 206. The army's 2014 decision to switch to Airbus Helicopters' twin-engine UH-72A Lakota, a variant of the EC145, for its initial-entry rotary-wing (IERW) trainer was at the time a controversial one.

Senior army officers argued that the shift to the UH-72A would provide a variety of practical advantages. Students would be able to stay with the same airframe longer during their training, and aircraft-specific simulators could be incorporated into training. In addition, it was thought that learning on an aircraft with sophisticated avionics and automatic flight control systems would better prepare students to fly more-complex aircraft, such as the Boeing AH-64 Apache and CH-47 Chinook, as well as the Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk.

But behind the scenes, other forces played into the decision. Federal budget sequestration made it difficult for the army to obtain funding for a completely new aircraft training fleet. The UH-72A had already been in army service since 2007 as a utility helicopter. In addition to the acquisition of new Lakotas, some of those already in service could be quickly moved to the training fleet at the US Army Aviation Center of Excellence at Fort Rucker, Alabama, the army's primary IERW training facility.

The switch to the UH-72A began in 2016 and was completed by 2020. In the past nine years, the army has trained over 10,000 pilots on the

Previous spread and right: The US Navy began employing the Leonardo TH-73A Thrasher, a turbine single-engine variant of the civilian AW119T, as the platform for its Advanced Helicopter Training System in 2022 and is currently flying more than 100 of the aircraft. *(Leonardo Photo)*

UH-72A, with the Lakota fleet amassing over 1 million flight hours.

Even as the last UH-72A was being delivered, however, the army began looking at longer-term alternatives. A pair of related studies from Boston Consulting Group and the university William & Mary commissioned by the army concluded that the COCO approach using single-engine helicopters would be more cost effective, potentially saving hundreds of millions of dollars over a 26-year period. The studies also predicted that this approach would produce pilots with stronger "stick and rudder" skills.

Aside from the costs associated with conducting primary training in a twin-engine aircraft, senior army officers noted that the systems on modern twins produce a sophisticated and automated aircraft that "almost flies itself," according to former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. James Mingus, at the expense of basic flying skills. Army aviation has experienced a recent uptick in fatal accidents—what it calls "Class A mishaps"—during training flights, with many attributed to loss of control of the aircraft. More publicly, the US National Transportation Safety Board's investigation of the fatal army Black Hawk midair collision with a landing regional jet near Washington Reagan National Airport (KDCA) on Jan. 29, 2025, also highlighted the army's need to strengthen basic flying skills.

In late 2024, the army issued a request for information to solicit industry input on helicopter flight-training solutions. (In addition to helicopters, the army is looking to revamp its fixed-wing and unmanned aircraft system aviation training.) That information was used to formulate the Commercial Solutions Opening (CSO) framework now being used to gather more-formal proposals. The CSO process allows the army to move more quickly than it could using conventional contracting procedures.

In December 2025, the army released a Call for Solutions (C4S) as Phase I of the selection process. Requirements listed in the C4S will boost the average flight-training hours per student pilot from the current 80 to 131, and contractors will receive a fixed sum per student. The award is expected by September 2026.

Robinson TH-66 Sage

Even before that C4S, at least one OEM was participating as a team member in small-scale, proof-of-concept flight-training programs with the army and other branches of the US and other militaries. Early in 2025, Robinson Helicopter Co. provided several TH-66 Sage aircraft, a version of its R66 turbine single, to pilot training programs for both the US

Army and the US Navy. Conducted by Crew Training International in partnership with Helicopter Institute, the US Army FAA Part 141 Helicopter Flight School Pilot Program in Marianna, Florida, provides army student aviators with 16 weeks of training in the TH-66, with the goal of earning their FAA private pilot, rotorcraft helicopter, and instrument helicopter certifications.

Later in 2025, Robinson began working with the US Navy via its Contractor Operated Pilot Training – Rotary (COPT-R) program at Fort Worth Meacham International Airport (KFTW) in Fort Worth, Texas. The navy program, which also trains US Marines and US Coast Guard pilots, offers students 50 hours of instruction in the TH-66 Sage that will enable them to meet or exceed the requirements for their FAA private pilot (helicopter) rating. In both pilot programs, the goal is to both expedite the training and provide students with a solid grounding in foundational flight skills.

Robinson President and CEO David Smith told POWER UP that the company has no desire to be the prime contractor on any FSN bid but is working with several prime bidders as an aircraft supplier. "We've been working hard with each of them to build a strong value proposition," he says. While Smith declined to name the FSN bidders Robinson is working with, media reports indicate that they include Lockheed Martin, M1 Services, and Quantum Helicopters.

Meanwhile, the helicopter OEM is receiving valuable feedback from the army and navy pilot programs. The four ships assigned to the army program have amassed approximately 2,000 hours since April, and its original class of 48 students are two-thirds of the way to graduation. "[The programs are] running at a reasonably high tempo, but not as high as some of our commercial operators," says Smith.

The COPT-R program is adding two helicopters to its existing fleet of four TH-66s. Smith says the purpose of both programs is to better prepare students for formal military training by initially running them through a civil FAA Part 141 syllabus. "Early training days can be civil oriented and civil costed, which is really an advantage. Eventually, that saves money for additional training, the more advanced technical and mission training," he says.

The Nigerian Air Force (NAF) has been using the R66 as a primary trainer since 2012 via a cooperative venture with the NAF International Helicopter Flying School, which trains both military and civilian pilots. The four R66s used by the NAF log a combined 6,000 hours annually, according to Smith, with a better than 90% dispatch rate, no small feat in what Smith admits is a region that can be a challenging maintenance environment.

Smith says Robinson has worked through COVID-era supply issues,

The Robinson TH-66 Sage, a variant of the R66 turbine single, is currently being used in small-scale training demonstration programs for both the US Army and the US Navy. *(Robinson Helicopter Co. Photo)*

particularly with its engine supplier, Rolls-Royce, and is confident the company can produce the 200 to 250 helicopters over four years requested by the army. Robinson has approximately 1,500 R66s in service worldwide.

No matter the outcome of the FSN competition, Robinson is going to continue to pursue the military training market, says Smith. "We're not going to stop with the [US] army. We're going to be going after all the other training programs that come around. I think this is all rather positive for Robinson, no matter what."

As is some fine print in the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act, P.L. 119-60, which mandates that funds for FSN be restricted, as well as other programs that are part of the Army Transformation Initiative, until the secretary of the army provides Congress with a detailed report on the current army and navy Part 141 pilot programs in which Robinson is participating.

Bell 505

Bell is taking a different approach to the FSN competition. It's the prime contractor in the bid, offering its 505 turbine single along with training team partners. "The army's desire to move quickly on this is good for us," says Carl Coffman, Bell VP of military sales and strategy. Coffman joined Bell in 2016 after 29 years in army aviation. "We've been working on a solution for the army for about two years. We are well prepared."

Bell announced in February that it had advanced through Phase 3 of the army's C4S process. In each successive phase, teams must submit an increasing amount of detail. "It's kind of like a game of *Survivor*," Coffman says, adding that he expects the field to be culled to a few finalists by June.

Bell already has a large number of 505s embedded in a variety of foreign military training fleets, including 40 with South Korea as well

Unlike its peer group, Bell is proposing it act as the prime contractor for Flight School Next. The Bell 505 already flies for military training programs in Jamaica, Jordan, Montenegro, and South Korea. *(Bell Textron Photo by Sheldon Cohen)*

as the militaries of Montenegro, Jordan, and Jamaica—approximately 70 aircraft in total. It has delivered nearly 600 505s worldwide since FAA certification in 2017 and is currently completing IFR certification with the FAA.

According to Coffman, it makes sense for the army to contract for the training aircraft as opposed to buying them because, unlike the UH-72A, they are "nondeployable aircraft" for combat. The vision of the FSN program is to provide initial training in a simpler aircraft that doesn't meet army requirements for military combat operations.

Turning all elements of flight training—aircraft, maintenance and support, and instruction—over to a contractor is a sea change for the army. Coffman says the service is looking for two main things: the ability to successfully transition from the old program to the new and the ability to execute on the required schedule. The FSN program also represents a new frontier for Bell and its team: offering the army flight training as a service, with all the components, and then turning that student pilot into an "aviation warfighter."

"I can teach someone to be a helicopter pilot in 50 hours, but turning that pilot into an aviation warfighter is going to take longer than that. A military aviator flies in much different environments and needs advanced combat skills and night-vision goggles training. Right now, we believe the army isn't getting what it needs in terms of basic skills, confidence, and competence," Coffman says. "We want to be able to send an aviator to a unit who is immediately capable of contributing to the warfighting readiness of that unit."

Bell, a Textron company, will also be relying on sister company TRU Simulation + Training to provide an FAA-approved Level 7 flight training device (FTD) that uses virtual reality (VR) as part of its offering to the army. TRU's new Veris VR Flight Simulator FTD uses a high-fidelity headset to replace visual displays and features a six-degrees-of-motion base for realistic cues, accelerations, and vibrations.

The simulator provides another way to cut costs and expedite learning. "We don't want to

The US Army currently utilizes the twin-engine Airbus UH-72A for its initial helicopter training. *(Mark Bennett Photo)*

replace flying hours with simulator hours," Coffman explains. "We want to use sim hours to optimize time in the aircraft. I don't want to be doing start-up and basic maneuvers in the aircraft. Once that blade starts turning, I want to optimize the training time."

Airbus UH-72A Lakota

The incumbent training-aircraft provider, Airbus Helicopters, is still in the mix. Via a prepared statement, Airbus told POWER UP that the company has been working closely with the army to better support IERW training with the UH-72A. "Our primary goal is ensuring that future aviators learn the necessary skills—from basic familiarization to instrument navigation to rotary-wing tactics to successful transition to the army's 'go-to-war' aircraft, including the MV-75 [Bell tiltrotor]. The Lakota is well suited to be part of a comprehensive solution that leverages multiple aircraft and advanced instructional methodologies to provide training from initial familiarization through IFR flight and tactics."

Airbus tied the revamp of all army aviation training to larger questions facing the service. "We believe that army aviation is going through a period of dramatic change, both in the size of the fleet as well as in its missions and tactics. This requires a thorough and deliberate effort to develop a comprehensive solution that will ensure Fort Rucker can teach the skills necessary not just for today's fight, but tomorrow's, as well."

Airbus's FSN submission proposed reducing training costs while meeting the army's training objectives. Items covered included adjusting the multiple support contracts for Fort Rucker, altering the instructional syllabus, maximizing the UH-72A's training capabilities, and exploring a hybrid training

The US Navy uses 130 Leonardo TH-73As to train its pilots as well as those of the US Marine Corps and the US Coast Guard from Naval Air Station Whiting Field near Milton, Florida. *(Leonardo Photo)*

option with a single-engine aircraft alongside the UH-72A. "Our solution is affordable, sustainable, retains the safest rotary-wing trainer in Fort Rucker history, and honors the US taxpayer's $2.2 billion investment in the program."

Leonardo AW119T

Leonardo participated as an FSN team member with prime contractor Boeing, offering its AW119T turbine single. A variant of that aircraft, the TH-73A Thrasher, began flying as a training aircraft for the US Navy in 2022, and Leonardo has subsequently delivered 130 of the aircraft.

