

# The DCA Incident: *Assessing the Military's Role in the National Airspace Tragedy*



House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
Subcommittee on Military and Foreign Affairs

December 22, 2025

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- On March 13, 2025, the Subcommittee on Military and Foreign Affairs launched a bipartisan investigation into the U.S. military's use of airspace in the National Capital Region, following a fatal January 29, 2025, collision between a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter and American Airlines flight 5342 near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA) that killed 67 people.
- The goal of the Subcommittee's investigation was to understand how this fatal mid-air collision occurred and determine what failures – procedural, regulatory, or operational – within the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) may have contributed to the crash.
- The Subcommittee conducted three briefings with DoD to understand the nature of the situation.
- There were several missteps by the Black Hawk that led to the collision:
  - Failure to effectively communicate visual separation with the DCA tower.
  - Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) was turned off even though this flight was for training.
  - The Black Hawk pilot failed to follow air traffic controller instructions to change course.
  - Night vision goggles (NVGs) may have limited vision and depth perception.
- Following the crash, DoD made extra precautions.
  - Adjusted operations in response to FAA's permanent closure of Route 4<sup>1</sup> and restricted access of Route 1 and 5 around DCA.<sup>2</sup>
  - Expedited new hotline between DCA and DoD opening.
  - Limited flights in DCA airspace to only essential personnel.
  - Training routes have been changed and are required to have ADS-B operating.
- While changes around DCA and the National Capital Region (NCR) have occurred, there have been multiple instances of near collisions in airspace shared by civilian and military aircraft. Therefore, based on the investigative findings herein, the Subcommittee is recommending that the U.S. Department of Defense Inspector General conduct a comprehensive evaluation of all DoD operations in civilian airspace within the United States with an emphasis on safety, coordination, and compliance.

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<sup>1</sup> *FAA Statements on Midair Collision at Reagan Washington National Airport*, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (Aug. 8, 2025), available at <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faa-statements-midair-collision-reagan-washington-national-airport>.

<sup>2</sup> *FAA Updates Helicopter Routes, Zones at DCA, IAD and BWI*, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (Oct. 2, 2025), available at <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faa-updates-helicopter-routes-zones-dca-iad-and-bwi>.

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## INTRODUCTION

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On March 13, 2025, the Subcommittee on Military and Foreign Affairs launched a bipartisan investigation into the U.S. military's use of airspace in the National Capital Region (NCR).<sup>3</sup> This investigation followed an accident that took place on January 29, 2025, where a U.S. Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter and American Airlines flight 5342 collided near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA), resulting in the deaths of sixty-seven people.<sup>4</sup> According to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), there have been thirty near mid-air collisions since 1987 around DCA, with one-third of those incidents involving military aircraft and seven involving helicopters.<sup>5</sup>

Washington, D.C.'s airspace is among the most complex and heavily regulated in the nation.<sup>6</sup> DCA operates within the tightly controlled Flight Restricted Zone (FRZ), making it one of the busiest and most sensitive airspaces in the country.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) plays a critical role in managing and securing this airspace, with military aircraft frequently conducting operations in and around the NCR.<sup>8</sup> Missions range from routine training and transport to air defense and emergency response,<sup>9</sup> all of which require precise coordination with civilian aviation authorities to ensure safety and operational effectiveness.

The goal of the Subcommittee's investigation was to understand how this fatal mid-air collision occurred and determine what failures – procedural, regulatory, or operational – within DoD may have contributed to the crash.<sup>10</sup> Under the leadership of Chairman William Timmons (R-SC) and Ranking Member Suhas Subramanyam (D-VA), the Subcommittee held three briefings with DoD and military representatives to scrutinize shortcomings in operational procedures, assess risks posed by military activity near DCA, evaluate the effectiveness of current risk mitigations, and examine any corrective measures implemented since the crash.

The Subcommittee received its first briefing on May 1, 2025.<sup>11</sup> Chairman Timmons and Ranking Member Subramanyam issued a joint statement following the briefing:

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from William Timmons & Suhas Subramanyam, Subcomm. on Mil. & Foreign Affs., H. Comm. on Oversight and Gov't Reform, to Hon. Pete Hegseth, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of Def. (Mar. 13, 2025) *available at* <https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/DOD-on-DCA-Crash-Briefing-Letter69.pdf> [hereinafter "Letter to Pete Hegseth"].

