



Press Release

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Vertical Flight Society Announces 2025 Individual Recipients of Its Prestigious Awards

A dozen vertical flight leaders recognized for their invaluable contributions

Fairfax, Virginia, March 20, 2025 — The Vertical Flight Society (VFS) today announces the 2025 individual recipients of its prestigious awards program. Since its establishment in 1944, the VFS awards program has paid tribute to the outstanding leaders of vertical flight and served as a catalyst for stimulating technological advances. The 2025 award recipients will be honored at 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.

“Since Igor Sikorsky and Gen. H. Franklin Gregory were first honored in 1944, the Vertical Flight Society has been recognizing the leading contributors to advancing vertical flight,” said VFS Executive Director Angelo Collins. “This year’s honorees have made lasting contributions that continue to shape the past, present and future of vertical flight.”

Dr. Michael Torok, retired Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Company, is this year’s honored recipient of the **Dr. Alexander Klemin Award**, the highest honor the Society bestows on an individual for notable achievement in advancing the field of vertical flight aeronautics. Torok will be recognized for his numerous innovative and technical contributions that have greatly advanced vertical flight and significantly strengthened the defense capabilities.

The title of **Honorary Fellow** is granted to highly distinguished Society members who have made exceptional leadership, innovative or other meritorious contributions that have significantly advanced the Society and the vertical flight community during their career. The 2025 Honorary Fellows are:

- **John O’Neill**, retired, Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Company. O’Neill has dedicated over 40 years to advancing vertical flight, pioneering rotorcraft model-scale testing at Sikorsky, while providing exceptional service to the Society as a technical leader, committee chair, and organizer, strengthening industry collaboration, mentorship and pre-college outreach.
- **Mike Hirschberg**, Vertical Flight Society. Hirschberg’s contributions over the past three decades reflect his deep commitment to advancing vertical flight and aerospace education, while making a significant impact on technology, policy and the global community across industry, academia and government agencies.

The title of **Technical Fellow** is granted to Society members whose career-based accomplishments towards the goals and objectives of the vertical flight technical community constitute an outstanding technical achievement. The 2025 Technical Fellows are:

- **Glen Knaust**, Lockheed Martin Technical Fellow and Sikorsky Experimental Test Pilot. Knaust is a distinguished technical leader in vertical flight, renowned for his expertise in test piloting, flight safety, and fly-by-wire systems, with contributions that have set industry standards and continue to shape the future of rotary-wing aviation.
- **Dr. Hao Kang**, Aeroelasticity Team Lead, US Army Combat Capabilities Development Command (DEVCOM) Army Research Laboratory (ARL). Kang is a renowned rotorcraft aeromechanics expert, recognized for his contributions to tiltrotor aeroelastic stability — including as part of a team that won the 2024 VFS Grover E. Bell Award — rotorcraft simulation (RCAS and FLIGHTLAB), and vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) uncrewed aircraft systems (UAS) innovation, with over 100 publications and multiple patents.
- **Dr. Klausdieter Pahlke**, Rotorcraft Branch Head, German Aerospace Center (DLR). Pahlke is a pioneering expert in rotorcraft computational fluid dynamics (CFD) and aeroelastic simulations, renowned for advancing high-fidelity modeling, leading international collaborations, and developing industry-standard CFD tools.
- **Thomas H. Maier**, Chief of the Aeroflightdynamics Division, U.S. Army DEVCOM AvMC. Maier is a leading expert in rotorcraft aeromechanics, advancing aeroelastic stability, rotor dynamics, and dynamic stall modeling while driving US Army, NASA and international collaborations, earning multiple VFS awards and mentoring future leaders.

The **John J. Schneider Historical Achievement Award** is given in recognition of distinguished achievement by an individual in encouraging appreciation of, and enhancing access to, the history and legacy of vertical flight aircraft. This year's recipient is **Harry Pember**. Pember is a key historian of vertical flight, founding the Igor I. Sikorsky Historical Archives, authoring four books, and preserving invaluable rotorcraft history.

The annual **François-Xavier Bagnoud Award** is given to a Society member who is 35 years old or younger for outstanding career-to-date contributions to vertical flight technology. This year, two outstanding award recipients were selected:

- **Dr. Vera Klimchenko**, Senior Aeronautical Engineer, Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Company. Klimchenko's work has significantly influenced rotorcraft digital transformation, shaping future flight technology and rotorcraft performance optimization.
- **Dr. Umberto Saetti**, Assistant Professor, University of Maryland. Saetti's research and leadership are shaping the future of rotorcraft simulation, control and pilot training.

The Society's **Paul E. Haueter Award** is given for an outstanding technical contribution to the field of VTOL aircraft development other than a helicopter or an operational vertical flight aircraft. The 2025 Haueter Award is being awarded to **Jim Tighe**, chief technology officer at Wisk Aero, a Boeing subsidiary, whose leadership and technical expertise have significantly advanced the electric VTOL / advanced air mobility (AAM) industry.

VFS and the Stoll Family are proud to unveil a new award in memory of Alex M. Stoll. This award recognizes a professional in the field of vertical flight who, like Alex, demonstrates an exceptional commitment to advancing not only the mission of their organization but makes extraordinary contributions to enhancing the well-being and happiness of their colleagues, and elevates their organization's culture and morale. This year's winner of the **Alex M. Stoll Award** is **Dr. Natasha Schatzman** who embodies these qualities, making a significant impact both personally and professionally in the workplace and the larger vertical flight community.

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

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