The navy uses the TH-73A to provide helicopter training for navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard pilots. The aircraft is equipped with an integrated flight management system, digital avionics, night-vision goggles capability, and an infrared searchlight, position lights, and formation lights. The TH-73A replaced the TH-57 Sea Ranger, a variant of the Bell 206 with analog instruments.

In support of the program, Leonardo built the 73,000-sq.-ft. Florida Support Center, which opened in September 2025. Adjacent to Naval Air Station Whiting Field, the center provides maintenance, repair, and overhaul services for both military and civil aircraft.

The AW119T is in service worldwide with four major militaries that have used it to provide more than 160,000 military flight-training hours to 800 pilots, including 35,000 IFR training hours and 40,000 full-touchdown rotations.

"We are bringing together two industry leaders to offer the army a turnkey, innovative approach to rotary-wing training with an integrated, long-term training solution that increases aviator readiness, operational and sustainment efficiencies, and will deliver measurable value throughout

(Continued on p. 36)

The MD 530F's good high/hot performance makes it a popular training helicopter in the Middle East. *(MD Helicopters Photo)*

the life of the program," says John Chicoli, senior director, US Army/Marine Corps & Special Operations/Missions, Boeing Global Services.

Enstrom 480B and MD Helicopters MD 530

Two other OEMs are also competing to build the army's next training helicopter: Enstrom and MD Helicopters, with their 480B and MD 530F turbine single helicopters, respectively.

The 480B is used for military training in Japan, Thailand, the Czech Republic, Venezuela, Zambia, and Estonia. Enstrom received FAA certification for its 480B crash-resistant fuel system in November 2025, allowing the aircraft to satisfy FAA requirements and to be sold again in the United States.

MD 530 series helicopters are used for military flight training in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Kenya, Lebanon, and Malaysia. In making its case for the FSN program, the company touts the aircraft's proven performance in combat, US design and manufacture, and nimble handling characteristics.

Learning to Fly the "Old-Fashioned Way"

Whichever option the army selects, its intent to change helicopter flight training is clear. "We want to go to a simple, single-engine basic helicopter so that our pilots, when they come out of flight school, they are expert pilots," Gen. Mingus said last year during the annual Army Aviation Mission Solutions Summit. "We will teach them to be integrators and flight integrators on the back end of that, but we want them to be masters of their craft, of being able to fly a helicopter the old-fashioned way."

Army student pilots could begin flying a new training helicopter as early as 2027.

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

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VAI's Mil2Civ program helps former service members thrive in a hungry civilian helicopter industry.

MAKING THE TRANSITION

By Mark Huber

IN SEPTEMBER 2025, THE US ARMY announced plans to cull 6,500 active-duty aviation positions over fiscal years 2026 and 2027 out of a total workforce of 30,000. The service said most of the positions would be eliminated via normal attrition and that the move comes at a time when the army is increasingly focusing on unmanned aircraft operations.

The reduction follows the May 2025 announcement that the army would eliminate its reserve rotary-wing aviation units as part of the Army Transformation Initiative. That decision affects all rotary-wing units under the two Expeditionary Combat Aviation Brigades (ECABs) that are part of the Army Reserve Aviation Command (ARAC). The two ECABs are the 11th, headquartered in Fort Carson, Colorado, and the 244th, headquartered in Fort Knox, Kentucky, also home to ARAC, with additional battalions and aviation support facilities scattered over nine states from Washington to Florida.

ARAC operates 175 helicopters: 42 Boeing CH-47s and 133 Sikorsky Black Hawk variants: 29 HH-60L air ambulances, 30 HH-60M air ambulances, and 74

VAI/Jeff Stone Photo

TO FLY CIVIL

UH-60Ls. Altogether, the ARAC personnel force numbers 3,900, 400 of whom are civilian employees. Approximately 470 of the former are Active Guard Reserve personnel, and an estimated 200 to 250 of those are full-time pilots in staff and command positions. Of the 3,900 personnel, ARAC hopes to retain 1,200 to support its fixed-wing mission.

Mil2Civ Bridges the Gap

While the army is working hard to retain personnel via reassignment or reclassification, it realizes that losing some aviators is inevitable. That's where VAI's Mil2Civ initiative can attract top outgoing military talent and help them transition to aviation careers in the civilian industry.

Mil2Civ originated in 2013 when former army aviators (and future VAI Board Directors) Stacy Sheard and Marc Stanley collaborated on a workshop about civilian helicopter careers at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. After the presentation, VAI (then known as Helicopter Association International) encouraged the two veterans to expand the workshop.

The association began to fully sponsor the event, adding it to the program at its annual conference and trade show, HAI HELI-EXPO (now VERTICON). The organizers added

speakers, sessions, and volunteer mentors to the program and expanded it to attract both pilots and aircraft maintainers.

Today, topics at the Mil2Civ Workshop include obtaining FAA certifications, proper logging of flight hours, crafting a civilian resume, and networking, among others. Participating recruiters include leading civil air medical providers, offshore operators, and helicopter OEMs.

Set Up for Success

Heidi Scott is the chief pilot for helicopter services company PHI Aviation. A US Coast Guard veteran, she is also a lead Mil2Civ coordinator and frequent guest speaker at the workshop. She says the event is an invaluable opportunity for "military aviators who are either on the cusp of leaving the service or want to see what the transition looks like three to five years before retirement."

Mil2Civ helps "set them up for success in the civilian sector," Scott adds, by helping them understand how the civil industry works: its culture, language, and requirements. It's not uncommon for military attendees to come to Mil2Civ across multiple years to plug into networking and build relationships with prospective employers.

While the bulk of recruiting companies are helicopter air ambulance operators that find attractive the average military aviator's 1,500 to 2,000 hours of turbine time, utility and firefighting companies like the large numbers of Black Hawk pilots who attend as well.

For the aviators, civil employment, particularly helicopter air ambulance work, with its predictable shifts and generous time off, "is a huge draw" for recruits seeking a more stable family life, increased quality of life, and better compensation and benefits after frequent moves while in uniform, Scott says.

Mil2Civ also helps military aviators change their mission mindsets to prepare for civilian flying, Scott adds. Risk thresholds are typically lower in the civilian world, and hierarchies get tossed out the window when you're flying with a helicopter air ambulance team empowered with the doctrine of "three to say go, one to say no," she notes. Guest speakers address this and other topics, and between workshop sessions prospective recruits

Military members can take full advantage of networking opportunities with prospective employers between Mil2Civ educational sessions at VERTICON. *(VAI/f-stop Photography)*

PHI Chief Pilot Heidi Scott is a frequent speaker at Mil2Civ events and mentors pilots transitioning out of the military. The majority of PHI's new pilot hires have military experience. *(VAI/f-stop Photography)*

can visit with individual companies at their booths.

Due to an overall reduction in military flight hours in recent years or limited flight hours due to service that has included nonflight duties, some prospective recruits may lack enough turbine time to be hired right away. That's where people such as Scott can be mentors, suggesting other time-building solutions, such as flight instruction, air tour flying, or remaining with the service to build the needed time. Scott says the majority of PHI's new pilot hires have a military background.

Recruiter as Mentor

Doug Nash is a retired US Army veteran and US Coast Guard aviator who now serves as the Missouri-based regional director of flight operations for helicopter air ambulance provider Air Evac Lifeteam, part of Global Medical Response. Nash is a regular recruiter at VERTICON's Mil2Civ Workshop.

"It's a great experience," Nash says. "It helps these pilots, being able to speak with retired [service members] who made the transition [to civil aviation].

"The first thing I ask them is, 'Where do you want to live? Where does your spouse want to live?' You've been told what to do your whole [military] life, and now it's time to start making some decisions," Nash adds.

For aviators who need to build flight time, Nash also recommends air tours and agricultural application work. Air Evac can also offer direct employment

Mil2Civ: At VERTICON and Year-Round

The Mil2Civ Workshop is held each year on VERTICON Industry Day, the Monday events that open each annual conference and trade show. At VERTICON 2026, "Mil2Civ: Landing Jobs in the Civil Vertical Aviation Industry" will take place Mon., Mar. 9, 12:00 pm – 6:00 pm, in Room B206 of the Georgia World Congress Center.

But Mil2Civ isn't just a one-day event. The group has a presence on LinkedIn (search for Mil2Civ Helicopter). VAI also has extensive resources on its website; look for Mil2Civ under the Initiatives menu.

Anyone needing more information about Mil2Civ—to take advantage of its resources or to volunteer as a Mil2Civ mentor—should contact Greg Brown, VAI director of education and training services, at Education@verticalavi.org.

to aviators who may be short on hours by hiring them as ferry pilots to transport the company's helicopters between its regional maintenance bases.

Nash has personally hired close to 100 former military pilots over the past eight years. He often sees the same pilots over the course of several years at Mil2Civ. He encourages those with insufficient time to stay in the service or find other ways to obtain it.

There's a lot of demand for pilots, and there's not enough of them right now." — Ronnie Fleming, Air Evac Lifeteam

"When they're ready, they come back to us," Nash says. "Sometimes I ask them why and they say, 'You gave me the time of day when others wouldn't.' And that's what these pilots need."

One-Stop Shopping

Ronnie Fleming is a retired US Navy captain and aviator and Nash's counterpart at Air Evac Lifeteam for Oklahoma, North Texas, and Western Arkansas. He describes the Mil2Civ Workshop's combination of education, mentorship, and recruiting as "really quite brilliant. It's one-stop shopping for the folks transitioning."

Over a decade, Fleming has personally hired 20 service members he met at the Mil2Civ event. While some attendees aren't quite ready to make the leap into civilian life, he's hired others "right on the spot."

"If someone is qualified, we'll have a little meeting and conduct some interviews," Fleming explains. "There's a lot of demand for pilots, and there's not enough of them right now."

Fleming likes the energy at Mil2Civ. "It's not boring. It's not stuffy." But the best part, he says, is the confidence the workshop gives attendees, some of whom are understandably apprehensive about switching to a civilian career.

Fleming is happy to explain the benefits of civilian life. With seven-days-on/seven-days-off schedules, "they're going to be working about half the year. They can live almost anywhere they want," Fleming says. "They can easily make six figures when you add in the geographic modifiers and overtime.

In his view, one of the most important things to learn at Mil2Civ is that there is a future in civil aviation. "They can go back home and tell their spouse, 'It's OK; we're going to have a job.'"

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

CLOSING THE EXPERIENCE GAP

Small operators play a big role in mentoring low-time pilots.

By Justin Bachman

Hampton Roads Helicopters Photo

LOW-TIME HELICOPTER PILOTS face a sizable gap between earning their commercial pilot's license and building the experience needed to be eligible to fill many roles across the industry. To build hours, many work as flight instructors. Others seek positions flying air tours or working for smaller operators. These companies have come to play a crucial role in mentoring low-hour pilots and preparing them for future employers.

After all, low time in a helicopter doesn't prepare one for flying precision human-external-cargo work next to live electrical power lines or flying into a canyon to land on a dry creek bed to pick up an accident victim, both jobs that usually seek pilots with 2,500-plus flight hours. In contrast, pilots working for tour operators usually fly a routine of short flights on set routes that take off from and land at fixed locations.

