



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 10, 2026

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PRESS RELEASE

VAI Announces 2026 Salute to Excellence Honorees

Recognizing leaders in safety, service, and operational performance.

Alexandria, Virginia, USA (Feb. 10, 2026) – Vertical Aviation International (VAI) has selected the 2026 recipients of its Salute to Excellence Awards, an annual recognition of high performance in vertical aviation. The awards spotlight the people and teams whose daily work sets benchmarks for safe, professional operations and who exhibit a dedication to advancing the vertical aviation industry.

The Salute to Excellence Awards program recognizes excellence across core functions of vertical aviation, from flight operations and maintenance to flight instruction and safety management. Its multiple award categories reflect the industry's diversity and the shared responsibility required to perform complex missions in demanding environments.

"VAI is honored to recognize this year's award recipients," says François Lassale, VAI president and CEO. "Their work elevates standards across the industry. Their example supports safer operations and stronger performance for everyone who depends on vertical flight. This year's honorees represent the discipline, judgment, and consistency that define top-tier operations."

Salute to Excellence Communications Award (Sponsor: VAI)

Bruce Webb and the Airbus Helicopters Aviation Education and Community Outreach Team, based in Grand Prairie, Texas, are recognized for redefining how an OEM advances safety through communications. Webb, who joined Airbus (then Eurocopter) in 1999 after flying air ambulances, served 16 years as chief pilot before launching a new role in 2016 as director of aviation education and community outreach. Backed by company leadership, he built a safety ambassador program focused on a human-centered view of safety, sharing best practices and lessons learned. When the pandemic halted in-person training, the team pivoted to digital media, creating Webb Sight Aviation and the *Push to Talk* podcast.

Salute to Excellence W.A. "Dub" Blessing Flight Instructor of the Year Award

(Sponsor: Hill Air Corporation)

German-born flight instructor Tom Luca Schneider is honored as the Flight Instructor of the Year for upholding high standards in flight instruction. Now based in Los Angeles, Schneider earned his CFI in 2024 and now has his CFII. He tailors instruction to each student, balancing empathy, discipline, and flexibility. Under the social media handle "Helicoptom," he created practical, back-to-basics videos to help pilots navigate US operations and procedures. These popular videos came to the attention of the FAA Safety Team, which recruited Schneider to develop and present webinars on safety for

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helicopter pilots because of his engaging style and ability to communicate with pilots at all skill levels.

Salute to Excellence Harold Summers Legacy Award (Sponsor: VAI)

Lee Roskop is honored as the Harold Summers Legacy Award recipient for selfless service to the worldwide vertical aviation community. An aviation safety coordinator at the FAA, Roskop leads rotorcraft safety analytics, transforming accident and incident data from the FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board into practical guidance for operators. A former US Air Force helicopter pilot, he promotes open dialogue, global outreach, and clear action. His leadership on the FAA Rotorcraft Accident Dashboard and work with industry partners, including the US Helicopter Safety Team, reflect the collaborative spirit championed by the late Harold Summers, former director of flight operations for Helicopter Association International (now VAI).

Salute to Excellence Humanitarian Service Award (Sponsor: VAI)

Operation Helo is receiving the Humanitarian Service Award for using rotorcraft to deliver aid after disasters. Formed within two days of Hurricane Helene, which hit the Southeastern United States on Sep. 27, 2024, the volunteer network surged from 33 helicopters on Day 1 to more than 100 aircraft by Day 3 at Hickory Regional Airport (KHKY) in Hickory, North Carolina. Over 11 days, crews flew 400 missions a day, moving food, water, medicine, diapers, and clothing into isolated mountain communities. The nonprofit deployed seven more times in the next 12 months, including Jul. 4, 2025, following devastating floods in Texas, earning government trust and OEM support, and supporting nationwide coordination of helicopter assistance in disaster response and recovery.

Salute to Excellence Law Enforcement Award (Sponsor: VAI)

Nicholas Romano, a deputy with the Broward Sheriff's Office in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, is recognized for leadership in public-safety drone operations. Raised in a law enforcement family, Romano began on road patrol before moving to the detective bureau as a computer forensics examiner. Nearly a decade ago, he was selected as one of the agency's first drone pilots, despite having no prior experience in unmanned systems. He built expertise through intensive research, became an early trainer, and later served as unit coordinator. Romano credits the significant advancement of sensors and other capabilities with protecting officers, including during a barricaded-suspect incident in which a drone, instead of a SWAT officer, drew gunfire.

