



vertiflite Commentary

Leadership from the Top

By Mike Hirschberg, Executive Director

As this issue of *Vertiflite* was about to go to press, Textron announced that John Garrison had left Bell Helicopter. I know that John's successor, Mitch Snyder, will be great for Bell, but it was with great personal and professional melancholy that I read the press release.

This May will mark my fifth anniversary as Executive Director of AHS International (as well as 20 years of my involvement with AHS). I first met John Garrison — then serving his first term as Secretary/Treasurer of the AHS Board of Directors — during my interview for the job. I was actually a bit startled upon interacting with him. There was something, well, different about him from other executives that I had met.

And he asked several penetrating questions that would seem prescient over the next three years that he was an officer of the AHS Board of Directors. One of them was a great self-assessment question: "What else in your background gives you confidence that you can manage the financial aspects of running a multimillion dollar a year organization?" I didn't take this to be meant pejoratively or to be critical, but rather as a mentor providing advice: "AHS has been a leader since



the helicopter industry was born and tough times are ahead. AHS needs the financial stability to continue to lead and grow in the 21st century."

Over the next few years, AHS struggled to modernize capabilities, expand our benefits and membership, update our cost structure, and accelerate our "internationalization" — all as the global industry began experiencing massive defense

cutbacks, combined with economic malaise. Concurrently, US government-imposed sequestration cuts and conference attendance restrictions, the unexpected fall in oil prices, and other factors added to an overall increased uncertainty. Given that context, John's words have often reminded me of my duty as the current steward of the Society's 72-year heritage.

In 2013, Mark Huber at *Business Jet Traveler* (November 23) wrote about meeting Garrison for the first time before his first Heli-Expo press conference in 2010: "Garrison did something I have never seen before or since from a CEO: he worked the room, introducing himself to everyone, shaking hands, looking people in the eye and thanking them for coming. It was a small but significant gesture that got my attention and made me think: Who is this guy?" This was the same experience and the same question that I had when I had first met him.

Huber noted that when Garrison took over the company in July 2009:

Bell had been limping along for years with declining sales, a stagnant product line and faltering development programs. The stock of its parent, Textron, had done a spectacular faceplant, with its split-adjusted price falling from \$67 in 2007 to \$6 in 2009,

and was only slowly crawling out of the gutter. Bell was poised to do a swan dive — maybe for good. In nine years, Bell had had six CEOs and no one seemed able to right the ship. Garrison likely would be the next enthusiast headed for the meat grinder, I thought.

Instead, Garrison led Bell through significant change. In naming Snyder, Textron chairman and CEO Scott C. Donnelly said, “We are also grateful for John Garrison’s years of leadership, and his diligence in driving so many improvements in our global rotorcraft business.” Essentially reinventing Bell in large and small ways, Garrison refocused the company to a more balanced portfolio between military and civilian. Under his watch, Bell advanced the production and fielding of the 429, oversaw significant upgrades to the legacy 407 and 412 singles, and launched the new 505 and 525. He also oversaw significant improvements to Bell’s military products, specifically with the H-1 and V-22 for the Marine Corps, and launched the V-280 Valor for the Joint Multi-Role (JMR) technology demonstration effort.

Garrison embraced, from the top, his leadership role in Bell and AHS. Bell became the first Platinum Class Corporate Member of AHS, the first company to reach 1,000 members at its peak and the aircraft manufacturer with the highest percentage of members (two-thirds), which helped the US Southwest Chapter become the first with more than 1,000 members (nearly twice that of the next largest AHS chapter).

John seemed to have boundless energy for his company and for inspiring students and the workforce with his passion. Through AHS, particularly at the Annual Forum CEO Panel, Garrison fought for the technical community and for areas of mutual importance across the industry. Trumpeting the almost magical capabilities that rotorcraft can provide to civil and military operators, Garrison sounded off strongly and repeatedly



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about instilling that kind of excitement in students versus the glamour of “algorithm factories” at companies like Google.

John’s accomplishments during his six years at Bell and four years on the AHS Board of Directors’ Executive Committee have been immense. He personally reached out to scores of companies to encourage them to join AHS and to participate in Forum 70 in Montreal, making it and Forum 68 in Ft. Worth two of our most successful

annual meetings. After his term as Chair of AHS, he became the Chair of our Vertical Flight Foundation scholarship fund — where he was personally responsible for raising more than a quarter-million dollars in contributions, increasing the endowment by 50%.

John Garrison made incredible, lasting impacts at Bell, AHS and across the global rotorcraft community. His passion and leadership will be sorely missed.