Flying tours or performing other routine operations allows low-time pilots to accumulate flight hours and improve their skills. Helicopter pilots flying Las Vegas, Nevada, tourists to the Grand Canyon or quick aerial tours over Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, or Orlando, Florida, for a year or two often then move to another industry sector that requires more experience.

"The industry is kind of separated by tiers, and some of these first-tier jobs are in tourism," says Mark Schlaefli, a veteran of the air tour sector and a member of the VAI Board of Directors. "Flying tours are some of the first opportunities that pilots will get with lower times. Everybody will move on eventually—we expect that—and that's part of why tours are such a great [aspect] of workforce development."

To gain insight into the types of training, mentoring, and skills low-hour helicopter pilots need to progress in their careers, POWER UP spoke with two seasoned commercial helicopter operators who have worked with and hired dozens of pilots.

Schlaefli owns Dakota Rotors, a Part 135/133 operation in Custer, South Dakota, which flies air tours, surveys, and aerial filming and photography missions. He is also the director of operations for Redding Air Service, an operator in Northern California that provides utility, firefighting, charter, and maintenance services.

Another operator we spoke to, Dave Hynes, is the cofounder and president of Hampton Roads Helicopters in Chesapeake, Virginia. The company, founded in 2005, provides a variety of services, including air tours, flight instruction, aerial photography, charters, sales, and helicopter

Mark Schlaefli (third from right) enjoys a moment with the Dakota Rotors team. A veteran of the air tour sector, Schlaefli embraces its role in seasoning low-time pilots. *(VAI/Johnny Sundby Photography)*

Air tour pilots usually fly a routine of short flights on set routes that take off from and land at fixed locations, making these jobs ideal for gaining experience and building hours. *(VAI/Johnny Sundby Photography)*

maintenance. Hynes is also a US Air Force veteran who flew a variety of military aircraft.

Pilot Demand Meets Low Supply

The demand for helicopter pilots has grown more acute in recent years. In 2019, the last year the company surveyed helicopter personnel for its annual labor forecast, Boeing estimated the need for 61,000 new civil helicopter pilots globally through 2038, along with 44,000 maintenance technicians.

As its aging workforce of pilots nears retirement, larger trends buffeting the helicopter industry have slowed the overall number of pilots entering the profession. These issues include the high cost of flight training as well as the steep competition for skilled pilots among all aviation sectors. Part 121 air carriers, for example, actively recruit helicopter pilots transitioning from the military.

"The airlines sucked up a bunch of helicopter pilots coming out of the military and trained them in their jets and found that being a successful pilot was really more about character and responsibility and just overall airmanship," says Hynes. "You wouldn't normally think the helicopter industry is going to compete with the airlines, but yet here they were."

Unfortunately, it's difficult for the average small operator to compete with the airlines' deep pockets and sophisticated recruiting programs. Adding to the shortage, utilization of rotorcraft and unmanned aircraft systems has expanded in recent years, from utility to law enforcement to reconnaissance to air ambulance work.

With fewer pilots entering the workforce, the role that small operators play in turning a newly minted commercial pilot into a seasoned professional is more important than ever.

Make-or-Break Skills

All pilots must possess and apply the fundamentals of airmanship: the technical skills to fly an aircraft and the extensive knowledge required to do that safely and efficiently (this includes the principles of flight, the aircraft's systems and performance, airspace rules, and numerous other topics).

But operators will tell you that the qualities that make a pilot stand out are often the soft skills they develop: the ability to proactively scan for hazards and assess risk dispassionately, their ability to communicate openly about difficult issues, and their dedication to discipline and professionalism.

"If two pilots are equal in their ability to fly the aircraft, the guy with the higher level of engagement and professionalism is going to win that job every time," Schlaefli says.

Learning to assess risks dispassionately and methodically is critical to making good decisions and becoming a better pilot, Schlaefli says. "I need very smooth, controlled, fact-based risk analyzers—not emotional, reactive people. I look for pilots who are not looking to run out into bad conditions to feed their ego, and they're not looking to cancel things because it's challenging. They literally look at the risks, assess the facts, and make decisions from that."

If he had to summarize what he tries to impart to the people who move through his company, Schlaefli says, it would come down to these two

questions: First, have you conducted a fact-based analysis of risk level of the flight that you're about to take? Second, can you safely control that aircraft during all phases of flight without emotion or fear?

The Job: It's Not Just Flying

Coming out of flight school, many pilots think of their profession exclusively in terms of the skills they've just acquired: flying a helicopter. They're surprised to learn the reality is far more involved, including preflight and postflight preparation, Schlaefli says.

"Your day doesn't start and end simply by jumping in the helicopter and going out for a flight," he says. "There's a tremendous amount of preparation, paperwork, and recordkeeping that's required of you in these operations. And your ability to execute that part of the job professionally is every bit as important as what you do in the cockpit—if not more. Thorough, methodical preparation, including a review of identified hazards, associated risks, and ways to mitigate those risks, is essential for a successful flight."

Sometimes the training needed is more practical and hands-on, an introduction to the "real world" of commercial flying compared with the world of school, Hynes says. "There are a lot of maneuvers we do in the real working world that are never trained on through flight school, and they're not on the checkride."

A common maneuver in commercial operations is landing the helicopter on a dolly. "Sometimes the very first time a guy ever gets exposed to a dolly is when he all of a sudden gets the job to go work for an air ambulance company," Hynes says. "Landing on and off dollies … that's not just a natural thing to do, so you have to learn how."

The focus of some training isn't so much on acquiring a new skill as it is on getting rid of a technique or habit that isn't standard or effective in their new job.

"We have to unlearn some things every once in a while or show them, 'Hey, that may have passed the checkride, but it doesn't cut it in the real world of dealing with what you're going to be experiencing,' " says Hynes.

Managing Safety

Another topic that isn't on the test to

get your commercial pilot's license: the safety management system (SMS). Recognized around the world as the best way to manage risk in aviation, an SMS provides operators with a data-driven, systematic way to identify hazards, assess and mitigate the associated risks, and regularly review outcomes, adjusting mitigation strategies as necessary.

"All the big companies have been doing SMS for years," says Schlaefli. "Preparing people to work in that kind of an environment is also a big part of training and mentoring lower-hour pilots."

To be successful, an organization's SMS must be supported by the entire organization, from the CEO or accountable executive on down. Everyone must be empowered and encouraged to report hazards—even if that means reporting their own mistakes or a colleague's—because the entire process of risk assessment and mitigation begins with recognizing that a hazard exists.

SMS offers operators "the ability to collect tremendous amounts of data about what's actually happening out in the field so that you can help identify and reduce risks that you may not have known existed in your operation," Schlaefli says. But openly communicating about your mistakes can be a big ask, especially for low-time pilots eager to make a good impression.

"Especially when it's their first job, everybody comes in super nervous. They don't want to mess anything up," says Schlaefli. "And we have to do a good bit of work to keep everybody in the same mindset, to realize, 'Hey, we've got to talk about these things that occur.' Because that's the only way we can address those things. There's no room in this industry for keeping things quiet, covering things up, and not talking about day-to-day occurrences in the operation."

Schlaefli points out that the "just culture" philosophy protects those who report hazards stemming from honest mistakes (as opposed to willful misconduct). "Those days of a pilot making a mistake and getting fired right off the bat—they've been over for a long time. Pilots have to learn to trust that the information is going to be taken and used in an appropriate manner and not just simply as a job performance tool."

What Really Counts

Character and integrity are paramount values and often predict a pilot's success in the industry, Hynes and Schlaefli both agree.

"I've flown with 200-hour pilots that were fantastic—I would trust my family on board with them. And I've flown with multithousand-hour pilots that I won't get in the cockpit with," says Schlaefli. "Experience is important—I don't want to minimize it—but success in this industry really starts with the individual, their character and integrity, and the professionalism with which somebody approaches this line of work."

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

Hampton Roads Helicopters Photo

PART 108 ROUND 2

The FAA's reopened comment period asked pointed questions about electronic conspicuity.

By Amber Harrison

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT regulatory actions currently underway is the FAA's Part 108 rulemaking, which establishes a framework for beyond visual line of sight (BVLOS) drone operations in the US National Airspace System (NAS). The rule has implications for all airspace users, particularly those operating at or below 400 ft. above ground level (agl).

During the initial 60-day public comment period, a substantial number of comments was submitted to the FAA. VAI contributed a detailed set of comments informed by operational experience and safety considerations, and over 100 VAI members endorsed the comments and resubmitted them to the FAA.

Following the closing of the comment period on Oct. 6, 2025, VAI participated in more than 30 follow-up engagements with congressional offices and other stakeholders to convey member concerns raised during the rulemaking process.

What Changed to Reopen Comments

In response to extensive stakeholder feedback, including input from VAI and its members, the FAA subsequently reopened portions of the Part 108 docket. The reopened comment period, which ran from Jan. 28 to Feb. 11, 2026, asked pointed questions regarding electronic-conspicuity devices (portable, low-power, air-to-air deconfliction devices), including capabilities, approvals,

availability, appropriate standards, and reasonable alternatives.

VAI used the reopened period to highlight existing electronic-conspicuity technologies and suggest appropriate frameworks for standards. The association continues to urge the FAA to adopt a performance-based framework that supports portable electronic conspicuity, preserves manned aircraft right-of-way, and encourages broad voluntary utilization.

VAI draws a clear distinction between ECDs, which support air-to-air deconfliction, and ADS-B Out, which supports ATC surveillance.

VAI's Position, in Plain Terms

- **Portable electronic-conspicuity devices are not equivalent to ADS-B.**
  VAI draws a clear distinction between electronic-conspicuity devices (ECDs), which support air-to-air deconfliction, and ADS-B Out, which supports air traffic control (ATC) surveillance and, in some cases, authorization to operate in controlled airspace. The association cautioned against treating portable ECDs as equivalent to certified ADS-B Out systems, or using the same standards or performance frameworks currently applied to ADS-B Out systems for ECDs.

  VAI noted in its comments that the association is aware of only one available ECD, uAvionix's SkyEcho, but argued that it is not by itself an appropriate airspace deconfliction device. VAI's response also emphasized that where ATC surveillance or authorization to operate is required for deconfliction, aircraft should remain equipped with higher-power, fully certified transponders and ADS-B Out systems, even if a SkyEcho device is also used.
- **Redundant and fully tested detection systems are essential to safety.**
  VAI reiterated in its follow-up statement what was said in its earlier comments regarding the FAA's Part 108 proposed rule: The FAA should require redundant systems as part of a phased rollout to ensure detect-and-avoid reliability. Those backups should include UAS capabilities such as onboard ADS-B In receivers, plus passive systems such as optical or acoustic detection to help the avoidance system make more-informed decisions.
- **ADS-B Out requirements should not be applied to ECDs.**
  ADS-B Out requirements support ATC surveillance and separation. Portable ECDs, on the other hand, have a different job—air-to-air awareness—so the standard does not fit, VAI argues. If ADS-B Out requirements (14 CFR 91.227) were applied to ECDs, it would create burdens that work against portability, affordability, and broad adoption by operators. It would impose certification, installation, and cost requirements intended for installed avionics. It would also push transmitter power and design choices optimized for ground-based surveillance rather than nearby-aircraft awareness. VAI's view is that the outcome would be higher costs and reduced scalability for electronic-conspicuity usage.
- **Manned aircraft must retain right-of-way.**
  VAI reiterated its position that manned aircraft must retain right-of-way.

