Transitions: From 2011 to 2023

VFS Behind the Scenes of FVL

By Mike Hirschberg, VFS Executive Director

At 5:15 pm EST on Monday, Dec. 5, the US Army announced the long-awaited Future Long Range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA) contract award to Bell Textron for its V-280 Valor tiltrotor.

This decision came 15 years after Congress first instigated what evolved into the Future Vertical Lift (FVL) program — at the behest of VFS and our members — 11 years after the first contract awards for design studies, and five years after the first flight of the V-280 Valor under the Joint Multi-Role (JMR) Technology Demonstration initiative. The year 2023 begins with FLRAA moving forward at full speed (see “FLRAA Tilts to Bell,” pg. 22).

Over the past decade, Bell and the Sikorsky-Boeing SB>1 Defiant team pushed the state of the art, flight testing not only impressive next-generation JMR technology demonstrators, but also developing incredibly capable advanced weapon systems designs for FLRAA. Both teams can be immensely proud of their accomplishments, showcasing the incredible capabilities of the vertical flight industry. The competing teams have proven the transformative capabilities of advanced rotorcraft designs in terms of speed and range, survivability, affordability and maintainability, and changed how the world views rotorcraft.

FVL was conceived when the US was fighting asymmetric wars overseas with aging helicopters being used beyond their limits. But the war in Ukraine has highlighted once again that geopolitical realities change quickly, while it takes decades to develop next-generation aircraft.

With FLRAA finally moving forward into the next phase, Bell, the US Army, the United States’ industrial base and national interests — and those of its allies — benefit from this momentous decision.

VFS Behind the Scenes

This was also a very momentous milestone for me personally, as well. One of my first actions when I became Executive Director in June 2011 was to pull together the rotorcraft community to urge the Department of Defense (DoD) to proceed with the seemingly moribund FVL program.

As a member of VFS (then known as AHS International) for years before becoming the Executive Director, I had listened to the Annual Forum’s CEO panel members highlight the need for a next-generation rotorcraft program.

The Society had promoted the creation of the Congressional Rotorcraft Caucus in 2001, and had worked with the Caucus to augment Congressional funding of rotorcraft research at NASA. In January 2008, VFS members and staff worked closely with the Caucus, which requested that the Pentagon conduct a Capabilities Based Assessment and develop a strategic plan (see “JMR Technology Demonstration Update: The Road to Future Vertical Lift,” Vertiflite, Jan/Feb 2016).

As a result of this Congressional action, the Office of the Secretary of Defense submitted the “Report to Congress: A Strategic Plan for United States Department of Defense Vertical Lift Aircraft” in 2010 (see www.vtol.org/fvl). However, this was just a report, not the plan itself, and the program appeared stalled.

With the advice of members, I initiated a letter — signed by the heads of the five major rotorcraft companies, VFS and the leadership of the non-profit Vertical Lift Consortium (VLC) — to Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta on Sept. 19, 2011, urging the approval of the FVL Strategic Plan itself. In December 2011, VFS helped get the Army Aviation Caucus kicked off, advising it of the urgency in investing in advanced rotorcraft technology. The Caucus sent a letter to the Secretary of Defense on Feb. 10, 2012, urging him to sign the FVL Strategic Plan so the program could move forward.

The FVL Strategic Plan was finally signed and submitted to Congress in October 2012. This was followed in July 2013 by the “Future Vertical Lift (FVL) Family of Systems (FoS) Initial Capabilities Document (ICD),” validated by a Joint Requirements
Oversight Council Memorandum (JROCM). In August 2016, the Army signed the Initial Capability Refinement Document (ICRD) for Capability Set 3 — which evolved into FLRAA.

**JMR Advocacy**

June 2011 was also a momentous time for the rotorcraft industry. This is when the Army awarded its first JMR “Configuration Trades and Analysis (CTA)” study contract to industry — AVX Aircraft, Bell Boeing, Boeing and Sikorsky — to evaluate the spectrum of configurations and capabilities of next-generation medium-class rotorcraft. The next phase, the JMR initial design contracts, were awarded in 2013 to AVX, Bell, Karem Aircraft and Sikorsky-Boeing, with Boeing famously switching from the Bell Boeing tiltrotor team to the Sikorsky-Boeing X2 team.

Over the years, VFS continued working with our members and the VLC to educate members of Congress and other key stakeholders. As a result of the VFS-VLC advocacy, more than $70M of additional funding was added to Army funding lines for additional risk reduction investments. More importantly, our early efforts created broad support on Capitol Hill for the FVL program as it began to grow. VFS and VLC continued to highlight the incredible importance in investing in advanced technologies for FVL.

In October 2017, the Army named FVL as one of six top modernization priorities, with a dedicated Cross-Functional Team (CFT) lead, now Maj. Gen. Wally Rugen. The Army announced in March 2018 that it was launching two development programs under FVL — the Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft (FARA) and FLRAA (see [www.vtol.org/fara](http://www.vtol.org/fara)). On a panel with the then Vice Chief (now Chief) of the Army Gen. Jim McConville (see photo), I highlighted that the rotorcraft industry was capable of supporting two simultaneous development programs but needed stable requirements (see [www.vtol.org/cft](http://www.vtol.org/cft)).

Our extensive work in Congress paid dividends when the Army went to Capitol Hill to ask for mid-year funding for FARA. Rugen gave huge kudos to VFS later that year (see “HELMOT XVIII: Dominant, Disruptive Vertical Lift,” Vertiflite, Jan/Feb 2019).

**More to Come**

It’s been a long, hard road to get to this point. Over the past decade and a half, the rotorcraft industry spent thousands of labor years and more than a billion dollars on the development of the JMR demonstrators and the FLRAA weapon systems designs. In its press statements, the Army has also justifiably complimented itself on its own hard work.

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**Stepping Down**

It has been the honor of my life to serve as the VFS Executive Director. June 1, 2023, will mark 12 years. All things must eventually come to an end, and I have decided that it is time to pass the baton on or after this date.

I notified the Board of Directors Executive Committee of my intent in November, and we have developed a transition plan. I provided six-months’ notice to the membership to ensure that the Board will find an excellent candidate who can take VFS forward in the years to come, with new ideas and new energy, and provide ample time for training and a smooth transition.

We will provide additional information after Jan. 1 at [www.vtol.org/director](http://www.vtol.org/director), with a position description and specific details for VFS members who may wish to consider applying for the job.

When I came to my first Society event in 1996, I fell in love with our members and their generous volunteerism. I am still inspired daily by their passion, knowledge, technical expertise and kindness. I will continue to work as hard as ever to keep VFS running at full speed over the next six months, through our 79th Annual Forum in May. I hope to continue serving VFS after the June 1 transition — in a non-executive capacity.

As the advocate for advancing vertical flight, VFS has worked tirelessly since the creation of FVL to support the work of industry and the Army in conducting a robust and fair competition for FLRAA. This regular “Commentary” series has been replete with widely praised perspectives on FVL, urging the continued support of speeding the capabilities to the battlefield.

Looking back now over nearly 12 years since I started at VFS, it’s fitting that my first major advocacy push that spurred FVL forward happened when our members were first beginning funded study efforts on JMR.

The FLRAA decision is truly a turning point from the hard-fought competition to delivering on our promises to the warfighter.

What do you think? Let me know at director@vtol.org.