Press Release

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Vertical Flight Society Announces
2026 Individual Recipients of Its Distinguished Awards

Eleven vertical flight leaders recognized for their invaluable contributions

Fairfax, VA, April 3, 2026 — The Vertical Flight Society (VFS) today announces the 2026 individual recipients of its prestigious awards program. Since its establishment in 1944, the VFS awards program has paid tribute to outstanding leaders in vertical flight and served as a catalyst for stimulating technological advances. The 2026 award recipients will be honored at the Grand Awards Dinner on **May 6, 2026, as part of the 82nd Annual Forum and Technology Display in West Palm Beach, Florida**. This 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 recognized leading contributors to the advancement of 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."

Nicholas Lappos, from Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin company, is this year's recipient of the **Dr. Alexander Klemin Award**, the Society's highest honor for notable achievement in advancing vertical flight aeronautics. He is recognized for more than 50 years of transformative contributions to the vertical flight community as a test pilot, engineer, and industry leader.

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 careers. The 2026 Honorary Fellows are:

- **Ajay Sehgal,** Senior Technical Fellow EMERITUS at KBR, is recognized for over 50 years of sustained and distinguished contributions to vertical flight across industry, government, and academia through technical innovation, program leadership, mentorship, and enduring dedication to the Vertical Flight Society; and for influential work on the design, testing, certification, and sustainment of manned and unmanned rotorcraft, resulting in multiple U.S. patents and inspiring future generations of vertical flight engineers.
- **Marilyn J. Smith**, Professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, is recognized for her pioneering contributions to computational rotorcraft aeromechanics and her global leadership in advancing vertical flight.

The title of **Technical Fellow** is granted to Society members whose career-based accomplishments toward the goals and objectives of the vertical flight technical community constitute outstanding technical achievement. The 2026 Technical Fellows are:

- **Jeffrey Sinsay**, Aerospace Engineer with the U.S. Army, is recognized for advancing rotorcraft conceptual design through the development of innovative aircraft design methods and tools. His technical leadership has been instrumental in Army Aviation modernization efforts, while his mentorship has helped shape the next generation of vertical flight engineers.
- **Manikandan Ramasamy**, Research Scientist in the Experimental Aeromechanics Branch at the U.S. Army DEVCOM Aviation & Missile Center, is recognized for advancing rotorcraft aeromechanics through innovative experimental methods and insights into complex aerodynamic physics. His work has enhanced rotorcraft design capabilities, while his mentorship supports the next generation of vertical flight engineers.
- **Robert McKillip Jr.**, Senior Associate at Continuum Dynamics, Inc., is recognized for decades of leadership in rotorcraft flight dynamics, advancing modeling, simulation, and control technologies for VTOL aircraft. His innovations and mentorship have had a lasting impact across the vertical flight community.
- **Sung Nam Jung**, Professor at Konkuk University, is recognized for his pioneering contributions to rotorcraft aeromechanics, including advanced testing methods, composite modeling, and high-fidelity analysis. His work and global leadership have significantly advanced the vertical flight community.

The **John J. Schneider Historical Achievement Award** is presented in recognition of distinguished achievement in encouraging appreciation of, and enhancing access to, the history and legacy of vertical flight. This year's recipient, **Ben Oster**, Senior Manager for Cargo/Utility/Tiltrotor System Safety at Boeing, is recognized for preserving and promoting vertical flight history through the creation of the *Ascending Innovation* exhibit at the Glenn H. Curtiss Museum. By linking historic milestones with modern eVTOL technology and fostering educational partnerships, he has inspired and engaged the next generation of vertical flight engineers.

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's recipient is:

- **Katherine Gruber**, Aeronautical Engineer Senior at Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin company, is recognized for her technical leadership on the NASA Dragonfly mission, advancing rotorcraft aerodynamic design through innovative computational fluid dynamics methods. Her work and leadership have made a lasting impact on her team and the broader vertical flight community.

The Society's **Paul E. Haueter Award** is given for an outstanding technical contribution to the field of vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft development other than a helicopter or an operational vertical flight aircraft. The 2026 Haueter Award is presented to **Jason Satira**, Advanced Concepts Staff Engineer and Aircraft Technical Lead at Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin

company, for leading the development and flight testing of the innovative Rotor Blown Wing (RBW) aircraft concept. His work has advanced this novel VTOL configuration into a viable platform for next-generation unmanned aerial systems.

The Vertical Flight Society and the Stoll Family are proud to present the **Alex M. Stoll Award**, established in memory of Alex M. Stoll. The award recognizes a professional in the field of vertical flight who, like Alex, demonstrates an exceptional commitment to advancing their organization's mission while making extraordinary contributions to the well-being and happiness of colleagues and elevating organizational culture and morale.

This year's recipient, **William Staruk**, exemplifies these qualities, making a meaningful impact both professionally and personally within the workplace and across the broader 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 were essential to advancing 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 advancements in technology, safety, advocacy, and other key initiatives, and has served as the primary forum for the exchange of information on vertical flight technology.

Descriptions of the awards and past recipients are available at VFS - Vertical Flight Society Awards

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