VFF @ 50

The Vertical Flight Foundation celebrates a half century and initiates the VFF 50th Anniversary Capital Campaign.

By Mike Hirschberg,
AHS International Executive Director

The Vertical Flight Foundation was incorporated a half-century ago. When it was announced in the August 1967 issue of Vertiflite, the table of contents entry said it all: “An AHS Dream Come True — Society Establishes Vertical Flight Foundation.”

Because the American Helicopter Society, Inc., was established in 1943 as a broad non-profit organization supporting vertical flight — and classified in 1967 as a 501(c) (6) trade association, in the parlance of the US Internal Revenue Service — it was not able to accept charitable donations. Thus, in order to serve the educational needs of the vertical flight community, VFF was initiated as a charitable non-profit — a 501(c)(3) educational and technical charity. (When AHS filed its revised and amended certificate of incorporation in 2012 as the American Helicopter Society International, Inc., it was reclassified as a 501(c)(3).)

Success Stories

It took a decade for VFF to raise enough in donations to begin to make scholarship awards. The first three winners were announced in 1977, followed by eight in 1978; several of these winners are now prominent researchers and leaders.

Dr. William Warmbrodt is now the Chief of Aeromechanics at NASA Ames Research Center. He remarked:

“The VFF support played no small role in opening my eyes and career to vertical lift. It remains an honor to contribute to the nation’s goals in rotary-wing technology on a daily basis. And the personal relationships and friendships established and enabled, in large part through the activities of the AHS, are truly valued and cherished.”

Dale M. Pitt is now a technical fellow at The Boeing Company:

“I was fortunate to receive a Vertical Flight Foundation Scholarship to help defray the cost of my education. I used the Scholarship money during the research part of my studies where Professor Peters and I developed our Dynamic Inflow Model (The Pitt-Peters Dynamic Inflow Model) that many helicopter simulations use at this time... My VFF scholarship and my AHS membership were very instrumental in my career and very rewarding professionally and personally.”

Dr. Robert M. McKillip is now a senior associate at Continuum Dynamics:

“I like to think that the VFF opportunity was perhaps the “tipping point” that got me interested in rotorcraft, a passion that has led to an enjoyable engineering career, and even a Bensen Gyrocopter in my garage. I am sure such scholarship incentives provide additional exposure of the rotorcraft technology field to those students that may not have expansive helicopter-related course offerings at their institution, and thus help them get started in this exciting discipline.”

Ajay Sehgal is now the Chief Engineer for Systems at KBRWyle’s Aerospace Group:

“I was also fortunate to receive a VFF scholarship in 1978. It meant a lot to me for a number of reasons; namely, it brought recognition among peers and faculty I was working with, it provided visibility for future networking opportunities within the rotorcraft industry, and above all, provided financial assistance during the time when it meant the most. It provided the initial impetus I needed to be able to follow my passion and dream of pursuing a career in this ever-challenging field of rotary-wing.”

Many VFF winners have become leaders in industry, academia and government organizations around the world, as has been chronicled in the pages of Vertiflite over the past three years. Learn more about these and other VFF winners at www.vtol.org/vff.

The Next Chapters

This year — our 50th anniversary — AHS is awarding $80,000 worth of VFF scholarships, more than double what was awarded in 2011 and nearly triple what VFF provided in 2006. Not only has the size of the awards increased dramatically, but also the number of students receiving awards has doubled — from 12 to 24. In addition, this year’s winners, to be feted at the Grand Awards Banquet at Forum 73, include students from around the world at 14 different universities — the most diverse class of VFF recipients ever.

Every one of the two dozen 2017 winners has a unique story, even if only the first chapters of their careers are being written. But two repeat VFF winners wrote to explain the difference that the VFF scholarships had made in their academic careers.

Dhwanil Shukla is a Ph.D. student at Georgia Institute of Technology. He remarked:

“My thesis project is on experimental study of multi-rotor aerodynamic interactions, under which I am studying flow phenomena occurring due to aerodynamic interactions between multiple low-Reynolds number rotors in close proximity, such as in small size UAS [unmanned aircraft systems].”
He also noted the positive impact of being a two-time VFF recipient:

“VFF scholarships have helped me defray travel expense to attend the AHS Forum 71 and 73. The forums give awesome exposure to research done all over the world in the field of VTOL and is a great place to network. The scholarships also served as a great form of recognition and have encouraged me to do better.”

Matthew Krott is a Graduate Research Fellow of the National Science Foundation, which funds his Ph.D. research at the Pennsylvania State University on expanding the capabilities of a new class of vibration treatments using Fluidic Flexible Matrix Composite (F2MC) tubes for rotorcraft. Also a prior VFF winner, Krott recalled:

“Being invited to my first AHS Forum in 2014 as a scholarship recipient was a fantastic experience. When I attended the VFF scholarship awards dinner, I got the opportunity to sit at a table with several people who were remarkable leaders in the rotorcraft field. It was a huge inspiration to meet people who were not only great engineers that I looked up to, but were also very down to earth and humble about their career accomplishments.”

The Years Ahead

Since 1977, the merit-based VFF scholarship program has been a great success story; more than 500 scholarships have been awarded since that time. The program has been greatly expanded in recent years, with more than 120 VFF scholarships totaling $362,000 awarded since 2012.

It’s easy to crow about the great accomplishments of VFF, but — with your help — we could do so much more. Our growth is limited only by our financial resources.

AHS International is kicking off a 50th Anniversary Capital Campaign this year to increase the size of the VFF endowment, in the hopes that a sustained annual scholarship award level of $100,000 can be reached.

In order to do this, we need to raise $250,000 to add to our endowment (which currently sits at $700,000). If all 5,000+ AHS members each donates $50, we would exceed this goal; or, if 50 members donate $5,000 each, we would also reach the capital campaign goal.

We ask that every member consider making a stretch donation of as much as possible for this special 50th Anniversary Capital Campaign. If your organization offers donation matching, consider designating VFF as a beneficiary to leverage your contributions. Start a scholarship drive to remember someone who was an inspiration in your career — or to honor someone who still is!

Ed Birtwell, recently retired as GE Aviation’s vice president of turboshaft/turboprop engines, and former Chair of the Board of AHS International, is the 2016–2017 Chair of the Vertical Flight Foundation:

“In my 30+ years as a member of AHS — including serving previously as the Chair of AHS and now as Chair of VFF — I have seen firsthand the impact that AHS has on advancing vertical flight technology, as well as providing professional development to the current and future workforce. The prestigious VFF scholarships help recruit and retain the best and brightest students for vertical flight technical careers. It is vital to our industry that today we invest in the great talent we will need to serve as our leaders tomorrow. And you can help do this through donations to the VFF scholarship fund.”

Your support of VFF has a direct impact on the advancement of current and next-generation vertical flight. By contributing, you become an essential part of realizing our vision for the future by helping develop our future leaders and supporting deserving students.

DONATE TODAY!

VFF and AHS are both 501(c)(3) charities. AHS International covers all overhead costs of administration and accounting, so 100% of every tax-deductible contribution to VFF goes directly to student scholarships. AHS also contributes a portion of its revenue to supplementing individual contributions.

If you’d prefer to contribute by check, please make it payable to “VFF.” Our mailing address is:

Vertical Flight Foundation
c/o AHS International
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If you have any questions, please contact Betty Chen, VFF Scholarship Coordinator, at bchen@vtol.org or at +1-703-684-6777 x102.