



vertiflite Commentary

Celebrating 70 Years of International Cooperation in Vertical Flight Technology

By Mike Hirschberg, Executive Director

The American helicopter industry was born in January 1943 when the US Army Air Forces issued a contract for 29 Sikorsky XR-4 helicopters. Just a few weeks later, the American Helicopter Society was officially founded – largely by Sikorsky employees – in February 1943.

At Sikorsky Aircraft – the only helicopter manufacturing company in the “free world” – the founders of this technology organization reportedly first thought about calling it the “Sikorsky Helicopter Club,” but thought more broadly than their own company. They invited leaders in the American government – including then Army Major H. Franklin Gregory and Coast Guard Commander Frank Erickson – and known American helicopter developers W. Laurence LePage and Havilland Platt. Others were invited as they became known, such as Frank Piasecki, Arthur Young of Bell Aircraft, and Stanley Hiller, to name a few.

The organization was international from the beginning, as British rotary wing experts were asked to join the fledgling organization despite a virtual wartime moratorium on rotary wing development in the United Kingdom. Early inductees included Royal Air Force Wing Commander Reggie Brie and Air Ministry leaders James A.J. Bennett, O.L.L. Fitzwilliams and Raoul Hafner. During the War, Brie was instrumental in establishing a British purchase of 100 Sikorsky R-4s for the Royal Navy, while Fitzwilliams helped establish the licensing of Sikorsky helicopter designs by Westland. Bennett was initially the Chief Technical Officer for rotary-wing aircraft at the Air Ministry, and then was assigned to Sikorsky Aircraft.

The first technical meeting of this new American Helicopter Society was held on February 4, 1944, in Stratford,



Connecticut. The First Annual Dinner was held eight months later on October 7, 1944, in New York City, at which the first awards were given: Honorary Fellowships to Frank Gregory and Igor I. Sikorsky. By that time, Sikorsky's C.L. (Les) Morris was President of AHS and the Air Ministry's Bennett was the Vice-President. (A group photo of this dinner can be seen at the back of the 2014 AHS History Calendar. A copy of the First Annual Dinner program, signed by each of the event's speakers, as well as Bennett and Brie, can be seen on the AHS website at www.vtol.org/history.)

The First Annual Forum was held on April 3, 1945, in Philadelphia. By 1948, the Annual Banquet and Honors Night was held in conjunction with the technical program of Annual Forum, a tradition that continues today.

After the War, the cross-Atlantic technical cooperation expanded into production partnerships. Westland's production of Sikorsky helicopters and their own derivative designs established leadership over other British companies developing indigenous rotorcraft. By 1960, aviation industrial “rationalization” by the UK government resulted in a single company for rotorcraft in England,

namely Westland Helicopters. Likewise in Italy, Agusta entered into an agreement to build the Bell 47 range of helicopters under license in 1952. This partnership established Agusta as Italy's helicopter company. The cooperation grew from Agusta-Bell 47s and JetRangers to the initial development of the (then) AB139 helicopter and BA609 civil tiltrotor. The Westland/Sikorsky and Agusta/Bell license agreements were quite generous in their scope, and made a significant contribution to the development of the rotorcraft industry in Europe.

In Germany, the helicopter industry had been well ahead of the rest of the world at the beginning of World War II and held its technological edge through the war. The defeat of the Axis powers led to a ban on aerospace development in Germany and Italy until 1952. German helicopter engineers and scientists were scooped up by France, the US, UK and USSR, helping to advance the state of the art in each of those countries.

In the subsequent decades, cross-border cooperation continued. After all helicopter activities were consolidated separately within Germany and France, the helicopter divisions of Aérospatiale and Daimler-Benz Aerospace (MBB) merged in 1992 to create Eurocopter. The divisions of these companies that had been established in North America and around the world quickly increased their capabilities, dramatically expanding the helicopter industry globally to what exists today.

The in-country production of foreign aircraft, such as production of Agusta aircraft in the US and of Boeing aircraft in the UK, further enhanced collaboration between Europe and North America. Several national collaborations in Europe, such as EH Industries – preceding the birth of

AgustaWestland – and NHIndustries, facilitated further cooperation and collaboration. More recently, European Union research initiatives have led to cooperative efforts between AgustaWestland and Airbus Helicopters (formerly Eurocopter). Many more international joint ventures and production agreements have been established, in and across Asia (e.g. China, India, Japan, Korea, Turkey), Australia, Europe (Poland, Russia, Spain) and South America (Brazil).

In Canada, site of the AHS International 70th Annual Forum and Technology Display, Bell Helicopter Canada and Airbus Helicopters Canada have been building helicopters for three decades. The AHS Montréal-Ottawa Chapter – with 450 members, the fifth largest chapter in the world and the largest outside the US – celebrated its 25th anniversary last year.

As new markets hungry for rotorcraft open up in Asia and Latin America, the international helicopter community is competing vigorously for market share, as well as creating and leveraging new cooperative agreements with local industry. AHS International can be of particular assistance here, with AHS chapters active in nine countries on four

continents. The Society has 70 years of resources and relationships to bring to bear to advance the technical understanding of burgeoning and established helicopter technical communities.

Just as the international helicopter industry has expanded through 70 years of cross-border cooperation, so too has AHS expanded across the globe. In the 1990s, the Society became known as “AHS International.” The Society has made substantive changes to its structure and to its Board of Directors, both following and leading dramatically expanded international membership. AHS is intently focused on its role and responsibility as the world’s Vertical Flight Technical Society.

The Annual Forum will be held in Montréal this year for the fourth time, with papers presented by authors from 15 countries. Through our support of the European Rotorcraft Forum and AHS conferences around the world – from Japan and Korea to China, Singapore and Australia – the Society is working to expand the body of knowledge and international cooperation in vertical flight technology. More than 20% of AHS members are now outside the US, with the number growing rapidly. New

AHS chapters have recently been formed in India and Singapore, and exploratory discussions are underway in several other countries.

As with every Awards Banquet since the First Annual Dinner held in 1944, Forum 70 will honor the inspiring achievements and contributions that exemplify the very best of the technical and operating communities. This year’s prestigious AHS Awards are bestowed for activities by recipients in 11 countries, across Asia, Europe and North America, with most of these winners recognized as a result of international cooperation.

On behalf of the Society, and its members from across the globe, I invite you to join this worldwide community in celebrating international cooperation in vertical flight technology at the 70th Annual Forum and Technology Display being held in Montréal on May 20-22. Go to www.vtol.org/forum to register.

You don’t want to miss *la plus importante conférence internationale sur les technologies de vol vertical* – The Biggest and Best Vertical Flight Technology Conference in the World!