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Wong, *Rate of near-midair collisions are high around DCA. What does that mean for travelers?*, USA TODAY (Feb. 4, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Trevor Hughes, *Why the airspace near Reagan Washington National Airport has long been a concern*, USA TODAY (updated Jan. 30, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Restricted Airspace, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION, *available at* <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/restricted-airspace-0>.

<sup>8</sup> PowerPoint from U.S. Dep't of Def. (received May 1, 2025, on file with the Subcommittee).

<sup>9</sup> The Army Aviation Brigade, *Mission Statement*, JOINT TASK FORCE-NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION AND THE U.S. ARMY MILITARY DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON, *available at* <https://jtfncr.mdw.army.mil/TAAB/>.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Pete Hegseth, *supra* n. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Briefing by Brigadier General Braman, Former Dir. for Army Aviation, Tim Dill, Former Perf. Duties of Dep. Under Sec'y of Def. for Readiness. & Peter Belk, Principal Deputy Assistant Sec'y of Def. for Readiness, Dep't of Def., to Subcomm. on the Mil. and Foreign Aff. (May 1, 2025) [hereinafter "May 1 DoD Brief"].

***“The U.S. Department of Defense, in coordination with the Federal Aviation Administration, has adjusted procedures around DCA to reduce risk while the investigation continues. The Military and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee plans to continue monitoring the investigation’s progress and ensure that the U.S. Department of Defense strengthens the safety of its operations in the National Capital Region.”***

That same afternoon, May 1, 2025, another incident occurred involving a UH-60M Black Hawk approaching the Pentagon.<sup>12</sup> While the helicopter was broadcasting its signal, military air traffic controllers temporarily lost both radar and radio contact with it.<sup>13</sup> Military air traffic controllers were unable to contact air traffic controllers at DCA due to previously unrealized systemic issues.<sup>14</sup> This failure in communication led DCA air traffic controllers to order go-arounds for two commercial flights out of precaution.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, all Pentagon-area helicopter operations were temporarily paused while the Army and FAA improved flight-tracking coordination between the Pentagon tower and DCA.<sup>16</sup> Chairman Timmons and Ranking Member Subramanyam swiftly called for another briefing to understand if a troubling pattern involving military aircraft operating in congested airspace around DCA was beginning to emerge.<sup>17</sup> In just a few short months, there had been a catastrophic collision and a separate near-miss event due to communication failures between Pentagon air traffic control and DCA’s tower.

These incidents underscored systemic vulnerabilities in how military flights are coordinated in this highly regulated and sensitive airspace. The findings in this report reveal significant lapses in both operational judgment and coordination between military and civilian aviation authorities. While the DoD has taken some corrective actions following FAA mandates, the scale and severity of recent incidents demand further scrutiny and continued oversight to ensure the safety of all aircraft operating in one of the nation’s most congested and sensitive airspaces. As part of a lawsuit brought against American Airlines, the United States admitted that failures by the Army and the pilots of the Black Hawk contributed to needless loss, an admission formally made December 17, 2025, well after the incident.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Army Public Affairs, *Army completes review of May 1 DCA flight event*, U.S. ARMY, (May 23, 2025) available at [https://www.army.mil/article/285785/army\\_completes\\_review\\_of\\_may\\_1\\_dca\\_flight\\_event](https://www.army.mil/article/285785/army_completes_review_of_may_1_dca_flight_event). [hereinafter “Army Public Affairs”].

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> Ian Duncan, *National Airport, Pentagon hotline had been disconnected for three years*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Updated May 14, 2025) [hereinafter “Ian Duncan”].

<sup>15</sup> Army Public Affairs, *supra* n. 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> Briefing by Brigadier General Braman, Former Dir. for Army Aviation & Peter Belk, Principal Deputy Assistant Sec’y of Def. for Readiness, Dep’t of Def., to Subcomm. on the Mil. and Foreign Aff. (May 7, 2025) [hereinafter “May 7 DoD Brief”].

<sup>18</sup> *Rachel Crafton v. American Airlines, Inc.*, No. 1:25-cv-03382, (D.D.C. Dec. 17, 2025).

