

# The Washington Post

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SU V1 V2 V3 V4

Rain 55/44 • Tomorrow: Partly sunny 52/29 B6

Democracy Dies in Darkness

FRIDAY, JANUARY 31, 2025 • \$4

All 64 people on plane and 3 on Army helicopter are dead

National Airport's control tower was understaffed at time of collision

Busy airspace had been scene of close call one day earlier

## Disaster in crowded skies



ALLISON ROBERT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

### YEARS OF WARNINGS ON AREA'S SAFETY

2 air traffic controllers were doing double duty

This article is by Katie Shepherd, Aaron C. Davis, Victoria Crava, Olivia George and Ian Duncan

The air traffic control tower at Reagan National Airport was understaffed on Wednesday evening when a passenger plane and a military helicopter collided in midair, according to a government report about the circumstances surrounding the disaster that killed 67 people and sparked renewed debate around the airport's crowded airspace.

According to the report, described to The Washington Post, two people were handling the jobs of four among other colleagues inside National's control tower at the time of the collision. The control tower staffing levels, the report concludes, were "not normal" for the time of day or the amount of air traffic over D.C., where an average of more than 100 helicopters a day zip around and underneath arriving and departing airline flights.

SEE CRASH ON A6

### Trump baselessly blames federal diversity efforts

BY ISAAC ARNSDORF

First responders were still recovering bodies from the Potomac River on Thursday when President Donald Trump told the nation that his predecessors, Democrats and diversity were to blame for Wednesday night's fatal collision of an Army helicopter and an American Airlines passenger plane landing at Reagan National Airport.

Within five minutes of asking for a moment of silence for the victims, Trump pivoted to his political agenda, notably his promises to shrink the federal workforce and eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion programs from all agencies. The president told reporters he had seen no evidence to attribute the crash to changes in hiring standards for air traffic controllers.

"It just could have been," he said. "Because I have common sense."

SEE TRUMP ON A7

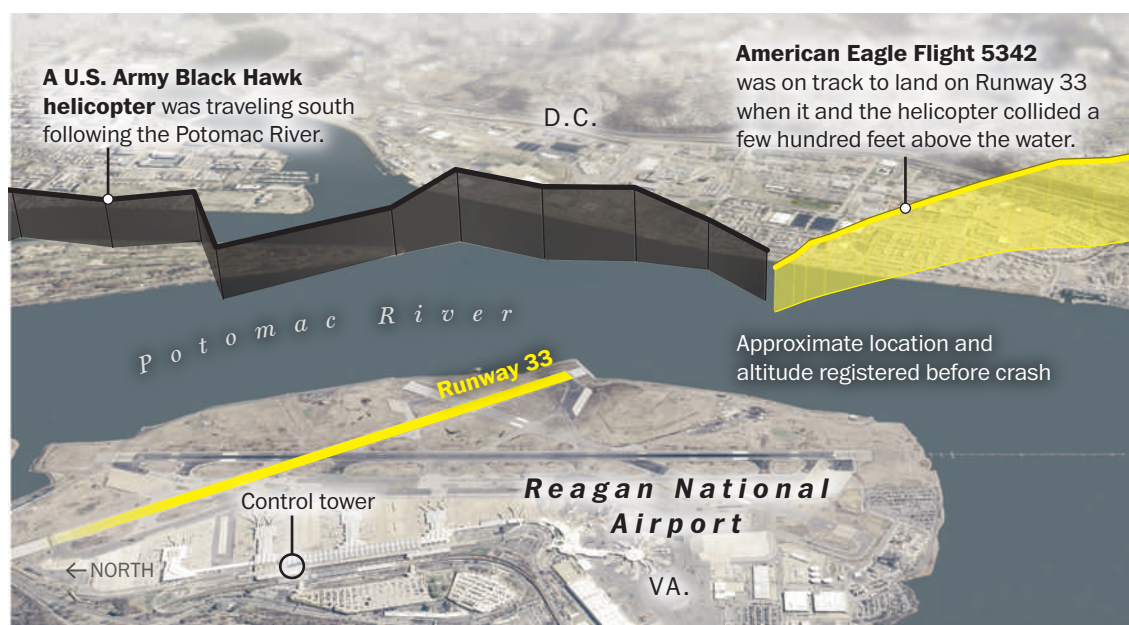
An American Airlines plane takes off from Reagan National Airport on Thursday as crews search the Potomac River amid the wreckage of the previous night's crash.



TRAVIS HEYING/AP

Lily Wu, the mayor of Wichita, from which the plane that crashed had departed, participates in a prayer vigil in her city Thursday.

