Press Release

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Vertical Flight Society Announces 2026 Group Recipients of Its Prestigious Awards

Eleven teams honored for outstanding achievements in vertical flight

Fairfax, VA, April 6, 2026 — The Vertical Flight Society (VFS) is pleased to announce the 2026 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 Dinner on Wednesday, May 6, 2026, at the VFS **82nd Annual Forum and Technology Display in West Palm Beach, Florida USA.**

For more than 75 years, the Vertical Flight Society (VFS) has recognized the most impactful achievements in vertical flight. This year's group award recipients continue that legacy, highlighting the exceptional capabilities of vertical flight aircraft and the expertise of the teams behind their design, maintenance, and operation.

"These awardees represent the very best of our industry," said **Angelo Collins, Executive Director of VFS**. "Their work demonstrates not only the remarkable performance of today's vertical flight platforms but also the dedication and innovation of the professionals who make these advancements possible."

The honorees exemplify excellence across engineering, operations, and support, reinforcing the critical role vertical flight plays in advancing aerospace technology and serving global needs.

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 **207th Aviation Battalion, Alaska Army National Guard**, for its extraordinary humanitarian response during Typhoon Halong. Operating in extreme weather and low visibility, the battalion executed a complex rescue mission across remote western Alaska—delivering lifesaving aid, conducting searches in isolated communities, and evacuating 501 civilians, the largest such operation in National Guard history. Their exceptional airmanship and coordination saved lives, accelerated recovery, and exemplify the highest standards of vertical flight excellence.

Grover E. Bell Award
Recognizing outstanding research and experimentation in vertical flight development, this year's Grover Bell Award honors two exceptional teams: the **National Research Council of Canada's AASCEND team** and the **DEVCOM AvMC ARCTIC team.**

In a landmark achievement, the **AASCEND team** advanced full-scale rotorcraft autonomy by integrating an autonomous Bell 412 into a live military air assault exercise alongside crewed helicopters in degraded conditions—demonstrating supervised autonomy within an operational formation in non-segregated airspace. This breakthrough validates a scalable path for human-autonomy teaming and marks a significant step forward in autonomous vertical flight.

The **ARCTIC team** is recognized for advancing high-fidelity rotorcraft research through ARCTIC-6, where advanced autonomy—real-time path planning, obstacle avoidance, and safe landing selection—was integrated into a full-motion simulation of next-generation tiltrotor aircraft within dynamic threat environments. This achievement enabled realistic evaluation of autonomous operations in complex scenarios, reducing risk for future flight testing and accelerating next-generation vertical lift capabilities.

VFS Supplier Excellence Award
Awarded for excellence in supporting vertical flight development, this year's Supplier Excellence Award recognizes **Advanced Rotorcraft Technology, Inc. (ART)** for its transformative impact on rotorcraft modeling and simulation. Through its industry-standard tools—FLIGHTLAB and the Rotorcraft Comprehensive Analysis System (RCAS)—ART has enabled high-fidelity analysis, reduced development risk, and accelerated innovation across military, commercial, and emerging VTOL programs worldwide, strengthening the entire vertical flight ecosystem.

Robert L. Pinckney Award
Awarded for a notable achievement in vertical flight manufacturing, this year's **Robert L. Pinckney Award** recognizes the **Airbus Helicopters Rotor Blade Team** for industrializing a breakthrough infusion-based manufacturing process for the H145 five-bladed rotor system. Transitioning from traditional prepreg methods to a more automated approach, the team improved production reliability and scalability, bringing the innovation from prototype to full-rate production in just two years and achieving output exceeding 1,000 blades annually—setting a new benchmark for rotor blade manufacturing.

Harry T. Jensen Award
Awarded for outstanding improvements in rotorcraft reliability and maintainability, this year's **Harry T. Jensen Award** recognizes the **Chinook Airframe MSG-3 Team** for pioneering MSG-3 maintenance optimization for military rotorcraft. Using digital-twin analytics, crack-growth analysis, and automated tools, the team developed a data-driven, traceable maintenance framework that delivered up to 80% improvements in key reliability metrics and nearly a 50% reduction in maintenance man-hours—significantly enhancing fleet readiness.

Frederick L. Feinberg Award
Awarded for outstanding contributions to flight testing and operational advancement of vertical flight, this year's **Frederick L. Feinberg Award** recognizes **John Rucci** of Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Company for advancing autonomous and optionally piloted rotorcraft. Through high-impact demonstrations, he expanded the flight envelope of multiple prototype aircraft, including remote operation of an S-70™ Optionally Piloted Vehicle over long distances and the first unsupervised remote command at operational range. His work helped transition autonomy from experimental capability to real-world missions, setting new standards for safe integration in vertical flight.

Leonardo International Fellowship Award
Recognizing outstanding international collaboration in vertical flight, this year's **Leonardo International Fellowship Award** honors the **H-47 UK Extended Range Certification Team** for achieving the first-ever certification of a Chinook helicopter to UK DEF-STAN 970 standards and delivering a UK-signed Certificate of Design. This landmark effort established a unified airworthiness framework bridging military and commercial standards, enabling faster fielding for allied forces while creating a repeatable model for future multinational certification programs.

Howard Hughes Award
Awarded for outstanding improvement in fundamental vertical flight technology, this year's **Howard Hughes Award** recognizes the **Bell High-Speed VTOL Track Test Team** for a groundbreaking "stop-fold" rotor demonstration. In a first-of-its-kind achievement, the team executed a powered transition from rotor-driven flight to jet propulsion—accelerating with a proprotor, transferring thrust to a turbofan, and stopping

and folding the rotor in motion to enable high-speed flight. This breakthrough resolves the long-standing tradeoff between efficient hover and high-speed cruise, paving the way for next-generation VTOL aircraft exceeding 400 knots.

Vertical Flight Heritage Site Recognitions
The VFS Heritage Sites Program honors locations with significant contributions to VTOL technology. The 2026 honorees are:

- **The Sikorsky Aircraft Stratford Facility** is recognized as a Vertical Flight Heritage Site for its enduring impact on the evolution of vertical flight. Since 1955, the site has produced more than 8,000 helicopters, including numerous industry firsts and the world's most successful helicopter program, the BLACK HAWK. As the home of Igor Sikorsky and a continuous center of innovation, it stands as a lasting symbol of pioneering achievement in vertical flight.

- **The Bell Textron Canada Mirabel** facility is recognized as a Vertical Flight Heritage Site for its enduring impact on global helicopter manufacturing. Since 1986, the site has produced more than 6,000 helicopters and served as the development and first-flight site for multiple Bell aircraft. Integrating design, production, flight test, and certification, it stands as a lasting symbol of innovation and excellence in vertical flight.

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 VFS - Vertical Flight Society Awards.

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