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## FINDINGS

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### *MISSTEPS LEADING TO COLLISION*

On March 11, 2025, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released its Aviation Investigation Preliminary Report.<sup>19</sup> The findings of this report indicate that discrepancies in altitudes were reported by the pilot and the instructor pilot of the Black Hawk.<sup>20</sup> According to the NTSB's review of Cockpit Voice Recorder Data (CVR), there were likely communication issues between the Black Hawk and the tower.<sup>21</sup> NTSB says that radio transmissions from the tower stating that the Canadair Regional Jet (CRJ) was "circling" to Runway 33 are not heard on the Black Hawk's CVR and may not have been received by the crew.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the report mentions that seventeen seconds before the collision, the tower directed the Black Hawk to "pass behind the" CRJ.<sup>23</sup> However, according to the helicopter's CVR, a portion of "pass behind the" may not have been heard by the crew.<sup>24</sup>

According to the *New York Times*' investigation, one of the pilots of the Black Hawk asked the tower for approval to employ what is known as "visual separation."<sup>25</sup> Visual separation, when applied by a pilot, requires that the pilot take responsibility for navigating and maintaining sight of other aircraft.<sup>26</sup> However, the Black Hawk, in coordination with the tower, could not execute visual separation properly.<sup>27</sup> The NTSB's review suggests several factors likely contributed to this failure, including the vision deficiencies with NVGs, ADS-B Out not transmitting, and the Army's lack of standardized procedures for navigating FAA routes and the airspace surrounding DCA.<sup>28</sup>

NVGs make it especially difficult to see peripherally and during flights with excessive bright light, like that seen coming from Washington and DCA.<sup>29</sup> In an investigative hearing held by NTSB, Dr. Stephen Casner, a human factors expert, testified that when an aircraft is approaching head-on, it will not appear to be moving closer, and approaching aircraft often looks the same as buildings and other objects while wearing NVGs, making it extremely difficult for pilots to detect oncoming traffic.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, NVGs make it nearly impossible to detect color,

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<sup>19</sup> Elise Hammond et al., *NTSB makes 'urgent safety recommendations' after deadly DC plane crash*, CNN (updated Mar. 11, 2025, 6:11 PM EDT).

<sup>20</sup> Nat'l Transp. Safety Bd., DCA25MA108, Aviation Investigation Preliminary Report, at p. 4 (Mar. 11, 2025) [hereinafter "NTSB Preliminary Report"].

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at p. 5, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Kate Kelley & Mark Walker, *Missteps, Equipment Problems and a Common but Risky Practice Led to a Fatal Crash*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (updated April 28, 2025) [hereinafter "Kate Kelley & Mark Walker"].

<sup>26</sup> Federal Aviation Administration, Aeronautical Information Manual, § 5-5-12 (2025) available at [https://www.faa.gov/air\\_traffic/publications/atpubs/aim\\_html/chap5\\_section\\_5.html](https://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications/atpubs/aim_html/chap5_section_5.html).

<sup>27</sup> Kate Kelley & Mark Walker, *supra* n. 25.

<sup>28</sup> NTSB Preliminary Report, *supra* n. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Kate Kelley & Mark Walker, *supra* n. 25.

<sup>30</sup> *Investigative Hearing: Midair Collision PSA Airlines Bombardier CRJ700 Airplane and Sikorsky UH-60 Military Helicopter*, Nat'l Transp. Safety Bd (Jul. 30-Aug. 1, 2025) (testimony of Stephen Casner, aviation and human

which is critical when trying to detect the red and green anti-collision lights positioned on the side of aircraft.<sup>31</sup> During a briefing with DoD, Subcommittee Chairman Timmons also confirmed the limited scope of visibility with NVGs at DCA due to city lights.<sup>32</sup>

On the night of the collision, ADS-B Out was not transmitting on the Black Hawk, preventing other aircraft and the public from detecting it.<sup>33</sup> Rick Dressler of Metro Aviation, which operates medical helicopters, stated during the NTSB hearing that his company's goal of maintaining “extra vigilance” while transporting critically ill passengers is “an extreme challenge when those aircraft [military helicopters] are not usually transmitting ADS-B” meaning the company “can’t see them on his traffic system” and has to rely on see and avoid methods.<sup>34</sup> The NTSB’s investigation is still ongoing, and it is still being evaluated whether having ADS-B Out transmitting would have made a difference on the night of the collision.<sup>35</sup> However, in response to a bill introduced by Senator Ted Cruz to mandate ADS-B Out for all aircraft operating in controlled airspace, NTSB Chairwoman Jennifer Homendy stated the bill’s ADS-B Out requirement would “save lives.”<sup>36</sup>

