

Remarks at Piasecki Heliplex Ceremony
Mike Hirschberg, Outgoing VFS Executive Director
May 31, 2023

Introduction by John Piasecki, CEO, Piasecki Aircraft Corporation:

The last speaker we have is Mike Hirschberg; he is a very dear friend of mine. Mike is the outgoing Executive Director of the Vertical Flight Society. The Vertical Flight Society is the premier organization that is for our profession. They've been existence since 1943. Our father was part of that founding group when they were called the American Helicopter Society. Today will be his last day as Executive Director of the Vertical Flight Society, and we're pleased to have incoming VFS Executive Director, Angelo Collins [as well]. Mike and Angelo, could you stand up? Angelo, welcome. Mike, come on up.

Mike has led VFS for the past 12 years, and he has truly been one of the most important catalysts for transformation of our industry from petroleum-burning helicopters to electric vertical flight to Future Vertical Lift. Mike has been at the forefront, advocating for the industry, and particularly, most of the battles that we joined together involved advocating with the US government for research and development funding. Mike's been a huge supporter in his capacity as Executive Director of VFS, a huge supporter of Piasecki, and a true friend for over two decades.

Mike, thank you so much for coming on your last day.

Mike Hirschberg:

Well, I couldn't have imagined a better swan song than being here today, so thanks so much, John.

It's such a pleasure to be here on such an auspicious occasion and to follow all these incredible talks today about the future of this facility and the future of our industry. I'm speaking last, so some of what I wanted to say has already been covered, but I want to emphasize a few points.

So, this is an historic facility here, the Heliplex, beginning with Peter Wright at Keystone Helicopters, who was also one of the key founders of the American Helicopter Museum and Education Center, not too far away from here in Westchester.

As John mentioned, the Vertical Flight Society was founded as the American Helicopter Society (AHS) in 1943, just as the American helicopter industry was taking off. The idea was something like the "Sikorsky Helicopter Club" for engineers only. But by the time the first meeting was held in Connecticut in February of 1943, it was expanded to include all of the pioneers of vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) aircraft from around the world. And that included members of industry, academia and government. And it's really that partnership that has always made AHS — and now VFS — so effective in advancing vertical flight technology. As John mentioned, we're the professional society for engineers, but [also] anybody interested in advancing technology for helicopters and VTOL aircraft. So if you're interested in advancing vertical flight, work with us to help create the future.

As John mentioned, Piasecki — both Frank and the company — were plank holders of the fledgling AHS. The PV-2 flew in early 1943, around the time that AHS was being founded. And because of the brain power, the work being done in Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia area, our First Annual Forum was held in Philadelphia, in 1944. Several more were held there in the early days, in the late '40s and early 1950s.

And we returned in 2019 with our 75th anniversary — the 75th Annual Forum — in Philadelphia. And Piasecki was kind enough to bring the Pathfinder II, which they restored, finished restoring, just for our event.

So, from one 80-year-old to another, thank you very much for being such an incredible, incredible supporter of VFS over these decades. Partnerships and collaboration is what makes the vertical flight industry so successful.

In 2014, VFS was the first organization in the world to really recognize the incredible transformative potential of electric vertical flight and other types of novel propulsion. And we held the world's first electric VTOL workshop — which Angela Collins helped to organize. Of course, John Piasecki spoke at the event and Piasecki Aircraft was the only sponsor of that event, where they really saw this new type of transformative vertical flight propulsion. And now look at it — everyone is convinced of this potential for electric VTOL, and convinced that it's a transformative capability.

In 2020, we started the working group on hydrogen electric propulsion for VTOL. And when we had our kickoff meeting, Piasecki employees were like a third of the attendees. Last year, we held what we think was the first hydrogen electric aviation conference in North America and maybe in the world. John was again a keynote and spoke again this year. [Both of] these years, Piasecki has continued to be a sponsor, to help us do these crazy ideas that no one else really thinks are really viable. You know, there's essentially very close to zero federal dollars going into hydrogen aviation, and it's really a shame. And there really ought to be more work in this area. So, it's left to these really incredible visionaries with John and Fred and the board of Piasecki to lead these things together.

John and I have worked closely together, as he mentioned, for the last 12 years or so advocating. John is the Vice Chair of the Vertical Lift Consortium, so advocating for more federal dollars for research and development for vertical takeoff and landing aircraft. And this has resulted in the Future Vertical Lift program, as well as also advocating together for additional funding for Vertical Lift Research Centers of Excellence [VLRCEs] — our universities like Penn State that are really doing not only the high-tech research, but producing the high-tech researchers of the future.

So, this is a pivotal time in the aerospace industry, when revolutionaries like Piasecki are leading the way for advanced vertical flight for cleaner, safer, quieter and more economical forms of air transportation. We're so pleased to be here to celebrate this important milestone for Piasecki and for the entire industry, and we're really impressed by the incredible technologies and partners that Piasecki has brought together to realize their incredible and disruptive vision.

Thank you very much.