The victims: Figure skating veterans, a young competitor in the sport, a flight crew member and a Black Hawk crew chief are among the dead. A9



Source: Flight data is from ADS-B Exchange. The data for the Black Hawk helicopter is approximate based on signals received by various ground stations. Satellite imagery from Airbus via Google Earth.

### Figure skating community reels from the loss of athletes, coaches

BY EMMA UBER, NATALIA ABBAKUMOVA, LEO SANDS AND LES CARPENTER

The country's figure skating community mourned Thursday in the wake of news that young athletes, coaches and family members made up as much as a third of the 60 passengers on the American Airlines flight that crashed into the Potomac River on Wednesday night.

U.S. Figure Skating, the sport's national governing body, did not specify a number but said "several" members of its community

were on the Washington-bound flight from Wichita, where the national championships took place last week. Subsequent announcements throughout the day from clubs, family members and fellow skaters revealed the identities of many of the victims.

D.C. Fire Chief John Donnelly Sr. said at a news briefing Thursday morning, "We don't believe there are any survivors from this accident," and search-and-rescue teams pivoted to recovery operations later in the day.

Neither the airline nor aviation authorities had published an

SEE VICTIMS ON A9

### Before tragedy, helicopter flights had been tied to close calls

BY LORI ARATANI, CAROL D. LEONNIG, IAN DUNCAN AND MICHAEL LARIS

On Tuesday night, just 24 hours before a deadly collision between a military helicopter and a regional jet at Reagan National Airport, a different passenger jet coming in for a landing at the airport alerted the tower it had to abort. The reason: risk of possible collision with a helicopter.

A similar situation played out less than a week earlier, on Jan. 23, when a flight from Charlotte suddenly pulled out of its approach at

National. The captain told passengers he was tracking a helicopter and needed to abort the landing.

"They had to circle back around because there was a helicopter in the flight path," Richard Hart, a passenger returning from a business trip, recalled the pilot announcing. "At the time I found it odd. . . . Now I find it disturbingly tragic."

The two scrubbed landings within a week illustrate the heightened danger posed by frequent military helicopter flights adjacent to the busy airport, which have been the source of

SEE HELICOPTERS ON A8

### Midair crash at thriving hub frays mesh of military, civilian aviation

BY DAN LAMOTHE, ALEX HORTON AND MISSY RYAN

The Army Black Hawk rumbled through dark skies over the Potomac River on Wednesday night using a route so common for military pilots that many consider it an aerial highway. Just a few hundred feet above the icy water, the chopper — call sign PAT25 — was wrapping up what Pentagon officials said was annual proficiency training for one of the three aviators on board.

Then disaster struck. At 8:47 p.m., the helicopter and

American Eagle Flight 5342 collided over the river as the passenger jet, carrying 64 people, was on final approach to Reagan National Airport. A fireball erupted in the night, debris rained down — and the longtime, carefully choreographed ballet between rotary aircraft and the increasingly bustling D.C.-area airport collapsed.

The catastrophe killed everyone aboard the jet and all three soldiers on the helicopter, and it immediately raised questions about the close proximity in which aircraft soar over the busy skies of the nation's capital. For decades,

SEE MILITARY ON A11

### IN THE NEWS

**Funding freeze fiasco** White House officials rushed to clean up the confusion and regain their footing amid the chaos reminiscent of Donald Trump's first-term travel ban. A3

**Russian environmental crisis** The Kremlin's slow reaction to an oil spill blackening beaches in Crimea and Russia's Krasnodar region has many of its citizens fuming. A12

**THE ECONOMY** Trump's quick win in a showdown with Colombia over migrants could undermine the U.S. dollar's global primacy. A15

**THE REGION** A D.C. landlord is accused of discrimination by renting only to tenants with subsidies. B1

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### Bipartisan doubt over Gabbard; Patel gets GOP embrace

BY ISAAC STANLEY-BECKER, JEREMY ROEBUCK, ELLEN NAKASHIMA AND WARREN P. STROBEL

In a pair of confirmation hearings Thursday for roles overseeing American intelligence and law enforcement agencies, Tulsi Gabbard faced bipartisan skepticism of her suitability to serve as President Donald Trump's director of national intelligence, while

### Senators question key national security picks

Kash Patel, the nominee for FBI director, appeared to have the support he will need to advance despite vocal opposition from Democrats.

Gabbard and Patel, who appeared before the Senate Intelli-

gence Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee, respectively, faced questions about their judgment and qualifications for two key national security positions, and about their loyalty to Trump.

Senators repeatedly pressured Gabbard to label Edward Snowden a "traitor" for exposing sensitive U.S. surveillance programs more than a decade ago.

SEE HEARINGS ON A5