



Standing on the Shoulder of Giants — A Look at our Past Executive Directors

By Angelo Collins, Executive Director

Many of our members have fond memories of Mike Hirschberg and Rhett Flater’s tenures as Executive Director of the Vertical Flight Society, but their recollection ends there. A total of six Executive Directors served prior to my tenure, all with their unique stories and accomplishments. Their hard work and dedication contributed to the Society’s growth and success, and I will use this commentary to share some historical facts you may not know.



■ Lounsbury

In the early days of the then-American Helicopter Society (AHS), the Society had no central office, and its affairs were conducted by members of the Board of Directors from their respective corporate offices. As the Society grew, the need for a full-time Executive Director was apparent. In September 1952, the AHS officers appointed **Harry M. Lounsbury** to take over the day-to-day management

of the Society’s affairs in the role we now know as the Executive Director. Harry used the title “Executive Secretary” throughout his 23-year tenure of 1952–1975. He was remembered for his “gift of prose,” starting the “AHS News-Letter” in 1953 — today’s *Vertiflite* magazine. Office space for the Society’s headquarters was provided by the Institute of the Aerospace

Sciences (IAS) in New York City for several years during the beginning of Lounsbury’s tenure, prior to moving into permanent office space nearby; IAS and the American Rocket Society (ARS) merged in 1963 to become the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA).



■ Islin

John “Jack” Islin took over as Executive Director in August 1975, using the title “Executive

Vice President and Chief Operating Officer.” Jack was a former Army colonel with combat aviation experience and served as deputy for aviation to Norman Augustine, then Assistant Secretary of the Army for Research, Development and Acquisition, ASA(RDA). In the month following his appointment, Jack moved the Society’s headquarters to a modest condo in Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. During his tenure, Jack increased membership by 20% and broadened the Society’s international outreach. In October 1977, Jack left AHS to take a management role at Sikorsky’s West Palm Beach Facility in Florida.

Lynn Kesten was a member of the AHS staff during Jack’s tenure and became the Society’s third Executive Director in the winter of 1977. At only 25, Lynn was the youngest Executive Director to serve the Society. Lynn’s parents, Art and Dotty Kesten were the founders of the Army Aviation Association of America (Quad-A). After a three-year tenure, Lynn joined her parents at AAAA’s headquarters in Connecticut, assuming a new management role.



■ Kesten

Upon Lynn’s departure in 1981, AHS hired **John F. Zugschwert**, a retired Army colonel with prior enlisted service, and an experienced aviator. He served as Deputy Director to ASA(RDA), and brought with him multiple skills, connections and experience in military helicopter research and development. The historic Old Town Alexandria headquarters building was purchased under Zugschwert’s tenure in October 1982, and the adjacent building was purchased five years later in October 1987. “John Z.” served the Society for 10 years, building membership, expanding *Vertiflite*, and broadening the Society’s programs, leaving for an executive position in the Washington, DC, offices of Bell Helicopter Textron.



■ Zugschwert



■ Flater

In 1991, Zugschwert was replaced by M.E. “Rhett” Flater. In addition to his Marine Corps aviation experience in Vietnam, Rhett was a practicing attorney with law degrees from both Washington & Lee University and Georgetown University, and ran the HubExpress scheduled helicopter airline in Boston, Massachusetts. Rhett was the second-longest serving Executive Director in the Society’s history with an accomplished 20-year tenure ending in 2011. Rhett similarly expanded the international outreach and was incredibly well respected for his advocacy for vertical flight programs.



Rhett handed the baton to the younger, energetic and enthusiastic **Michael J. Hirschberg**, or simply “Mike” as we all know him. Although I did not know the former Executive Directors personally, I can confidently say no other tenure could have possibly matched

Mike’s passion and commitment to the Society. For 12 years, Mike ate, slept and breathed VFS, introducing new events, growing the membership base, helping to catalyze the electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) aircraft revolution, advocating for research and development (R&D) funding and much more. If I could accomplish half of what Mike was able to tackle during his tenure, I would call it a success.



We, as a Society, can accomplish so much together, because we are standing on the shoulders of these six distinguished giants. I will continue to learn from and draw inspiration from the former Executive Directors and the incredible history of the Society as we tread a new path into the future of vertical flight. 🦋

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