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Night Vision, Communication Failures Cited in Fatal Army Helicopter–Passenger Jet Collision

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The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) concluded three days of hearings into the deadly January midair collision near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, where a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter and an American Airlines jet collided, killing all 67 people aboard. Investigators examined multiple contributing factors, including limited visibility from night vision goggles, communication breakdowns, and military flight practices in congested civilian airspace.

Experts testified that the night vision goggles used by Army pilots likely impaired their ability to see the jet's navigation lights and limited peripheral vision, reducing situational awareness. Human factors expert Stephen Casner noted, "Knowing where to look. That's key."

The American Airlines flight had arrived from Wichita, Kansas, carrying a mix of passengers, including young figure skaters and union steamfitters. The tragedy became the deadliest U.S. aviation incident since 2001 and reignited scrutiny over civilian–military airspace coordination.

Flight data showed the UH-60 Black Hawk was flying 80 to 100 feet higher than its barometric altimeter indicated, placing it outside its designated 200-foot corridor. Further complicating matters, the helicopter crew missed a critical air traffic control directive to "pass behind" the jet due to a stuck microphone key. Though the crew claimed visual contact with the jet, they never acknowledged the instruction. An instructor aboard the Black Hawk told the pilot, "Kinda come left for me ma'am," but it remains unclear if the maneuver occurred in time.

Rick Dressler, a former Army and Air Force pilot, now with Metro Aviation, said aircraft identification near Reagan National is difficult at night, especially when military transponders were off, which Dressler noted can occur in some Army operations. He expressed concern over military pilots' lack of familiarity with the complex airspace and noted they no longer participate in inter-agency coordination meetings.

The Department of Defense referred questions to the Army, which has not commented. However, officials invited Dressler to elaborate in a future meeting.

Aviation expert Tim Lilley, whose son was a pilot on the downed jet, criticized the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for not testing air traffic controllers for alcohol, a standard procedure in fatal crashes. FAA official Nick Fuller said testing was missed due to delays in confirming fatalities. NTSB board member Todd Inman disputed that explanation, noting that two deaths were confirmed within 20 minutes.

NTSB Chairwoman Jennifer Homendy urged the FAA to “do better,” referencing prior warnings about dense helicopter traffic in the area. Aviation safety analyst John Cox supported the hearings, calling them a step toward reform. He questioned why the Black Hawk deviated from the east bank of the Potomac River, which is typically used to avoid flight conflicts.

The NTSB’s final report is expected next year, but Friday’s hearing made clear the urgent need for improved coordination, stricter flight adherence, and updated air traffic control procedures.