

IHST...In the Beginning

By Kim Smith, Editor-in-Chief

As is frequently the case with enlightened ideas, the International Helicopter Safety Team (IHST) effort was the helicopter community adopting an initiative created by our more cumbersome, less agile, but useful fixed wing brethren. In the mid-1990s, The Boeing Co. in collaboration with key members of the aviation industry and some aviation-oriented government agencies, came up with a process called the Accident Prevention Strategy (APS). Endorsed by the large transport airplane industry, the process was for industry and government experts to analyze accidents and come up with strategies to improve safety. In February 1997, the Final Report by the Commission on Aviation Safety & Security was sent to then-President Clinton and it called for a bold safety goal – reduce fatal fixed wing accident rates by a factor of five in 10 years. Refining the APS process further, the fixed wing transport industry then formed the ambitious Commercial Aviation Safety Team (or CAST as our acronym-crazed world came to call the initiative).

An FAA representative and a key member of the CAST process came to the AHS Annual Forum & Technology Display in Baltimore, MD in June 2004 and made a presentation on this evolving successful fixed wing accident mitigation strategy. A wholly voluntary effort, industry experts working in conjunction with FAA regulators, analyzed the fixed wing accidents and “brainstormed” about what happened and the chain of events that led to this event and what might have been done differently to prevent a similar accident in the future. Somen Chowdhury, International Vice President on the AHS Board of Directors and Bell Helicopter Canada certification expert was the catalyst behind this special session on CAST. Many in the AHS audience were skeptical as they couldn’t quite understand how this fixed wing process that the relatively limited number of organizations in the commercial airline industry had adopted could possibly apply to helicopters which fly many different missions in a diverse array of environments. But the idea was intriguing, it worked to reduce accidents in the fixed wing community, it was a voluntary non-regulatory approach and there was a dedicated cadre of vertical flight industry members willing to explore this strategy to reduce the unacceptable worldwide helicopter accident rate.

Members of AHS, the FAA, HAI, the US military, domestic and international operators and others joined together and talked about the too high helicopter accident rate and what could be done. After many meetings, the first International Helicopter Safety Symposium was organized and held September 25 – 27, 2005 in Montréal, Canada, hosted by AHS International and their Montréal/Ottawa Chapter, led by Somen Chowdhury. More than 250 people from thirteen countries and five continents came and attendees included representatives from operators, manufacturers, maintenance organizations, regulatory and accident investigation agencies, associations and the aviation press. Recognizing that the worldwide accident rate was too high, the attendees embraced the CAST approach and the aggressive goal to reduce helicopter accident rates by 80 percent in ten years.

With this mandate, AHS became the official Secretariat of the International Helicopter Safety Team (IHST) and then-AHS

Executive Director Rhett Flater helped craft the charters to guide the process. Matt Zuccarro, President of HAI became the IHST Industry Co-Chair and Dave Downey, then-Manager of the FAA Southwest Directorate became the IHST Government Co-Chair. Bob Sheffield, of Shell Aircraft Ltd, has been on board since the beginning offering his invaluable large operator experiences and Roy Fox, Bell Helicopter Textron Inc. helped the industrious group put the operating flight hours into a more workable context. There were many, many others.

The Joint Helicopter Safety Analysis Team (JHSAT) was set up and adopted the basic CAST process for analyzing helicopter accidents. The three basic tenets of the CAST process were maintained – solutions must be based on actual accident data (data driven); helicopter community stakeholders from the region must perform the analyses; and the performance of the safety improvement recommendations must be measurable. After the JHSAT members released their findings, Joint Helicopter Safety Implementation Team (JHSIT) groups were set up to establish actions that operators could take to reduce accidents in their day-to-day operating environments.

With five international symposiums conducted since the initial meeting in 2005, and countless other IHST groups continually meeting to work on this important initiative, the effort has expanded globally. Taking a look at the organizations represented by the dozens of IHST members from around the world, who are listed on the 2011 IHSS program as being in leadership positions, is mind boggling. The European Helicopter Safety Team (EHST) was set up shortly after the establishment of IHST and they have made remarkable progress while dealing with a diverse array of countries, different regulations and regulatory agencies and countless languages.

Regions/countries actively participating in the IHST include Australia, Brazil, Canada, the European Region, the Gulf Region, India, Japan, and the U.S. Briefings on IHST have taken place in many areas including Dubai as well as in Russia and IHST’s global reach is always seeking new participants. Good news did emanate from the IHST organizers. Those countries whose operators have implemented the IHST recommendations have experienced an average reduction in helicopter accident rates around 20% compared to 2006 levels, which in themselves were much reduced from the period of 2001 – 2005. But IHST participants know that the goal clock is continuing to count down.

A diverse array of toolkits have been developed under the IHST umbrella and they include Safety Management Systems (SMS); Training; Risk Assessment; Helicopter Flight Data Management (HFDM); Interactive Helicopter Flight Analysis Profile Project (HFAPP); EMS Weather Toolkit; Maintenance Toolkit and multiple training videos. To access information about these valuable resources visit the IHST web site at www.ihst.org.