The association supports the safe and scalable integration of BVLOS drone operations in the NAS. VAI urges the FAA to ensure that Part 108 reflects the operating truth below 400 ft. agl.

In order for drones to safely integrate into the airspace system, the FAA must establish three things: standards that can scale; clear right-of-way expectations; and electronic conspicuity requirements built for low-altitude operations between aircraft.

Amber Harrison *is VAI's director of regulatory affairs.*

IT'S OK TO

Your biggest contribution to safe operations: your personal safety culture.

By Gina Kvitkovich

"IT'S OK TO STAY." THAT MESSAGE may seem strange, especially when aimed at pilots, people defined by their ability to leave Earth behind. But encouraging pilots to make the smart choice to stay on the ground when conditions aren't right is the central message of the latest safety campaign from VAI and the US Helicopter Safety Team (USHST).

Their previous safety campaigns, including "Land & LIVE" and "56 Seconds to Live," also addressed aeronautical decision-making, but both messages were primarily aimed at pilots who had already flown into conditions that required additional action to maintain operational safety. "We thought it important to focus on the safety actions the pilot should take before anyone gets into the aircraft. Making good decisions then will set you up for success—and sometimes that is defined by deciding not to take off," says Dave Dziura, owner of Safe Rotors and cochair of the VAI Safety Industry Advisory Council.

"It's OK to Stay" is focused on helping pilots overcome an outdated mindset in aviation—that a successful flight requires taking off. This attitude contributes to our industry accident rate because the very act of taking off reduces the options available for pilots. Any issue identified with the flight—weather, mechanical, physical, etc.—isn't going to be easier to solve while actively flying an aircraft. And the lure of continuation bias—the idea

that this flight must go on to avoid negative consequences—is powerful. Just ask any accident investigator.

When we talk about unfortunate outcomes from a delayed or canceled flight, here's one thing to remember: In the 100-plus years of powered human flight, no one has surveyed a crumpled aircraft and human remains and said, "The real shame here is that they never made that meeting." Or the family wedding. Or the bucket-list experience. So let's keep some perspective about what the worst possible outcome could be and focus our efforts on preventing that.

By telling pilots, "It's OK to Stay," the USHST and VAI are redefining the concept of what makes a flight successful: It's one that comes to a safe conclusion—even if that means no one left the ground.

Doing the Ground Work

You may agree that flight success is tied to flight safety. But how does that idea play out in the real world? What can you do to ensure that "It's OK to Stay" is more than a slogan? One answer lies in your personal safety culture.

Find the Facts

Before taking off, do you consistently practice these preflight behaviors that support flight safety?

- Conduct a comprehensive review of current weather conditions and forecasts at your departure point, destination, and en route
- Review the route, terrain and obstructions, NOTAMS, and any other relevant information about your planned flight

VAI/Mike Hershauer Image

- Use the PAVE checklist, IMSAFE checklist, and/or similar tools to scan for flight hazards related to the pilot(s), aircraft, environment, and external pressures
- Use a flight risk assessment tool (FRAT) to assess and mitigate the cumulative impact of identified hazards on the flight's overall chance of success
- Establish and follow personal or company minimums for safe flight
- Establish and follow en-route triggers, such as minimum acceptable altitude or airspeed, that dictate an action when reached during flight
- Perform a thorough preflight of the aircraft, paying particular attention to any recently maintained or repaired items or systems to ensure their airworthiness.

If your answer is yes, then keep on doing those things. Making good decisions on the ground is essential to safe operations in the air. Even really, really good pilots—like you!—should avoid unnecessary risk that threatens their ability to fly safely.

Note: The list above covers the essentials and isn't meant to be comprehensive. If your or your company's standard preparation for flights includes additional steps, then continue your professional approach to flight safety!

If your answer is no, then help is all around you:

- VAI (verticalavi.org/safety), the FAA Safety Team (FAAsafety.gov), and the USHST (ushst.org/safety-resources) have great materials to help you fly more safely, many created by helicopter pilots who have faced the same challenges as you
- The USHST and FAA now offer a confidential phone and email helpline (202-267-3333/accidents@faa.gov) for those who need to talk about safety issues
- If you're struggling or have turbulence in your personal life, the USHST's Peer Pilot Program stands ready to offer confidential support at ushst.org/mental-health
- If you're at VERTICON, take an Elevations course or Foundations session, or pay a visit to the VAI Safety Zone
- Ask your pilot examiner or another pilot you respect for recommendations.

Your goal before the flight is to gather the facts that back up your go/no-go decision. Being a pilot means that lives, including yours, depend on your ability to objectively and methodically evaluate the risks for each flight, mitigate those risks when possible, and decide whether the cumulative risk meets the threshold of your overriding goal: bringing every flight to a safe conclusion. Unless you're part of that rare flight crew tasked to defend your country from an existential threat, the importance or urgency of the flight should not figure into this assessment.

Some pilots can become complacent about these preflight tasks. It's easy to just "check the box" on your FRAT and move on, especially when you've already filled one out 10 times this month alone. If your preflight preparation is focused more on filing paperwork than having an honest conversation about issues and risk, then you're wasting your time. If that's happening to you or around you, then stop. Figure out how to get back to the real task: talking about the greatest risk posed by the upcoming flight and what you can do to mitigate it.

Accept Your Role

Another part of making "It's OK to Stay" more than just a slogan is accepting the responsibility that the civil aviation authorities around the world, including the FAA and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), have given you:

- FAA: "The pilot in command of an aircraft is directly responsible for, and is the final authority as to, the operation of that aircraft."
- EASA: "The pilot is the only one who has the authority to make decisions concerning the flight and the aircraft."

Both statements are unambiguous. You are the final authority as to the operation of that aircraft—not your boss, not your chief pilot, not your customer.

There are no exceptions: The pilot is responsible, full stop. The go/no-go decision is yours—don't give it away to someone who doesn't know the aircraft, the route, the terrain, or the weather like you do.

You have the authority to shrug off comments about the importance of the flight or the inconvenience of delays to concentrate only on factors

that affect flight safety. The meeting's importance or the patient's condition isn't going to make the iffy weather better or improve your sleep deficit, so why would you let them affect your go/no-go decision?

Communicating the No-Go Decision

Some days, you're able to tell your customers, "We're not flying," and they will say, "That's fine. We can go when conditions improve." But in a world with schedules, deadlines, and emergencies, they may be upset by your decision. A big part of "It's OK to Stay" is practicing the soft skills of communicating with others about your decision so they understand and concur.

Set Expectations

Even if the flight doesn't seem problematic, it's always a good idea to set expectations at the start. Your task is to build trust with your passengers, and canceling the flight when they're not prepared for that news can be shocking.

Practice these conversations ahead of time so you feel comfortable letting people down and not giving them what they want—a flight. Be aware that their understanding of aviation may be limited or misguided, and you may need to explain, for example, why a nighttime flight or overcast skies pose a hazard.

You don't need to give them a half-hour lecture on aerodynamics or spatial disorientation: just use plain, factual language that names the hazard and its effect on the flight: "The weather's OK right now, but if the wind picks up, then we'll have to reassess." Or, "If we can take off by 6 pm, then we'll have time to reach our destination while it's still light. If our departure is delayed past that time, then we'll have to postpone until tomorrow."

Help the Customer Cope

Your next skill to practice is to help customers accommodate the change in plans and, if possible, still meet the goal(s) for their flight. Think of the questions you would have in that situation and try to have solutions for:

- Places to stay or eat while they wait for conditions to change
- Local transportation if they don't have a car available
- Air or ground transportation

alternatives (if conditions permit) to their destination
- Facilities that provide privacy and Wi-Fi for remote meetings.

For Really Insistent Customers

Normally, we take pains to make our customers and passengers comfortable. We stress that our aircraft are well equipped and our pilots well trained; company policies and procedures will ensure flight safety.

But if you really need to break through to someone who consistently and unapologetically challenges your no-go decision, try saying the unvarnished truth: "When people go flying in these conditions, it sometimes makes the evening news—they love to cover aviation accidents. My real job isn't transporting you to your destination; it's making sure you get to your destination safely. Some days I can do that by flying you there. And some days—like today—the safest thing to do is to stay on the ground. But let's talk about our other options."

The go/no-go decision is yours—don't give it away to someone who doesn't know the aircraft, the route, the terrain, or the weather like you do.

You may even hear a disappointed customer or client threaten your job. There may be times when you have to get out your cardboard box—the box safety advocate and former head of Helicopter Association International Matt Zuccaro said every pilot should keep ready for when a passenger insists that a flight go on, even after being informed of the unacceptable level of risk. In that situation, Zuccaro advised, the best thing to do is clean out your office, put all your personal belongings in the box, and go home to have dinner with your loved ones.

But before you get out your box, try this script with that boss, customer, or client: "I hear you—this flight is very important to you. However, your life is much more important than my job. As your pilot, I have a duty to protect you. I'd be happy and honored to remain your pilot if you allow me to be the professional you hired me to be."

Dealing With Your Toughest Critic

Now let's talk about how to handle your ultimate critic, the person who consistently hands out devastating critiques of your work and professionalism, the person who knows you and your shortcomings all too well: yourself.

When we talk about the pressure to accept flights, we often think of that insistent customer who won't take no for an answer. But how often does that pressure come from within? It may be that you don't want to disappoint the customer or that you fear retaliation by your employer, and so you don't even bring up your misgivings about the flight.

Other times, you accept a flight to satisfy your ego, to prove that you really are an exceptional pilot (that hazardous attitude is called *machismo* by safety experts, or you may be exhibiting *invulnerability*). Or perhaps you've taken flights with similar hazards and made it to your destination just fine (that's called *complacency*).

As pilot in command, it is your responsibility to combat these hazardous attitudes, whether they come from within or from others. Instead, rely on the objective fact-gathering that comes before each flight, with the confidence that your professionalism has enabled you to make a data-based, responsible decision. Communicate that decision effectively so that your boss, colleagues, customers, and passengers can understand it. Offer alternatives that will help to meet the flight's goals. And remind yourself and others that "It's OK to Stay."

Gina Kvitkovich *is VAI's senior director of communications.*

SALUTE to EXCELLENCE

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Honoring the Best in Vertical Aviation

Each year, through our Salute to Excellence Awards, VAI proudly honors exceptional members of the vertical flight community whose dedication, innovation, and leadership elevate our industry. Whether through a singular achievement or an entire career of distinction, these aviation professionals from around the world inspire us to continually reach new heights.

In the following pages, VAI celebrates our 2025 honorees for their remarkable contributions to aviation and for exemplifying the very best of the vertical aviation industry.

Nominations for the 2027 Salute to Excellence Awards—presented at VERTICON 2027 in Anaheim—will open in June 2026. For details, please visit verticalavi.org.

