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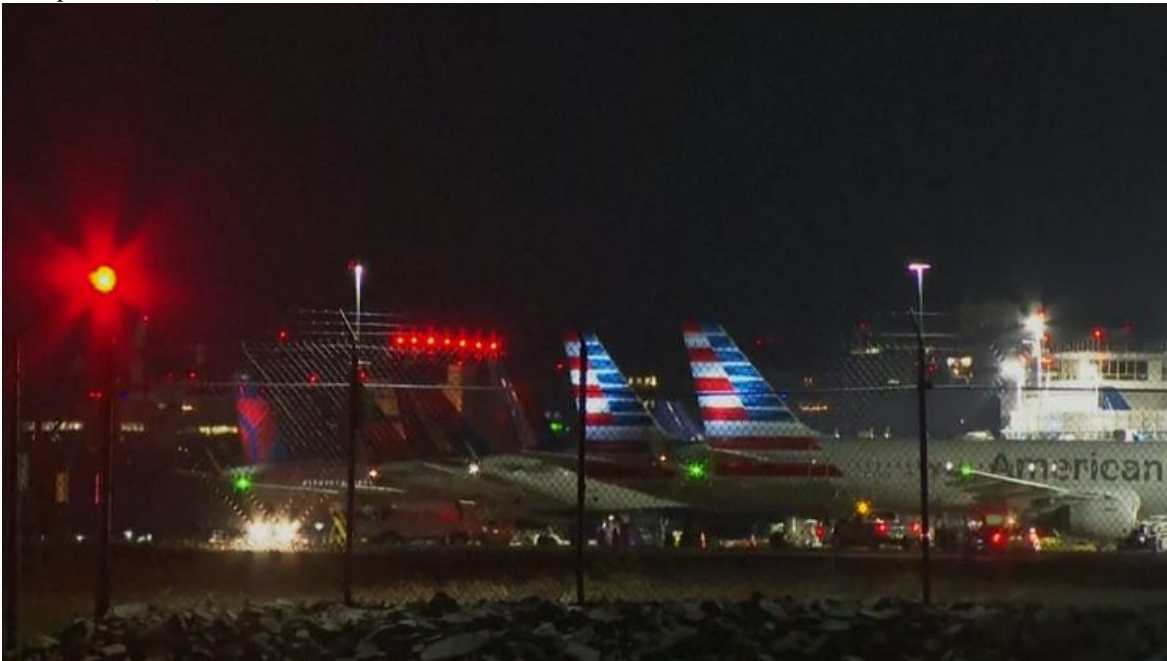
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## Eyewitness recalls plane at 90-degree angle seconds before it hit the ground in Washington, DC, crash

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An eyewitness to the [Washington plane disaster](#) has described seeing the plane at a 90 degree-angle seconds before the crash.

Ari Schulman said he was driving home when he witnessed the collision.

"Initially I saw the plane and it looked fine. Normal. It was right about to head over land, maybe 120 feet (36m) above the water," Schulman told CNN.

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The plane crashed in waist-deep water in the Potomac River. (AP)

Seconds later, the plane "was banked all the way to the rightâ€ past 90 degrees."

"I could see the underside of it. It was lit up a very bright yellow, and there was a stream of sparks underneath it" and then everything went dark, he said.

## 'Complex' recovery operation underway

It is believed there are no survivors from the collision, and rescuers must now conduct a recovery operation in the frigid waters of the Potomac River before the federal investigation can get underway, said National Transportation and Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy.

"It's a highly complex operation. The conditions out there are extremely rough," said Donnelly, the DC Fire and EMS chief. He added that officials are confident they will recover all bodies of those killed.



A diving team and police boat is seen around a wreckage site in the Potomac River from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Thursday, Jan. 30, 2025, in Arlington, Va. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

The mangled wreckage is making the recovery effort particularly difficult for the dive teams, who have had trouble accessing parts of the plane's fuselage. It has been an extensive recovery effort described as including essentially every dive team in the area.

The section of the river divers are working in is about 2.5m deep, dark and murky with floating pieces of ice, Donnelly said, adding search efforts will likely take days.

The wreckage of the American Airlines jet was broken apart, said Duffy, the transportation secretary, with the fuselage found in three different sections in waist-deep water.

## Near miss a day earlier»¿

A passenger jet had to abort its landing to avoid a collision at Reagan Airport in Washington, DC, a day before the fatal crash that killed 67 people.

Just over 24 hours before Wednesday's fatal midair collision, a different regional jet executed a go-around manoeuvre when descending to land at Reagan Airport due to a military helicopter in the same area.

Flight tracking sites and air traffic control logs show the Embraer E-175 was cleared to land on runway 19 and advised about a helicopter in its

vicinity.



Recovery efforts are under way. (AP)

It executed a go-around after its automated collision avoidance system ordered what is known as a "resolution advisory" to avoid nearby traffic, which put the aircraft out of proper alignment for landing.

It landed safely minutes later.

The military helicopter, callsign PAT1, was advised of the descending aeroplane. Flight tracking sites show the plane flew roughly 300 metres above the helicopter, a normally acceptable separation.