The NTSB investigation<sup>37</sup> and briefings with Subcommittee members<sup>38</sup> also reveal that the Army often lacks certain knowledge of the DCA airspace and should implement additional protocols and training for operating in the high-traffic airspace. Chief Warrant Officer Five David Van Vechten stated during the NTSB hearing that Army Black Hawk pilots are not trained on fixed-wing aircraft approaches to DCA runways, and this is based on “personal knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> Additionally, when asked if there was a unit he was concerned about, Dressler of Metro Aviation, stated that when flying, the 12th Aviation Battalion, the unit of the U.S. Army Aviation Branch to which the Black Hawk was assigned, make his company “uncomfortable” due to what he described as “gross misunderstandings” of the airspace, including instances of military helicopters landing on MedSTAR helipads without prior notice.<sup>40</sup>

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factors research author; retired NASA Ames Employee), *available at* <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA25MA108.aspx>.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> May 1 DoD Brief, *supra* n. 11

<sup>33</sup> Ayesha Ali, *Deadly DC plane crash was years in the making, air traffic manager tells NTSB*, ABC NEWS (Aug. 2, 2025).

<sup>34</sup> *Investigative Hearing: Midair Collision PSA Airlines Bombardier CRJ700 Airplane and Sikorsky UH-60 Military Helicopter*, Nat’l Transp. Safety Bd (Jul. 30-Aug. 1, 2025) (testimony of Rick Dressler, Aviation Site Manager-MedSTAR Transport, Metro Aviation), *available at* <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA25MA108.aspx>. [hereinafter “Testimony of Rick Dressler”].

<sup>35</sup> *Investigative Hearing: Midair Collision PSA Airlines Bombardier CRJ700 Airplane and Sikorsky UH-60 Military Helicopter*, Nat’l Transp. Safety Bd (Jul. 30-Aug. 1, 2025), *available at* <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA25MA108.aspx>. [hereinafter “NTSB Investigative Hearing”].

<sup>36</sup> Oriana Pawlyk, *Ted Cruz looks to force changes to military flights near airports, after deadly airline crash*, POLITICO (Jul. 29, 2025).

<sup>37</sup> NTSB Investigative Hearing, *supra* n. 35.

<sup>38</sup> May 1 DoD Brief & May 7 DoD Brief, *supra* n. 11 & 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Investigative Hearing: Midair Collision PSA Airlines Bombardier CRJ700 Airplane and Sikorsky UH-60 Military Helicopter*, Nat’l Transp. Safety Bd (Jul. 30-Aug. 1, 2025) (testimony of Chief Warrant Officer five David Van Vechten, Pilot, U.S. Army Brigade), *available at* <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA25MA108.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> Testimony of Rick Dressler, *supra* n. 34.



During the NTSB investigative hearing, an NTSB official stated that during their investigation, the commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion believed flying below the altitude published for Route 4, the previously designated helicopter corridor with limited separation from Runway 33, would keep him safe from arriving commercial traffic.<sup>41</sup> Earlier in the same NTSB hearing, however, an FAA representative explained that these routes have no defined lateral bounds, and any firm boundaries are expected to be set by air traffic control.<sup>42</sup> The FAA has also acknowledged that its guidelines are unclear and need to be updated.<sup>43</sup> In the aforementioned DoD briefing with the Subcommittee, officials emphasized a position identical to the FAA: that DoD helicopters are to follow FAA-established routes while operating under the positive control of air traffic control.<sup>44</sup> Taken together, these statements highlight an underlying inconsistency in how responsibilities and expectations are understood, raising questions about the procedures DoD pilots follow.