Communications Award

For creative distinction in disseminating information about the vertical aviation industry

Bruce Webb and the Airbus Helicopters Aviation Education and Community Outreach Team

Airbus Helicopters, Grand Prairie, Texas, USA

"The Airbus team has reimagined how an OEM can serve the broader aviation community." – Chris Baur

Growing up on a farm in Illinois, Bruce Webb's ambition to fly was so unusual (especially given that his need for glasses barred him from flying with the US Air Force) that the local newspaper wrote a story about it. But that didn't deter the future Airbus Helicopters pilot.

"I guess when you're 18, you're unaware of all the constraints there are," he says. "And because you're unaware, you just go ahead like they're not there."

Webb's early career piloting air ambulances had him hopscotching across the Midwest, moving every few years. Seeking an end to the itinerant lifestyle, he went to fly for Airbus (then Eurocopter) in 1999, in the Dallas, Texas, area. After 18 months at the company, he was promoted to chief pilot, a position he held for 16 years.

Though he loved it, Webb eventually felt he was growing stale in the job and, in 2016, decided he wanted something else. "I really did feel I needed a change. And I felt it would be good for Airbus to have a change too," says Webb.

That decision spawned a brand-new role at the OEM: director of aviation education and community outreach, a position Webb continues to hold today.

He credits Airbus, specifically then–president and CEO (and current executive VP of customer support and services) Romain Trapp, with giving Webb the latitude to write his own job description as a kind of safety ambassador for the company—promoting a human-centric view of safety, circulating best practices and lessons learned.

"There's no one else in the world that does what we do," Webb says, emphasizing Airbus's investment in him and his team. "I travel the world to speak at events. We make videos. We do podcasting. None of this is inexpensive. And there's no regulatory requirement to do it.

"I'm proud of Airbus for making that investment. They really have a commitment to safety. And not only to the safety of our products, but to safety, period."

When the pandemic shut down their in-person safety presentations in 2020, Webb and his team turned to making Internet videos to get the message out. They pivoted from classroom and print-based training to dynamic, on-demand digital media. The result was a "new standard in aviation communication: responsive, relevant, and far-reaching," says Hughes Aerospace CEO and VAI Board Director Chris Baur, who nominated Webb and the team for the 2026 Salute to Excellence Communications Award.

The team created two innovative products: a video channel, Webb Sight Aviation, and the *Push to Talk* podcast. On the former, Webb breaks down complex maintenance and flight procedures into clear, concise lessons. The popular platform enjoys hundreds of thousands of views. On *Push to Talk,* which totals more than 52,000 downloads, Webb talks with guests ranging from test pilots and engineers to accident investigators, exploring the "why" behind operational decisions.

Initiatives such as these, Baur notes, represent "education in its most accessible and authentic form" and exemplify how Webb and his team have "reimagined how an OEM can serve the broader aviation community.

"In every sense, they've turned communication itself into a safety tool."

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POWERING UP

Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award

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

US Coast Guard Air Station Savannah Crew of CG-6561

Savannah, Georgia, USA

Nicholas Barnes

Glenn Bratlie

Zachery Geyer

McClain G. "Mac" Isom

The mission that could have killed the four-member crew of US Coast Guard helicopter CG-6561 almost didn't happen.

"It was fifty-fifty," says Cmdr. McClain G. "Mac" Isom, the pilot of the MH-65E Dolphin, of the decision to take off from Air Station Savannah in 40- to 50-kt. winds, with heavy rain, lightning, low visibility, and 200- to 300-ft. cloud ceilings.

Isom's copilot, Cmdr. Zachery Geyer, explains that Coast Guard personnel are trained to make a risk assessment about flying in such weather, to weigh the "potential of saving somebody's life against the risk we're going to incur to ourselves trying to do it."

> "It was the worst weather I've ever seen, hands down. I grabbed my [gear] and started praying, 'Dear God, I hope we make it out of this tonight.'" – Nicholas Barnes

The mission that night was to rescue a 56-year-old man about 40 miles away. The man, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, had left his sailing vessel, boarded a dinghy, and launched red distress flares.

The decision to take off was driven in part by the confidence the crew felt in one another. Isom and Geyer had flown together occasionally for more than a decade and knew that their two fellow crew members, Aviation Electronics Technician 2nd Class Glenn Bratlie, a flight mechanic, and Aviation Survival Technician 2nd Class Nicholas Barnes, a rescue swimmer, were both seasoned petty officers.

"I think both Mac and I would say, if either one of us had a more junior copilot, we probably wouldn't have taken the mission," says Geyer. Even so, the Dolphin sat powered up on the tarmac for more than an hour, waiting for a break in the weather.

When the break came, Isom took off, but within five minutes, the crew was stood down. The mariner had "self-rescued" and no longer required assistance.

By that time, the weather had closed in behind the crew and returning to Savannah was no longer an option. Even with night-vision goggles, the lashing rain and lowering clouds reduced visibility to just a few feet, except for the lightning strikes every few minutes that illuminated funnel clouds ahead.

"It was the worst weather I've ever seen, hands down," says Barnes. "I grabbed my [emergency mini-scuba tank] and started praying, 'Dear God, I hope we make it out of this tonight.'"

As the pilot, "I was incredibly task saturated," says Isom, "to the point where my ability to creatively troubleshoot our way out of this situation was dwindling, because it was taking everything I had to try to just maintain control of the aircraft."

It was Geyer, Isom recalls, who first suggested landing on the beach, and his fellow crew members immediately assented.

But even on the ground, the crew wasn't out of danger. The helicopter was sinking into the sand, in danger of tipping over, recalls Bratlie. The crew had to take off and re-land several times. "We were sinking, then we'd pop up, land somewhere else. I'm not even sure how many times we did that," he says.

Eventually, Barnes got out of the aircraft, found some harder-packed sand below a berm, and directed the crew there using the radio and his flashlight. They remained under power on the sand for nearly an hour before they could safely proceed to the nearest airfield, St. Simons Island Airport (KSSI).

The storm had receded to some degree, but there was still cloud cover down to 300 or 400 ft. "Most pilots wouldn't fly in that," says Bratlie, "but to us, it felt like a beautiful day."

Humanitarian Service Award

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

Operation Helo

Cornelius, North Carolina, USA

> "Operation Helo brought hope to the mountains of North Carolina, and they brought it with helicopters." – Lee-Anne Jae Aranda

On Sep. 27, 2024, Hurricane Helene decimated parts of the Southeastern United States, including Western North Carolina, where torrential rain dumped almost 3 ft. of water within 72 hours. The event destroyed 126,000 homes, wiped out 6,000 miles of roads and more than 1,000 bridges and culverts, and downed power and communications grids.

Within just two days, private helicopter pilots and area volunteers created one of the largest private air forces in US history to assist overwhelmed emergency responders, long before officials arrived. Operation Helo (for "Humanitarian Emergency Logistics Organization") was born.

Eric Robinson, the nonprofit's cofounder and executive director, had expected a handful of friends to show up to help out after Helene, but word had spread about the call for helicopter owners to volunteer. "We thought that maybe we'd have 5 to 10 helicopters show up," he recalls. "Day 1, we had 33."

By Day 3, more than 100 aircraft had come to the small airport in Hickory, North Carolina (KHKY). Even local volunteers without helicopters gravitated to the area, which quickly became a hub for distribution of vital supplies including food, medicine, water, diapers, and clothing.

Over the next 11 days, helicopter owners came from as far as Wyoming, and the operation ended up flying 400 missions daily. The key to success was self-organization, Robinson recalls. "It's a testament to the community in that there were so many people who wanted to help. We were simply a conduit [to enable them to help]."

By that time, Robinson says, he and Operation Helo cofounder Matt McSwain had already realized they had to try to institutionalize the huge capability revealed in Hickory, where "the terrain was not going to allow for fixed-wing assets," Robinson recalls. "Once we understood the ability to help with rotor-wing assets, it would be a disservice not to keep this thing going," McSwain says.

Operation Helo ended up deploying seven more times in the next 12 months, including Jul. 4, 2025, in Burnet County, Texas, when devastating flash floods along the Guadalupe River killed more than 130 people in the state's Hill Country region.

"Our participation in the [North Carolina and Texas] search-and-recovery operations showed we can take direction and bring skilled aviators to the mission," Robinson says. "It showed we're not amateurs who are going to be a liability. It showed we can fly a grid and integrate seamlessly with state and local emergency management. It really gave us credibility with government agencies, to the extent that we're now talking to the feds about working with them."

"Operation Helo brought hope to the mountains of North Carolina, and they brought it with helicopters," says Lee-Anne Jae Aranda, public relations specialist with Robinson Helicopter Co. The OEM nominated Operation Helo for the 2026 Salute to Excellence Humanitarian Service Award and announced in March 2025 it had formed a disaster-relief partnership with the organization. "The heroic work of these volunteers, pilots, veterans, and first responders showcased the versatility of helicopters to reach the most vulnerable in the aftermath of a disaster."

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Law Enforcement Award

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

Nicholas Romano

Deputy, Broward Sheriff's Office
Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA

"As soon as I flew the drone in and it turned the corner, [the suspect] opened fire at it. Years ago, that would have been one of my guys."

Nicholas Romano comes from what he calls "a law enforcement family. … My dad was a police officer for eight years before I was born. And growing up, a lot of my family members were police, fire, military. So it was always a big influence."

His favorite childhood toy, he recalls, was "a little Matchbox police helicopter … and I told everyone I wanted to be a police helicopter pilot." Later, he found out the helicopters didn't have air-conditioning. "And I live in South Florida, so I realized, no, I'm not doing that," he laughs. "But I kept on with the police part."

Romano followed his father into the Broward Sheriff's Office (BSO), one of the largest local law enforcement agencies in the United States. Initially, he was assigned to road patrol but later transferred to the detective bureau, where he specialized as a computer forensics examiner.

That same "sure, I can do that" attitude when given a new role made Romano a natural choice to be one of the BSO's first drone pilots when the agency decided to start using the unmanned aircraft systems almost a decade ago.

"At the time, I had zero interest in or knowledge of" the small, remotely piloted rotorcraft, he remembers. The devices' sensor capabilities were much more limited at the time; their cameras couldn't zoom and had to be monitored on-site by the operator. "Searching for suspects and searching for missing persons was pretty much the bulk of all we would do," says Romano of those early days when the unit got up and running.

But he flung himself into research about emerging drone technology. "Naturally, since I was given this task, I wanted to do it well, so I delved into it and learned everything I could and tried to become as much of an expert as possible," Romano says.

He quickly became an enthusiastic convert—and one of the drone unit's first trainers and, later, its coordinator. "I became a believer in the technology," Romano says. "The amount by which it expanded our capabilities for air support was a revelation."

That same spirit animates his work in the Florida Public Safety Coordination Group, which aims to advocate on behalf of and promote best practices among the state's law enforcement drone units.

Sensors and other capabilities have advanced by leaps and bounds since the BSO's unit was set up, Romano points out. A key turning point was the ability to send drones into buildings where armed suspects might be hiding.

Romano recalls an incident last year that starkly illustrates the stakes. "We had a barricaded suspect inside a residence. No information that he was armed or anything. The SWAT team breached the door … . As soon as I flew the drone in and it turned the corner, [the suspect] opened fire at it. Years ago, that would have been one of my guys, no doubt about it."