Salute to Excellence Maintenance Award (Sponsor: Rolls-Royce)

Matt Pagano, senior mechanic for the Riverside Police Department Air Support Unit (ASU) in Riverside, California, is recognized for sustained excellence in rotorcraft

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maintenance under demanding conditions. A former US Marine Corps aviation maintainer and Hamilton Standard quality-control and blade-repair specialist, Pagano earned his FAA A&P certificate and joined the ASU in 2003. Pagano is currently the sole mechanic for the unit, which operates two Airbus H125 helicopters, each flying 1,100 to 1,200 hours annually. Having led standardized preflight training and managed a fleet transition from MD 500s, he prioritizes clear pilot-mechanic communication to protect crews and missions.

Salute to Excellence Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award (Sponsor: VAI)

The US Coast Guard Air Station Savannah crew of CG-6561 is receiving the Matthew S. Zuccaro Land & LIVE Award for exceptional aeronautical decision-making and crew coordination during a mission that took place during a severe storm. Cmdr. McClain G. "Mac" Isom and Cmdr. Zachery Geyer launched in 40- to 50-kt. winds, heavy rain, lightning, and 200- to 300-ft. cloud ceilings to reach a distressed mariner about 40 miles away. Although the mission was canceled shortly after takeoff, the weather had closed behind the crew and visibility worsened to only a few feet, making their immediate return to base impossible. The crew agreed to an emergency beach landing, managed repeated relocations as the aircraft sank in sand and, guided by Aviation Survival Technician 2nd Class Nicholas Barnes, held position under power until safe departure to St. Simons Island Airport (KSSI).

Salute to Excellence Pilots of the Year Award (Sponsor: VAI)

Coldstream Helicopters aircrew Brian Atkinson and Brian Dunn are receiving the Pilots of the Year Award for decisive airmanship during a 2025 firefighting mission for the Ontario, Canada, Ministry of Natural Resources. Flying an AS 332L1 Super Puma with a 200-ft. line and a 7,000-lb. water load, they suffered a total electrical failure that cut power and disabled cockpit communications. In under 30 seconds, the crew manually released the bucket, shifted to emergency governing, and used a headwind to restore rotor rpm and regain control. Investigators later traced the event to a loose, 78-cent screw shorting a circuit board.

Salute to Excellence Safety Award (Sponsor: BLR Aerospace)

Irina Sakgaev, applications manager at CHC Helicopter, is receiving the Safety Award for advancing rotorcraft safety education and awareness. Sakgaev has led the CHC Safety and Quality Summit since 2006, scaling it from an internal event to an industrywide forum that drew 450 attendees last year. The summit convenes operators, regulators, customers, and safety specialists across sectors, without exhibit halls or sponsor booths, to focus on collaboration and learning. Working with a volunteer CHC team, Sakgaev delivers 35 to 40 speakers and up to 100 workshops designed to produce practical "aha moments" that improve frontline operations.

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Lifetime Achievement Award (Sponsor: Bell)

Pete Gillies is honored for a lifetime of rotorcraft piloting skill, innovation, and instruction. Suffering from airsickness as a teen, Gillies nevertheless learned to fly and built a career spanning fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft. After a first helicopter attempt in 1967 went poorly, one lesson changed his course and he earned his commercial helicopter license that year. He went on to master advanced techniques, including the “cyclic back” response to engine failure, which is credited with saving lives and still taught today. A longtime Western Helicopters pilot and chief pilot, Gillies continues teaching at 93 through videos and lectures.

The Salute to Excellence recipients will be honored at VERTICON 2026, the world’s largest vertical aviation conference and trade show, being held at the Georgia World Congress Center, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, March 9–12 (exhibits open Mar. 10–12), 2026. For more information, visit verticalavi.org.

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Vertical Aviation International (VAI), formerly Helicopter Association International (HAI), is the world’s leading membership association dedicated to the vertical aviation industry, which encompasses all aircraft capable of vertical or short takeoffs and landings.

Throughout its 75-plus years of fueling industry growth through connection, advocacy, safety, education, and support for its members’ success, VAI has leveraged the power of vertical flight to strengthen communities worldwide. The association welcomes all facets of the vertical aviation industry, including manufacturers, operators, suppliers and vendors, pilots and maintenance technicians, and other aviation professionals. For more information about VAI, please visit: <https://verticalavi.org>.

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