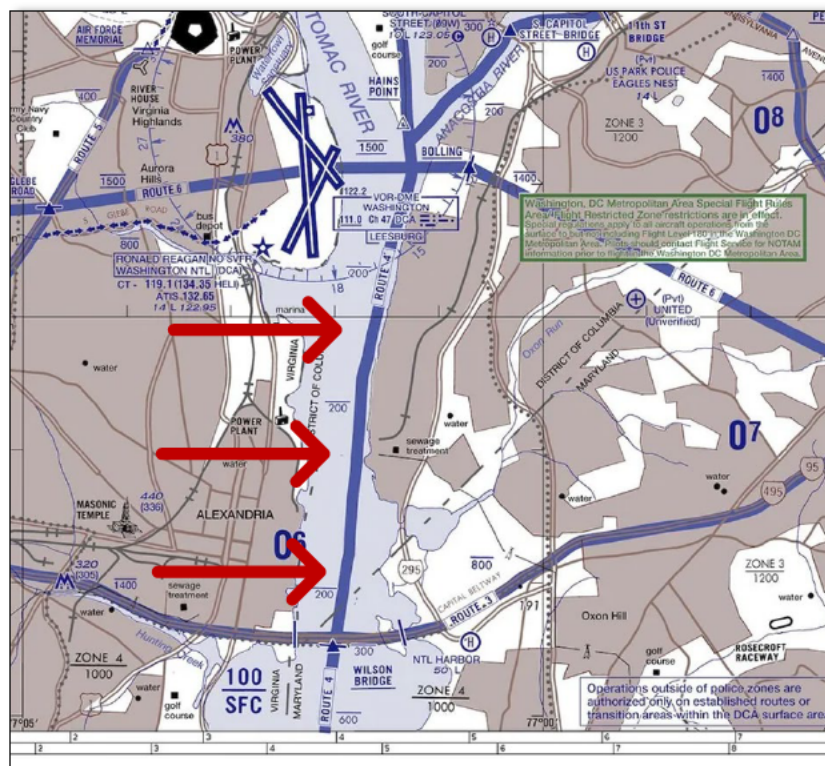


Figure 1: Map of Route 4.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *Investigative Hearing: Midair Collision PSA Airlines Bombardier CRJ700 Airplane and Sikorsky UH-60 Military Helicopter*, Nat'l Transp. Safety Bd (Jul. 30-Aug. 1, 2025) (statement of William Bramble, Investigator, NTSB), available at <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA25MA108.aspx>.

<sup>42</sup> *Investigative Hearing: Midair Collision PSA Airlines Bombardier CRJ700 Airplane and Sikorsky UH-60 Military Helicopter*, Nat'l Transp. Safety Bd (Jul. 30-Aug. 1, 2025) (testimony of Katie Murphy, Manager of Visual Charting, FAA), available at <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA25MA108.aspx>.

<sup>43</sup> *Investigative Hearing: Midair Collision PSA Airlines Bombardier CRJ700 Airplane and Sikorsky UH-60 Military Helicopter*, Nat'l Transp. Safety Bd (Jul. 30-Aug. 1, 2025) (testimony of Nick Fuller, Acting Deputy Chief Operating Officer, FAA) available at <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA25MA108.aspx>.

<sup>44</sup> May 1 DoD Brief, *supra* n. 11.

<sup>45</sup> *Helicopter Route Chart Baltimore-Washington*. FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (Effective Feb. 20, 2025), available at [https://aeronav.faa.gov/visual/02-20-2025/PDFs/Balt-Wash\\_Heli.pdf](https://aeronav.faa.gov/visual/02-20-2025/PDFs/Balt-Wash_Heli.pdf) (*emphasis added*).



## *Pentagon Taking Extra Precautions Following FAA Mandates*

The FAA has significantly restricted the airspace surrounding DCA in the aftermath of the collision, implementing permanent changes affecting military operations.<sup>46</sup> This includes permanently eliminating the use of Route 4, which intersects the approach path of Runway 33.<sup>47</sup> Military transport flights have also been tightly limited. Under the new policy, these flights are now reserved exclusively for aircraft carrying general officers who hold a rank of three stars and above.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, the FAA is mandating ADS-B Out to be turned on for all flights with very limited exceptions in the DCA Class B airspace.<sup>49</sup> These carve-outs are defined as “active national security missions,”<sup>50</sup> and while the rule is intended to close critical safety gaps, its lack of specificity unfortunately still allows for an unknown number of military aircraft to operate without broadcasting their position.<sup>51</sup>