Being able to ensure that his fellow officers get home to their families makes his work truly meaningful, Romano says. "I really feel like I made a difference when I know what we did kept people safe."

Safety Award

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

Irina Sakgaev

Applications Manager,
CHC Helicopter
Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

"Safety isn't a competitive advantage. The aim is to collaborate, to put differences aside and learn together."

What began as an internal safety education event at CHC Helicopter was "so successful that our customers started asking if they could attend," recalls Irina Sakgaev of her company's inaugural CHC Safety and Quality Summit in 2005. So the following year, the company opened up the conference, first to their customers and then to the entire rotorcraft industry. 2006 was also the first year Sakgaev ran the event, having joined CHC as executive assistant to former Safety and Quality VP and summit founder Greg Wyght.

The conference, which attracted 450 attendees last year, brings together helicopter and fixed-wing companies, along with their regulators, customers, and safety specialists from sectors as diverse as mining and law enforcement.

Through her work as the event's project manager, "Irina has had an immeasurable positive impact on the safety culture of the helicopter industry globally," says Wyght, now senior VP of aviation with Marsh Canada.

Longtime summit attendee Tony Kern echoes Wyght's sentiments. "What sets Irina apart is her selflessness and unwavering commitment to empowering others for safe operations," says Kern, CEO of Convergent Performance, a human-factors training and consulting firm. "As someone who's seen the evolution of the summit over the years, I can attest that Irina's work has had a profound impact on advancing safety practices and inspiring countless professionals in the helicopter industry."

Behind the conference's success is a common goal for all involved. "At the end of the day, we all want to come home to our families," Sakgaev explains. "That means we all need to run our operations safely." At the conference, "we're not competing with anybody," she adds. "Safety isn't a competitive advantage. … The aim is to collaborate, to put differences aside and learn together."

The summit doesn't have an exhibit hall or sponsors' booths, focusing instead on education and learning. Sakgaev leads a team of CHC volunteers, who, like her, have full-time day jobs, in putting together a program with 35 to 40 speakers and as many as 100 workshops. The team works hard, Sakgaev says, to secure the top industry experts, identify important new trends, and above all, create "aha moments … that leaders can translate into meaningful improvements at the front line."

A large community of repeat attendees looks forward to reuniting at the annual event, Sakgaev says. "People come year after year because they learn so much … they make connections. It becomes a sort of family."

The value that community finds in the summit is a direct result of Sakgaev's tireless backstage work and relentless attention to detail, says Scott Shappell, professor and chair of the Department of Human Factors and Behavioral Neurobiology at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and a regular attendee and speaker at the CHC conference.

"Irina has been the summit's glue, its backbone, and in many ways, its heart," says Shappell, who nominated Sakgaev for the 2026 VAI Salute to Excellence Safety Award. "She has created a community where knowledge is shared … and safety is elevated. She has set a standard of professionalism and care that has touched countless professionals across borders and disciplines."

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Maintenance Award

For significant and distinct contributions to helicopter maintenance

Matt Pagano

Senior Mechanic, Riverside Police Department Air Support Unit
Riverside, California, USA

"I don't know a mechanic who hasn't woken up and thought, 'Did I do this? Did I do that?' We have people's lives in our hands."

ROLLS ROYCE

Award Sponsor

In its 50-year history, the Riverside Police Department Air Support Unit (ASU) has had only five mechanics. Matt Pagano, a 23-year veteran of the department, is one of them.

Pagano, who grew up building and working on motorcycles and hot rods, didn't plan on a career in aviation maintenance. But, when he joined the US Marine Corps in 1992, he found the specialty fit him "perfectly" because of his detail-oriented nature and determination to do a task "exactly the way it's supposed to be done."

Upon leaving the Marines after four years, Pagano worked for seven years in quality control and blade repair for propeller manufacturer Hamilton Standard. The company sponsored him for his FAA A&P certificate, which qualified him to work on US civil aircraft as a mechanic. "A lot of military personnel believe, since they were trained to work on aircraft by the military, they can work on aircraft in the civilian world. But it's not true. You've got to have your A&P," notes Pagano, who worked on CH-46 engines in the Marine Corps.

In a large facility such as the one where Pagano first worked, maintenance technicians can operate under the facility's repair station certificate, but at the comparatively small Riverside Police Department ASU, they must hold an A&P license, he says.

The ASU's full maintenance complement is two mechanics, but currently the team is down to just Pagano. The department operates two aircraft—a pair of Airbus H125 helicopters—each flying 1,100 to 1,200 hours a year, an intense workload even at full strength.

When Pagano joined the ASU in 2003, the unit operated four MD 500 helicopters. Due to the high volume of flight hours the aircraft accumulated, Pagano and the department's then–senior mechanic often completed progressive 100-hour inspections on each ship every three to four weeks. Over time, Pagano became a recognized expert in MD 500 maintenance, taking calls from others in the industry for advice on maintenance-related issues.

Pagano and other ASU staff took on the additional task of helping train new pilots when the department experienced personnel turnover in 2019. Pagano led unit-wide sessions in how to properly preflight the aircraft, ensuring consistency across the team. "His methodical approach played a crucial role in establishing a standardized process that all flight crews followed," notes Dan Schwarzbach, executive director and CEO of the Airborne Public Safety Association, who nominated Pagano for the 2026 Salute to Excellence Maintenance Award.

When the ASU acquired the H125s in 2021, Pagano became the department's sole aircraft mechanic after his mentor and longtime partner retired. He quickly began studying the H125 to familiarize himself with the helicopter while beginning an extensive inventory of the ASU's substantial stock of MD 500 spare parts and tooling, all of which would need to be sold and replaced with the necessary H125 components. Once the new aircraft were delivered, Pagano developed a plan to ensure that both helicopters wouldn't be grounded for inspections simultaneously.

Throughout his career, Pagano has emphasized the importance of showing the flight crew the specific maintenance actions performed, making sure they inspect every area worked on. This practice became even more crucial with the H125s, as many ASU members were unfamiliar with the aircraft.

That communication goes both ways. A good mechanic needs to "ask the pilot questions," Pagano says, "to help figure out what's causing that stick shake or that pedal vibration or that weird transmission noise."

It's no wonder Pagano takes seriously his duty to ensure the safety of those aboard his aircraft. "I don't know a mechanic who hasn't woken up and thought, 'Did I do this? Did I do that?' We have people's lives in our hands. We're responsible for taking care of these pilots and crew members for their families."

Pilots of the Year Award

For outstanding achievement as a helicopter pilot

Brian Atkinson and Brian Dunn

Aircrew, Coldstream Helicopters
Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada

"The entire situation gets your heart rate up, but when you have to start yelling, it rises even higher. I've never felt that level of intensity." – Brian Atkinson

Brian Dunn and his copilot, Brian Atkinson, were on a firefighting mission for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources in 2025 when the warning lights in their AS 332L1 Super Puma began flashing. The aircraft was trailing a 200-ft. Kevlar® line and a bucket filled with 7,000 lb. of water when a total electrical failure occurred, causing the engines to decelerate to 85% power.

Dunn was leaning out into the aircraft's bubble window to judge the right moment to open the bucket over some burning trees, but when he pulled his head back inside, he could tell at once something was very wrong.

"I realized Brian couldn't hear me; then I saw the [low rotor] warning light, and I could hear the engines coming off," recalls Dunn, who's been flying helicopters for 50 years. "That's your death knell. If you get below 200 rpm, your rotor system folds up like an umbrella going backwards, and down you go."

The power failure disabled the internal communication systems in the pilots' headsets, and between the engine noise and the acoustic protection from their helmets, the two men couldn't hear each other.

Dunn's first move was to release the bucket, but the electronic control didn't work. But all wasn't lost.

"Two things were going our way," says Dunn. First, after Atkinson engaged the bucket's manual release, the crew had "250 to 300 ft. to give away to try and get the rpm up," which Dunn could do once Atkinson got the throttle into the manual emergency governing range. Second, adds Dunn, "we had 20 kt. of wind on our nose. If we hadn't had that, we would have gone into the drink right there."

Dunn and Atkinson estimate it was less than 30 seconds between the failure and the moment they regained control of the helicopter. In those crucial seconds, the inability to hear each other was a big stressor, says Atkinson. "The entire situation gets your heart rate up, but when you have to start yelling, it rises even higher. I've never felt that level of intensity, and I hope to never feel it again."

The two pilots credit their training (they'd worked through an electrical-failure scenario in a simulator) and Dunn's experience (he survived a crash caused by engine failure in 1993) for their survival. But Dunn also calls out Atkinson's calm, methodical demeanor.

"In a situation like this, fear can take over, and then you do something rash. Everything that Brian did, he waited for my confirmation before he actually did it."

Mike Bridson, director of operations at Coldstream Helicopters, the aircraft's operator, attributes the successful outcome to the pilots' "training, understanding of systems and emergency procedures, CRM, and decisive action," which he says saved both the crew and the helicopter.

The manufacturer is still investigating what caused the power outage, but the maintenance team that fixed the problem determined it was all started by a 78-cent screw that had come loose. The screw had fallen across two elements of a circuit board, shorting it out and causing the electrical failure and an engine governor shutdown.

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Harold Summers Legacy Award

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

Lee Roskop

Aviation Safety Coordinator (Rotorcraft), FAA
Fort Worth, Texas, USA

"Roskop extracts critical safety trends and translates them into a clear path for meaningful action."

When Lee Roskop first went to work for the FAA in 2009, he was already familiar with Harold Summers's reputation. "He was just such a helpful person," says Roskop of the former director of flight operations for Helicopter Association International (now VAI), who died in 2021. "If there was a resource he could point you to that would be beneficial to you, he just shared it."

Roskop knows a thing or two about resources. A leading authority on helicopter safety analytics, Roskop spends his days deep in the weeds, sweating the details, poring over accident data from the FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). His work, says Hughes Aerospace CEO and VAI Board Director Chris Baur, has "shaped how safety data are gathered, interpreted, and applied, … turning data into actionable insights that save lives."

The task isn't easy, given the huge variety of operations aircraft fly, notes Roskop. "The ways you can use a helicopter are only limited by your imagination."

He is quick to credit others for his success at the FAA. "Much of what I do and what I'm involved in, there's a big team behind it," insists Roskop, a former US Air Force helicopter pilot who finished his military career in 2006 before working as a flight safety engineering specialist at Bell Helicopter for three years.

The key, he says, is to identify patterns and spot emerging trends in monthly accident and incident data reported by helicopter operators across the country and then share those findings with the industry to help improve safety.

That means a good part of his job entails listening to operators, Roskop explains. "If [you see] things differently, tell us why and what we're missing. … It's really only through that interaction that learning takes place on both sides."

Roskop promotes safety data through in-person and virtual presentations to rotorcraft operators and government entities, both in the United States and abroad. Events at which he presents his findings include operational-safety forums with international civil aviation authorities, VERTICON, and the Ag Aviation Expo, to name just a few.

But perhaps Roskop is most widely known for his leadership in developing the FAA's Rotorcraft Accident Dashboard, which provides a baseline for understanding the current safety performance of the US vertical aviation community compared with historical data. Beyond presenting numbers, Roskop extracts critical safety trends in the monthly briefings and translates them into a clear path for meaningful action, says Baur. "Lee goes the extra mile to help the industry understand what those trends mean and, most importantly, what must be done to address them."

