



Press Release

Contact:

Valerie Sheehan

1-703-684-6777 x107

pr@vtol.org

Vertical Flight Society Announces 2025 Group Recipients of Its Prestigious Awards

Ten teams honored for outstanding achievements in vertical flight

Fairfax, Virginia, March 27, 2025 — The Vertical Flight Society (VFS) is pleased to announce the 2025 recipients of its prestigious group awards. Since 1944, the VFS Awards program has recognized excellence in vertical flight and served as a catalyst for innovation and advancement in the field. This year’s honorees will be celebrated during the Grand Awards Banquet on May 22, 2025, as part of the 81st Annual Forum and Technology Display in Virginia Beach, Virginia (www.vtol.org/forum). This premier event will bring together leading experts and industry professionals to celebrate excellence in vertical flight.

“For over 80 years, VFS has honored the most impactful achievements in vertical flight,” said VFS Executive Director Angelo Collins. “This year’s group award recipients showcase the remarkable capabilities of vertical flight aircraft and the dedicated teams who design, maintain, and operate them.”

Captain William J. Kossler, USCG Award

Awarded for the greatest achievement in the practical application or operation of vertical flight aircraft, this year’s Kossler Award goes to the **California Department of Forestry & Fire Protection — CAL FIRE**. As operator of the world’s largest civilian firefighting aviation fleet, CAL FIRE has demonstrated exceptional capability in rapid deployment, advanced rescue operations, and pioneering night aerial suppression. During the 2024 Park Fire in Northern California, helicopter teams flew for 29 consecutive days, delivered nearly half a million gallons of water, and rescued dozens — showcasing innovation, resilience, and life-saving impact.

Grover E. Bell Award

Recognizing outstanding research and experimentation in vertical flight development, this year’s award goes to the **Rapid Wildfire Response Demonstration Team** of Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Company, and Rain, for executing the first fully autonomous aerial firefighting mission. By integrating Sikorsky’s autonomous Black Hawk with Rain’s wildfire detection system, the team enabled rapid, precise, and around-the-clock wildfire suppression — advancing the future of autonomous fire response.

Supplier Excellence Award

Connecticut-based **Alpha Q, Inc. (AQI)** receives this year’s Supplier Excellence Award for more than 15 years of delivering critical flight safety components with zero-defect quality and on-time

performance. As an Elite Supplier to Lockheed Martin's Rotary and Mission Systems, AQI has consistently demonstrated innovation and collaboration, particularly in high-priority production efforts.

Robert L. Pinckney Award

Presented for notable achievement in manufacturing research and development for vertical flight, this year's award goes to the **Automated Blade Sanding Team** at Sikorsky. The team developed and implemented a robotic blade sanding system that improves quality, increases production throughput and eliminates ergonomic risks. Now in full production, the system also delivers significant cost savings and is adaptable for future aircraft models.

Harry T. Jensen Award

This award recognizes outstanding contributions to improving vertical flight reliability, maintainability, safety or logistics. The 2025 recipient is Sikorsky's **Enhanced Maintenance Analysis Tool (EMAT) team**. EMAT uses AI and natural language processing to convert unstructured maintenance data into actionable insights — helping reduce downtime, identify failure trends, and enhance aircraft reliability across the enterprise.

Frederick L. Feinberg Award

Awarded to the pilot or crew of a vertical flight aircraft for outstanding skill or achievement, this year's honor goes to the US Army DEVCOM Aviation and Missile Center's **Mission Adaptive Autonomy Flight Test Team**. The team demonstrated autonomous external load delivery in complex, contested environments using sensor-based navigation and real-time route adaptation, setting a new benchmark in rotorcraft autonomy and logistics.

Leonardo International Fellowship Award

This award recognizes significant international contributions to vertical flight. The 2025 recipient is the joint **Israeli Air Force and Sikorsky Support Team**, honored for outstanding collaboration in sustaining UH-60 and CH-53D helicopter operations. Their efforts enhanced aircraft availability, improved maintenance processes, and ensured mission readiness — even under conflict conditions.

Howard Hughes Award

Presented for significant advancements in fundamental vertical flight technology, this year's award goes to the **Airbus Helicopters Racer Team**. Developed under the Clean Sky 2 program, the Racer high-speed demonstrator surpassed 260 mph (420 km/h) shortly after its first flight. With innovations in aerodynamics, propulsion and systems design, Racer represents a leap forward in the development of fast, fuel-efficient rotorcraft.

Vertical Flight Heritage Site Recognitions

The VFS Heritage Sites Program honors locations with significant historical contributions to advancing vertical flight. The 2025 honorees are:

- **Floyd Bennett Field (Brooklyn, New York)**: The first US Coast Guard and Navy helicopter base, it played a central role in early search and rescue (SAR), anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and police aviation missions, and remains a pivotal site in rotorcraft history.

- **Penfield Reef (Fairfield, Connecticut):** Site of the world's first helicopter hoist rescue in 1945, proving the helicopter's life-saving potential and helping to establish its role in modern search and rescue.

The Vertical Flight Society was founded as the American Helicopter Society in 1943 by the pioneers of the helicopter industry, who believed that technological cooperation and collaboration was essential to advance vertical flight. VFS is the global non-profit society for engineers, scientists and others working on vertical flight technology.

For more than 80 years, the Society has led technology, safety, advocacy, and other important initiatives, and has been the primary forum for interchange of information on vertical flight technology. Descriptions of the awards and past recipients are available at www.vtol.org/awards.

The Vertical Flight Society

2700 Prosperity Ave, Suite 275, Fairfax, VA 22031 USA

+1-703-684-6777 | staff@vtol.org | www.vtol.org