## *DoD to DCA Hotline*

Despite the Pentagon halting military helicopter flights around DCA following the January 29<sup>th</sup> incident, on Thursday, May 1<sup>st</sup>, two commercial airliners landing at DCA were forced to conduct a “go-around” to avoid colliding with a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter inbound to the Pentagon.<sup>52</sup> This flight, also operated by the 12th Aviation Battalion, was classified by the FAA’s assistant administrator for government and industry affairs, Chris Senn, as a “loss of separation.”<sup>53</sup> Senn also wrote in a verified internal email that the Black Hawk chose to “take a scenic route around the Pentagon versus preceding directly from the west to the heliport.”<sup>54</sup> While go-arounds are routine for aircraft operations due to weather or runway obstructions, it is alarming that elements leading to the January 29<sup>th</sup> incident had reoccurred, despite efforts by the FAA and DoD to prevent it.

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<sup>46</sup> *FAA Statement on Updated DCA Helicopter Charts*, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (Jun. 12, 2025), available at [https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faq-statement-updated-dca-helicopter-charts?utm\\_](https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faq-statement-updated-dca-helicopter-charts?utm_)

<sup>47</sup> *FAA Statements on Midair Collision at Reagan Washington National Airport*, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (Aug. 8, 2025), available at [https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faq-statements-midair-collision-reagan-washington-national-airport?utm\\_](https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faq-statements-midair-collision-reagan-washington-national-airport?utm_)

<sup>48</sup> Tara Copp, *Army adjusts tracker policy and flight training following January collision with passenger jet*, AP NEWS (Updated April 8, 2025).

<sup>49</sup> May 1 DoD Brief, *supra* n. 11.

<sup>50</sup> David Shephardson and Idrees Ali, *US Army turns over helicopter safety memo to Congress*, REUTERS (April 10, 2025)

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

<sup>52</sup> Alexandra Koch et al., *Two planes do 'go-arounds' to avoid military helicopter near Reagan Washington National Airport*, FOX NEWS (last updated May 3, 2025, 4:09 am EDT).

<sup>53</sup> Oriana Pawlyk, *FAA: Army helicopter taking 'scenic route' near Reagan National forces two passenger jets to shift course*, POLITICO (May 2, 2025).

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

In May of 2025, Franklin McIntosh, Deputy Chief Operations Officer of the FAA, testified to the Senate Commerce Committee that a critical hotline between the Pentagon and DCA controllers had been disconnected since March of 2022.

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*“I believe the DoD maintains that hotline. But I think the next question would be why were we not aware of it and insist upon it being fixed. So, we take safety responsibilities extremely seriously in the FAA and those were the questions we were asking. And we were not aware, but we became aware after that event. And now that we became aware of that event, we are insisting upon that line to be fixed before we resume any operations out of the Pentagon... We still have landline abilities; we can still make phone calls from the helipad to the operation supervisor or even the controller in charge can answer.”*

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*Quote by Mr. Franklin McIntosh.*<sup>55</sup>

This hotline, maintained by DoD, was severed during the construction of a new air traffic control tower at the Pentagon. Previously, the hotline was used to allow for seamless communication between the Pentagon’s air traffic controllers and DCA’s.<sup>56</sup> While the hotline’s disconnection alone may not have led to the January 29<sup>th</sup> incident, it does represent broader breakdowns of critical air traffic coordination, communication, and systemic failures.

FAA Aviation officials only discovered the hotline was offline after the May 1 incident, when two commercial jets were forced to abandon their approaches due to the Army Black Hawk.<sup>57</sup> According to McIntosh, during his testimony, the Pentagon and DCA were still able to reach each other by phone line, but this should be a “last resort.”<sup>58</sup> McIntosh further stated during the Senate Commerce hearing that the FAA is insisting upon the line being fixed before resuming any further operations out of the Pentagon.<sup>59</sup>

According to DoD, there were no gaps in operations while the hotline was disconnected.<sup>60</sup> General Mathew Braman, former Director of Army Aviation, during a briefing with the Committee, relayed that a supplemental phone line at a temporary tower had been in use to maintain communication with DCA while construction occurred.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *FAA Reauthorization One Year Later: Aviation Safety, Air Traffic, and Next Generation Technology*. 119<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1 (statement of Mr. Franklin McIntosh, Deputy Chief Operating Officer, FAA) [hereinafter “Statement of Franklin McIntosh”].

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> Ian Duncan, *supra* n. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Statement of Franklin McIntosh, *supra* n. 54.