The same belief motivates his work with the US Helicopter Safety Team (USHST), a public–private partnership, which has for almost 20 years worked to improve fatal-accident rates. The USHST makes recommendations for safety enhancements based on its analysis of gold-standard data from the FAA and the NTSB. Implementation is voluntary but very widely applied.

"We look at all the data and try to figure out what happened and how we can prevent similar events in the future," Roskop says. "We communicate the [safety enhancements] and then also try to encourage and persuade folks that, hey, this will work."

VERTICAL AVIATION INTERNATIONAL

Award Sponsor

Lifetime Achievement Award

For long and significant service to the international vertical aviation community

Pete Gillies

Loma Linda, California, USA

"His lifelong dedication to aviation education has made the skies safer for all of us." – Doug Williams

BELL

Award Sponsor

As a teenager growing up near San Diego, California, Pete Gillies absolutely hated to fly. Never mind that both his parents were pilots and the family owned a series of small airplanes.

"My parents would be up front, and my younger sister and I sat in the rear [of the plane]," Gillies recalls. "She'd be reading a book, and I was holding a barf bag to my mouth."

His mother—who'd been a pilot for the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron during World War II—told him the best way to cure his airsickness was to learn to fly. But Gillies didn't take her advice until he moved to Arizona to attend college. "Of course, she was right. Once I learned to fly, I didn't get airsick," Gillies says.

After graduating, Gillies spent a year at Hughes Aircraft before joining the US Army for two years. For the next 15 years, he worked for two San Diego–based companies, during which time he obtained his commercial pilot's license with airplane single- and multi-engine and instrument ratings.

While working for an electronics firm in 1967, a confident Gillies flew a helicopter for the first time. "The mistake I made was, because I was a pilot and it had a stick, I thought, 'Well, I can fly this.' … I couldn't fly it for even two seconds," he admits.

Afterward, Gillies took a one-hour helicopter lesson, and that was all it took. "After that hour, my whole life changed," Gillies says. "I realized I would have to be a helicopter pilot, because it was so much fun." He ended up taking 30 hours of training, solo and dual, and qualifying for his commercial helicopter license that year.

"That's the only formal training I've ever had," says Gillies.

Gillies eventually taught himself how to fly vertical reference, do precision touchdown autorotations, land on mountain approaches, and numerous other skills, including the now famous "cyclic back" maneuver in response to in-flight engine failure, which is credited with saving numerous lives and which he continues to teach today. "I had to learn by myself how to do this, and it was wonderful," he says. "I've learned a lot, but my motto has been to share my experience, good or bad."

To keep up his helicopter skills at the airfield where his company was based, Gillies volunteered to do small flying jobs. Soon, he was picking up regular gigs for the local utility, San Diego Gas & Electric. In 1972, Western Helicopters hired Gillies as a line pilot, and he ended up working for the operator for more than four decades, retiring as chief pilot in 2016.

In 2018, Gillies received the FAA's Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award, given to pilots who have been actively flying safely for 50 years. Over the years, he has been regularly sought after for flight instruction, says VAI Western US Regional Representative Chuck Street. "Many Southern California police agencies have sent their pilots to 'tune up' their skills with Pete," and over the years he's trained hundreds of them, Street says.

"If you're a pilot training with me, my goal is, I want you to end up a better pilot than I am," says Gillies, who was honored with the 1996 Salute to Excellence Flight Instructor of the Year Award.

Today, at 93, Gillies still shares his passion for teaching, through YouTube videos and lectures.

"Pete has taught hundreds of pilots—including me—the art and discipline of flying helicopters," says fellow pilot Doug Williams, who nominated Gillies for the Lifetime Achievement Award. "His lifelong dedication to aviation education has made the skies safer for all of us."

VERTICAL AVIATION INTERNATIONAL

POWER UP

2026 Photo Contest Winners

Another stunning collection of photography from our worldwide vertical aviation community.

Grand Prize Winner

Michael Portmann
Zermatt, Wallis, Switzerland
See more on Instagram: michi_portmann

Captured by photographer Michael Portmann, this Air Zermatt team is en route with their Bell 429 to perform a rope winch rescue of a mountaineer on the Matterhorn.

Vertical Flight Aircraft at Work

Juan Hernández Ramírez
Rociana del Condado, Huelva, Spain
See more on Instagram: provideotec

This Bell 412, operated by Pegasus AeroGroup, makes easy work of filling its helibucket with water from a reservoir and whisking it 2 km to deliver its contents, then back again, fighting a wildfire threatening crops and housing in southwestern Andalusia, Spain.


INFOCA
EC-IKX

People and Their Vertical Flight Aircraft

David Van Bouwel
De Panne, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium
See more on Instagram: sound_of_kerosene

An NHIndustries NH90 NFH from the Belgian Air Force 40th Heli Squadron, in support of the nation's navy, conducts hoist training with a search-and-rescue diver in the North Sea.

Vertical Flight Aircraft in the Military

Ramon Wenink
Enschede, Overijssel, The Netherlands
See more on Instagram: ramon_wenink

Heading north along the Hudson River, abeam the West 30th Street Heliport (KJRA), this Bell AH-1Z Viper of US Marine Corps HMLA-773 "Red Dogs," based at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, in New Jersey, affords its crew a view of Manhattan as the sun sets and the moon rises above the skyline.


MARINES


G-11

How We Serve

David Van Bouwel
De Panne, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium
See more on Instagram: sound_of_kerosene

Van Bouwel, who also won this year for his People and Their Vertical Flight Aircraft photo, captured the moment a Belgian Federal Police officer is about to release his K9 partner from this MD Helicopters MD 902 during a training mission along the coast of Belgium.

Wrench Turners

Rob Fletcher
Hayward, California, USA

Few helicopters have this much interior space, which means there's much to do when conducting heavy maintenance on a Sikorsky S-92. This work is taking place down under in Broome, Australia.

Digitally Enhanced Photo of Vertical Flight Aircraft

Dominik Kanz
Tübingen, Baden-Württemberg, Germany
See more on Instagram: the.changeintime

Energy-drink maker Red Bull has a former US Army Bell AH-1F Cobra in its extensive fleet of demonstration aircraft. Here it is, N11FX, cruising among the Austrian Alps.

THANK YOU to all the photographers from around the world who shared their unique perspectives on vertical aviation. Mark your calendar: The POWER UP Magazine 2027 Photo Contest opens Mon., Aug. 3, 2026, at *photo.verticalavi.org*.

Taken by Surprise

Pilot's relative inexperience leaves him unable to recover lost yaw control.

By David Jack Kenny

THE COMPLEXITIES OF ROTORCRAFT aerodynamics are subtle and often counterintuitive. When those complexities start to emerge, reasoning based on fundamentals may not work quickly enough to allow for an effective response, so pilots develop rules of thumb they can refine as they gain experience. Hours flying a particular model in varying winds and density altitudes can provide a sharper sense of the margin remaining before a steep descent sinks into vortex ring state … or yaw control is lost in an out-of-ground-effect hover.

The Occasion

Shortly before 11:00 on the morning of Dec. 30, 2021, three passengers boarded a Bell 206B at the Livingston

NTSB Photo

(Texas) Municipal Airport for a local sightseeing flight. The rear-seat passengers were guests of the passenger in the front seat, who'd won the flight in a local charity auction. He asked the pilot to take them over his childhood home near Woodville. They lifted off at 11:07.

The Aircraft

The 1990-model helicopter's most recent annual and 24-month inspections had both been completed seven months earlier, on May 20, 2021. At that time, the aircraft's total time in service was recorded as 2,296.3 hours and 3,327 engine cycles. The inspection worksheet listed replacing the turbine with a used unit supplied by the customer, cleaning a "clogged compressor wash[ing] spray nozzle as needed," and replacing the tail-rotor hub flapping stop bumper with a new part.

The Bell 206B uses a two-blade semi-rigid main-rotor system and conventional two-blade tail rotor driven by a single Rolls-Royce M250-C20J turboshaft engine rated for 420 shaft horsepower. Maximum gross weight is 3,200 lb. The standard cabin configuration seats one pilot and four passengers; the fuselage rests on skids.

The Pilot

The 73-year-old pilot held an airline transport pilot certificate with ratings for rotorcraft helicopter and airplane multiengine land, plus private pilot privileges for single-engine airplanes. He began flying helicopters in February 2017, training in the Robinson R44 and switching to the Bell 206B in June 2020. He finished transition training the following month after seven flights and completed recurrent training with a commercial provider on Jul. 18, 2021.

His most recent medical application was submitted on Jul. 15, 2016, when he was issued a second-class certificate without limitations. At that time, he reported 1,679 hours of flight experience.

In 2018, he began flying under BasicMed, submitting the required Comprehensive Medical Examination Checklist on Jun. 18 and repeating the BasicMed course on Jun. 7, 2020. By Dec. 30, 2021, he'd logged 200.9 hours of helicopter flight, including 71.7 hours in the Bell 206B.

The Weather

Just before noon, the Livingston airport reported clear skies with 7 miles visibility, 3-kt. winds from 160 degrees, and warm air with a 1-degree temperature/dew point spread (24°C/23°C, or 75.2°F/73.4°F). Three unofficial weather stations of unknown quality were located between 5 and 12 miles from the accident site. All of them reported winds of 4 kt. or less, one from the north and two from the south to southeast. A National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration High-Resolution Rapid Refresh sounding model predicted 2-kt. southwesterly winds from the surface to 600 ft., becoming southerly up to 1,000 ft. above ground level.

The Flight

ADS-B data showed that the helicopter followed an east-northeasterly course in the direction of Woodville for about 25 nautical miles before reversing direction. The rear-seat passengers recalled that low clouds prevented them from continuing to the auction winner's childhood home, so he agreed to an overflight of his present residence near Livingston instead.

A few miles from the Livingston airport, the helicopter turned south to follow the road that led to the home, then made a slow, level right turn to circle the house. The pilot completed about 270 degrees of the turn before bringing the craft to a hover over the trees.

As the helicopter hovered, it began rotating to the right. One passenger thought this might have been a deliberate maneuver, but as the spin continued and the helicopter began to descend, he realized it was not. After two complete revolutions, the main-rotor blades struck a tree and the helicopter crashed onto a pile of timber left over from recent clearing operations, coming down on the left side of the fuselage. Seeing that the engine was still running, one of the rear-seat passengers, after attending to the pilot and front-seat passenger, "started moving any switch he could find to the 'off' position" until it stopped.

The front-seat passenger died at the scene. The pilot was evacuated to a hospital but succumbed to his injuries 13 days later. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) described the injuries suffered by the two rear-seat passengers as minor.

If the initial torque reaction isn't countered promptly, it can quickly accelerate beyond the system's maximum yaw authority.

The Investigation

The family of the deceased passenger provided investigators with three brief video clips he'd recorded on his cell phone. The first, which lasted 11 seconds, merely showed the three passengers inside the cabin. The helicopter's engine was audible, indicating that it was running, and "no abnormal sounds were heard."

The second clip lasted 21 seconds and captured the view out of the front windows as the helicopter lifted off from a spot to the left of a runway. After 10 seconds, the ship turned left, climbed over trees, and crossed a field. Again, engine sounds seemed normal.