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> Briefing by Brigadier General Braman, Former Dir. for Army Aviation & Peter Belk, Principal Deputy Assistant Sec’y of Def. for Readiness, Dep’t of Def., to Subcomm. on the Mil. and Foreign Aff. (Jun. 5, 2025).

<sup>61</sup> *Id.*

In an interview with the *Associated Press*, however, Braman noted additional technical failures.<sup>62</sup> He stated that air traffic controllers at the Pentagon lost contact with the Black Hawk for nearly 20 seconds due to the faulty placement of a temporary antenna that was set up during construction.<sup>63</sup> The antenna in its former position could not maintain contact with the helicopter as it flew low and rounded the Pentagon for landing.<sup>64</sup> The antenna has since been moved to the roof of the Pentagon.<sup>65</sup> Braman also reported, however, that FAA controllers at the DCA tower were receiving data from multiple outlets and coming back inconclusive, including the Black Hawk,<sup>66</sup> which was transmitting ADS-B.<sup>67</sup>

### *NATIONAL MILITARY AND CIVILIAN INCIDENTS SINCE THE COLLISION*

On July 19, 2025, a SkyWest Embraer ERJ-175 had a near miss with a B-52 assigned to Minot Air Force Base. The SkyWest pilot was prompted to make an aggressive maneuver and a go-around to avoid collision with the B-52 aircraft while attempting to land in Minot, North Dakota.<sup>68</sup> The incident is well known because of a video recorded by a passenger of the pilot's announcement explaining the maneuver.<sup>69</sup>

Unlike this event, which was publicized, many events may remain unreported or anonymously reported.<sup>70</sup> Near misses may go unreported for several reasons, including errors in depth perception, lack of detection, or outcome bias, where a pilot feels less inclined to report the incident when the incident ends without apparent harm.<sup>71</sup>

The Aviation Safety Report System (ASRS), an online database managed by NASA, gives aircraft operators and controllers a safe place to anonymously report incidents.<sup>72</sup> Since the recent collision, newly released ASRS reports reference a range of concerning issues just at DCA: an airborne conflict with a drone,<sup>73</sup> an last-minute instructed go-around that left the pilot confused about how air traffic control was handling what was presumed to be helicopter traffic,<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Tara Copp, *Pentagon lost contact with Army helicopter on flight that caused jets to nix landings at DC airport*, AP (Updated May 23, 2025).

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

<sup>64</sup> *Id.*

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*

<sup>67</sup> *Army completes review of May 1 DCA flight event*, U.S. ARMY (May 23, 2025) available at [https://www.army.mil/article/285785/army\\_completes\\_review\\_of\\_may\\_1\\_dca\\_flight\\_event](https://www.army.mil/article/285785/army_completes_review_of_may_1_dca_flight_event)

<sup>68</sup> David Shepardson & Phil Steward, *FAA investigating SkyWest jets near miss with B-52 bomber over North Dakota*, REUTERS (Jul. 21, 2025).

<sup>69</sup> *B-52 bomber that nearly collided with airliner in North Dakota almost hit another plane seconds later, NTSB says*, CBS NEWS (updated Aug. 28, 2025).

<sup>70</sup> Luigi Raphael Dy & John Mott, *Evaluating near midair collision reporting systems using aircraft surveillance data: A case study at a university airport*, SCIENCE DIRECT (Published online Sep. 14, 2025).

<sup>71</sup> *Id.*

<sup>72</sup> Jim Alexander, *NASA's ASRS an Effective Tool for Improving Unmanned Aviation Safety*, UNIV. OF MARYLAND SCH. OF ENGINEERING (Sep. 13, 2021).

<sup>73</sup> AVIATION SAFETY REPORTING SYSTEM, ACN: 2233318 (April 2025) available at <https://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/search/database.html>

<sup>74</sup> AVIATION SAFETY REPORTING SYSTEM, ACN: 2251952, (June 2025) available at <https://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/search/database.html>

and an unidentified helicopter self-reported by a pilot to be approximately 200 ft within a commercial aircraft—without any warning from air traffic control.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> AVIATION SAFETY REPORTING SYSTEM, ACN: 2219737 (Mar. 2025) *available at* <https://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/search/database.html>



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## ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE SUBCOMMITTEE

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- **March 13, 2025**, the Committee sent Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth a bipartisan letter requesting further information on the January 29<sup>th</sup> incident, as well as current DoD procedures relating to the crash, and steps that the DoD is taking to ensure that this type of incident does not happen again.<sup>76</sup>
- **March 21, 2025**, Committee staff were provided an initial briefing by DoD civilian staff on the ongoing investigation being conducted by the DoD relating to the January 29<sup>th</sup> incident.
- **May 1, 2025**, Mr. Peter Belk, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness and Brigadier General Braman, USA, Director for Army Aviation, provided a briefing on the January 29<sup>th</sup> incident to members of the Subcommittee on Military and Foreign Affairs.
- **May 1, 2025**, Subcommittee Chairman Timmons and Ranking Member Subramanyam issued a joint statement on the interagency coordination and changes to flight procedures following the January 29<sup>th</sup> incident.<sup>77</sup>
- **May 7, 2025**, Mr. Peter Belk, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness and Brigadier General Braman, USA, Director for Army Aviation, provided an update to members of the Subcommittee on Military and Foreign Affairs following reports of go-arounds taking place on May 1, 2025, due to a military helicopter in the vicinity of DCA flight operations.
- **June 5, 2025**, Mr. Peter Belk, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness and Brigadier General Braman, USA, Director for Army Aviation, provided an update on the DoD's investigation into the January 29<sup>th</sup> incident to members of the Subcommittee on Military and Foreign Affairs.

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<sup>76</sup> Letter to Pete Hegseth, *Supra*, n. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Press Release, Timmons and Subramanyam Statement on DCA Crash Briefing (May 1, 2025), H. Comm. on Oversight and Gov't Reform.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on these findings, the Subcommittee is recommending the U.S. Department of Defense Inspector General conduct a broad evaluation of DoD's use of U.S. civilian airspace and adherence to established safety protocols. This review should examine the extent and circumstances under which DoD aircraft operate in or near civilian-controlled airspace, assess compliance with FAA regulations and federal aviation safety standards, and evaluate coordination mechanisms with civilian air traffic authorities. The Inspector General should also review incident reporting practices, oversight responsibilities, and whether lessons learned from prior aviation incidents have been effectively implemented. Such an evaluation would provide Congress and the public with an independent assessment of risks and opportunities to strengthen safety in shared airspace.

Additionally, the Subcommittee recommends the following targeted evaluations and clarifications for DoD broadly:

1. Review methods and efficiency of communication between Pentagon air traffic controllers and those at DCA, identifying any gaps.
2. Evaluate the overall effectiveness, staffing, and procedures of Pentagon air traffic control operations, including how they may fall behind FAA controllers.
3. Assess training programs for all DoD aviators operating in the NCR, focusing on identifying knowledge gaps.
4. Clarify and define what constitutes the temporary deactivation of ADS-B out for "national security events."
5. Conduct risk analysis of military operations in the shared airspace, identify potential high-risk scenarios, and provide mitigation training to reduce the risk of a potential event.
6. Evaluate the reliability and the limitations of onboard navigation systems and anti-collision systems, as well as ensuring their routine maintenance.

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## CONCLUSION

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The Subcommittee on Military and Foreign Affairs will continue to monitor the NTSB investigation as well as relevant FAA and DoD directives regarding the collision at DCA. This tragic incident has highlighted the significant hazards inherent in military operations within the busy, mixed-use airspace. It underscores the critical importance of strict military compliance with FAA regulations, implementation of NTSB recommendations, and the adoption of best practices and safety measures.

Going forward, the Army should place greater emphasis on training aviation personnel to navigate and have knowledge of complex airspace. Additionally, Army aviation personnel should also be trained proficiently in the operations of fixed-wing aircraft in the area. The Subcommittee's investigation, along with the NTSB's findings, has made clear that current military practices rely too heavily on personal experience rather than standardized procedures and formal training.

This incident demonstrates the urgent need for clearer guidelines, enhanced training, and systematic audits of agency flight operations and capabilities. Addressing these shortcomings is essential for strengthening coordination between military and civilian authorities and preventing future tragedies in one of the nation's most complex and congested airspaces. Ultimately, the lessons learned must catalyze lasting improvements across military aviation operations. The Subcommittee remains highly committed to this investigation and will continue to work towards promoting the safety of all who fly in the nation's airspaces.