The final recording was 46 seconds and began with exterior views but also included several pans inside the cockpit. One of those, 15 seconds into the clip, captured the instrument panel. Indicated airspeed was 40–45 kt. at an altitude of 400 ft.; the attitude indicator showed a slight left roll, and no cautions or warnings appeared on the annunciator panel. At 22 seconds, the helicopter began a right turn; the recording showed an airspeed just below 40 kt., with turbine power in the 97%–100% range and main-rotor rpm between 90% and 100%. Altitude remained steady at 400 ft.

Four seconds later, airspeed had slowed to 35 kt. The torque gauge indicated about 60%. Thirty-one seconds into the clip, the helicopter had finished circling the house and come to a hover. At 38 seconds, the airspeed indicator read 0 kt., and torque was increasing from 82% to 89%. According to the surviving passengers, the recording ended a few seconds before the spin began. No abnormal engine noises were heard at any point.

Based on the apparently normal engine sounds and instrument readings, the NTSB dismissed the possibility of a mechanical failure and attributed the accident to "the pilot exceeding the yaw capability of the helicopter for the flight conditions, resulting in a non-mechanical loss of tail rotor effectiveness."

The Takeaway

Loss of tail-rotor effectiveness (LTE) is a purely aerodynamic phenomenon in which a fully functional tail-rotor system fails to provide effective directional control. The result is sudden uncommanded yaw that can't be arrested by normal control inputs. All helicopters with tail rotors (as opposed to counterrotating main rotors or a NOTAR ["no tail rotor"] system, which

manipulates airflow around the tail boom to provide directional control) share some degree of susceptibility to LTE.

The risk is greatest at low airspeeds and particularly in a hover, when there's no airflow around the vertical stabilizer. Certain wind conditions are especially hazardous: Quartering tailwinds can cause weathervaning, pushing the helicopter's tail in the direction of the wind and thereby yawing the nose in the opposite direction. In helicopters with main rotors that turn counterclockwise (such as the Bell 206 and most other American designs), winds of 10 kt. to 30 kt. from around the pilot's 10 o'clock position can cause main-rotor disk interference, blowing the main rotor's tip vortices directly into the tail rotor, where they create enough turbulence to significantly reduce thrust. And direct crosswinds opposing the tail rotor's thrust can induce vortex ring state of the tail rotor itself.

Unfavorable winds aren't necessary to induce LTE, though. Coming into a hover—especially out of ground effect—increases the power demand from the main rotor and associated engine torque, which reduces power available to the tail rotor. If the initial torque reaction isn't countered promptly, it can quickly accelerate beyond the system's maximum yaw authority. Recovery is impossible without lowering collective and pitching forward to gain airspeed, both of which require sufficient altitude—a technique not generally practiced in the aircraft during either initial or recurrent training.

In the Livingston accident, the NTSB estimated that the helicopter was a scant 150 ft. above the ground at the onset of LTE. The light, variable winds at the scene wouldn't have brought to mind any of the usual rules of thumb for avoiding it, leaving a relatively low-time pilot more vulnerable to being taken by surprise by that first unexpected yaw.

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

Our Accident Changed Us

A fatal crash—and the ensuing investigation—forced us to completely reevaluate our company's operation.

By J.C. Murphy

MORE THAN SIX YEARS AGO, a Safari Aviation helicopter went down along the Nā Pali Coast of Kauai, Hawaii. The tragedy claimed the lives of all seven people onboard—the pilot and six passengers.

It was a day that forever altered our company and all those connected to it. While the grief and loss were overwhelming, what followed was a long and sobering journey through a full-scale US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation.

The Call No One Wants

When an aircraft fails to check in, everyone in Ops feels it in their gut. That was the case on Dec. 26, 2019—our pilot missed a scheduled position report. Weather was marginal. Terrain was unforgiving. Within minutes, we initiated emergency procedures and notified the FAA and the NTSB of the crash.

Everything moves quickly after an accident. Within 24 hours of the Nā Pali Coast event, the NTSB had investigators en route to the scene. Meanwhile, we were in crisis mode, scrambling to support our team, communicate with families, and preserve every shred of documentation.

That's the first real takeaway: Whatever you think you'll need in the event of an accident, triple it. Records, training files, maintenance logs, duty rosters—everything becomes urgent.

What the Investigative Process Really Feels Like

Most aviation professionals are familiar with the NTSB, the federal government agency responsible for investigating all civil aviation accidents in the United States. We know the NTSB's role, the phases of its investigative process, and the agency's importance to the industry.

But what many don't fully appreciate until they live through it is what it actually feels like to be on the inside of an NTSB investigation, to sit across the table from investigators, and to open your company's records, culture, and decisions to intense scrutiny.

The general phases of an NTSB investigation are well known and include the initial notification and decision to investigate, on-site fact gathering, fact analysis, and probable-cause determination. What's less talked about is what these phases demand from the operator.

In the field: The field phase starts quickly. Investigators arrive on-site and begin collecting data. They interview your pilots, maintenance techs, dispatchers, and anyone else tied to the flight—people, many of them grieving, who are still processing what's happened and now face detailed interviews with federal investigators.

Party status: Safari was granted party status in the Nā Pali Coast investigation, which meant we provided technical representatives from our operations and maintenance teams to work alongside the NTSB. This is a serious responsibility. Your reps must be experienced, composed, and cooperative, and they must represent your company with total honesty and professionalism.

Evidence collection: Expect everything to be reviewed: pilot logs, flight risk assessments, weather briefings, communications records, internal emails, even informal team chats and text messages. The NTSB leaves no stone unturned. This was one of the most sobering aspects of the investigation, revealing to what degree our operation was documented and how quickly assumptions or bad habits can be uncovered in writing.

> **Whatever you think you'll need in the event of an accident, triple it.**

Communications and media: In the aftermath of an accident, one of the hardest things to do is stay silent publicly. The NTSB controls the release of information, so you can't provide much clarification as the public and the media begin forming opinions. Internally, communication must be tight, honest, and empathetic, especially with families and employees.

What the Final Report Told Us

The NTSB ultimately found the probable cause of the Nā Pali Coast accident to be continued VFR flight into IMC in mountainous terrain, with contributing factors including deteriorating visibility and inadequate weather decision-making. That was hard to hear.

Like many operators in Hawaii, we operate in a unique and often volatile weather environment. We had trained for these scenarios. But the truth was, in this case, our systems failed to support the right decision in the moment.

The accident forced us to reevaluate and improve nearly every aspect of our operation by implementing important changes, including the following:

- Stricter weather minimums for high-minimum captains (35 hours with the company)
- Required FRATs (flight risk assessment tools) for every flight, no exceptions
- Scenario-based training on weather decision-making, moving beyond theory to real-life conditions
- Weather briefings for all flights as part of their flight release
- Line operations safety assessment (LOSA) flights
- A strengthened safety management system (SMS) that emphasizes practical, anonymous reporting and a true just culture.

We also realized that what we thought was a safe culture was, in many ways, aspirational. We had to make it real by encouraging open reporting of safety hazards, protecting those who spoke up, and ensuring that corrective action followed reports.

Be Ready Before You're Tested

The best time to prepare for an accident investigation is long before one happens. Ask yourself:

- Are our documentation systems bulletproof across all areas of our operation? That is, will they stand up to scrutiny as being comprehensive, up-to-date, and compliant with regulatory requirements? Will they make sense when we're talking into a media microphone?
- Do we have the internal maturity to handle an investigation honestly and transparently?
- Can our pilots say no to a flight without fear of reprisal?
- Do we truly prioritize safety over schedule and revenue?

The NTSB isn't out to assign blame. They're there to find out why the accident happened, and as painful as that process can be, it's also an opportunity for real improvement on the operator's part.

We didn't choose to have an accident, but we did choose how to respond to it. We chose transparency. We chose to learn. And we chose to make meaningful changes that will hopefully prevent another tragedy.

If sharing our experience can help another operator be better prepared, more self-aware, and more safety focused, then we've done something good with something terrible: We've honored those we lost by acting boldly, improving relentlessly, and never taking safety for granted.

J.C. Murphy *is director of operations at Safari Aviation, a tour operator located in Lihue, Hawaii.*

Complacency Is Deadly

In aviation, assuming things are as they should be can lead to tragedy.

By Zac Noble

ONE OF THE DEADLIEST of the Dirty Dozen, the 12 common causes of human-factors errors that can lead to aviation accidents, is complacency.

Our lives are filled with complacent moments involving activities we take for granted. We expect our cars to start. We expect the power to be on so we can turn on the lights and heat or cool our homes. We get so busy with life's daily activities that we often lack the time to critically inspect all the moving parts of everything we touch each day.

Although we may take some measures to ensure our lives run normally, we have to hope things go our way from day to day in order to accomplish all the things we expect to get done. As I learned in the army, however, hope is

not a tactic. We must account for nearly every action of our own and of our enemy. If it's not considered or planned for, it can—and likely will—fail us.

One of the places hope doesn't belong is aviation.

They're Counting on Us

In aviation, we can't afford to be complacent, because the list of people who count on us to be diligent in our duties is seemingly endless. Take a moment and consider everyone counting on you to be professional and to do things properly. We can wordsmith it to death, but let's just say "properly" means doing a task correctly as defined by rules, regulations, best practices, and expectations.

We put a lot of value in our knowledge and skills. Pilots have earned the privilege to fly an aircraft. Mechanics have earned the privilege to maintain, repair, and return to service those same aircraft. Fellow citizens expect and count on us to be vigilant in our duties.

> **There are so many things we can't control in aviation. Let's take advantage of the things we can control.**

We must do everything within our scope to do what we do correctly, every time. Even if you've

opened an access panel a thousand times and found no discrepancy, every time you work on it you must look not for what you expect, but for what you don't expect. The same goes for pilots doing a preflight inspection and the maintenance tech complying with an airworthiness directive. Complacency has led to innumerable aircraft accidents and mishaps.

Pilots, check your local area NOTAMs. If you're going to an unfamiliar location or airport, get familiar with their NOTAMs and local procedures for arrivals, traffic patterns, and departure procedures. FAA regulations require us to be familiar with all aspects of our flights, including airport operations at takeoff and arrival and en route hazards and procedures.

Mechanics, check up-to-date maintenance publications, service bulletins, and airworthiness directives. If possible, ask a colleague who's familiar with a maintenance task to spot you if it's been a while since you've performed it yourself.

There's a saying in aviation: "Aviation in itself is not inherently dangerous. But to an even greater degree than the sea, it is terribly unforgiving of any carelessness, incapacity, or neglect." The quote, most commonly attributed to Capt. Alfred G. Lamplugh of The British Aviation Insurance Co. in the 1930s, is a wise representation of all things aviation.

What We Do Matters

Respect the work you do, whether it's fixing, maintaining, flying, or managing. What we do matters to owners, shareholders, insurers, customers, family, and friends. The lineage of people who care about how we function is limitless.

There are so many things we can't control in aviation. Let's take advantage of the things we *can* control. Check your fuel, follow the checklist, abide by the maintenance manual.

Leave complacency at home.

Fugae tutum!

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

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