Airline pilots are trained to respond immediately to resolution advisories, which are designed to avoid a potential mishap, but occasionally sound alarms for traffic that does not pose an immediate threat to safety.

## Black box recovered»;

One of the flight data recorders – known as black boxes – from the doomed CRJ 700 that collided with a military helicopter on approach to Reagan National Airport has been recovered from the Potomac River, Washington Senator Maria Cantwell's office told CNN.

It was not immediately clear which of the two black boxes has been retrieved.

More than 40 bodies have been retrieved from the water, of a feared 67 dead. There are not believed to be any survivors of the collision.»;

**READ MORE:** [Everything we know so far about the American Airlines flight that collided with a helicopter in Washington, DC](#)



Debris recovered from the river. (AP)

[Two Russian Olympic figure skaters and several American ice skaters, coaches and family members](#) were among the 64 passengers and crew on board American Airlines flight 5342.

There were three military personnel on board the helicopter when the aircraft crashed into the Potomac River just before 8.50pm on Wednesday night (1.50pm Thursday AEDT).

Officials said the remains of the soldiers would be at Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware.

That office coordinates the dignified transfer of fallen service members.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details not yet announced.

### **Air traffic control details revealed**

There was one air traffic controller working two different tower positions at the time of the collision, an air traffic control source told CNN.

The source described the set-up, which had one person handling both local and helicopter traffic, as not uncommon.

The [New York Times](#), which first reported the detail, said an internal, preliminary Federal Aviation Administration internal report says staffing was "not normal for the time of day and volume of traffic".

The Reagan National control tower is 85 per cent staffed, the source said, with 24 of 28 positions filled.



Dozens of bodies and a black box have been recovered from the Potomac River after a mid-air collision between a military helicopter and a passenger plane in Washington, DC. (AP)

The National Transportation Safety Board is just beginning its investigation and will look at a wide range of potential causes of the collision.

It is too early to tell whether the tower staffing at the time played a role in the incident.››»

The crew that was flying the helicopter when it collided with an American Airlines jet was "very experienced" and were not new to the unit or the



congested flying that occurs daily around Washington, DC.

That is according to Jonathan Koziol, chief of staff for Army aviation.

"Both pilots had flown this specific route before, at night. This wasn't something new to either one of them," Koziol said.

"Even the crew chief in the back has been in the unit for a very long time, very familiar with the area, very familiar with the routing structure."

The crew, including an instructor pilot and pilot in command, were experienced to the point where either crew member "could manage that helicopter by themselves".

The instructor pilot, who was serving as pilot-in-command, had about 1000 flight hours, Koziol said.

The instructor pilot was evaluating the second pilot - who was also qualified as a pilot in command - for that night training flight and the pilot who was being evaluated had about 500 flight hours, Koziol said.

Just after sunrise on Thursday morning (late Thursday AEDT), Washington fire chief John Donnelly said the rescue efforts had shifted to a recovery operation.



Search and rescue efforts in the Potomac River. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

"At this point, we don't believe there are any survivors from this accident, and we have recovered 27 people from the plane and one from the helicopter," he said.

American Airlines CEO Robert Isom said at this stage it wasn't known why the two aircraft collided.

"I want to express my sincere condolences for the accident that happened at DCA last night," he said.

"We're absolutely heartbroken for the family and loved ones of the passengers and crew members, and also for those that were on the military aircraft."

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## **Trump says FAA diversity hiring has hurt air safety**

US President Donald Trump spoke in the White House press briefing room on Thursday (Friday morning AEDT), located about five kilometres away from the fatal crash site.

"As one nation, we grieve for every precious soul that has been taken from us so suddenly," Trump said.

"Sadly, there are no survivors" of the crash, he said.

Trump said it was still not clear what led to the crash.

He said the US military and the National Transportation Safety Board are investigating.

"We'll find out how this disaster occurred and will ensure that nothing like this ever happens again," he said.



US President Donald Trump blamed Democrats, air traffic controllers and diversity efforts for the crash. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Without evidence, Trump blamed air traffic controllers, the helicopter pilots and Democratic policies at federal agencies.

He also lashed out at the Federal Aviation Administration, saying the agency's diversity efforts had made air travel less safe.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said Trump spewing conspiracy theories about the crash "turns your stomach".

"It's one thing for internet pundits to spew off conspiracy theories, it's another for the president of the United States," Schumer said at the Capitol.

Schumer's remarks appear aimed at statements by Trump made on Thursday.

After opening a news conference with a moment of silence for the crash victims — Trump used most of his time at the podium to cast political blame.



The search for passengers and crew has become a recovery operation. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Former transportation secretary, Pete Buttigieg, also called Trump's criticisms "despicable" after the US president sharply criticised Buttigieg and even resorted to profanity to denounce what he called Democratic-led efforts to promote diversity at federal agencies.

"As families grieve, Trump should be leading, not lying," former Buttigieg posted on X shortly after Trump's White House news conference.

He noted that when he led the agency, it "had zero commercial airline crash fatalities out of millions of flights on our watch".

Trump said Buttigieg at the transportation department, had "run it right into the ground with his diversity".

## Russian and US figure skaters on board»ç

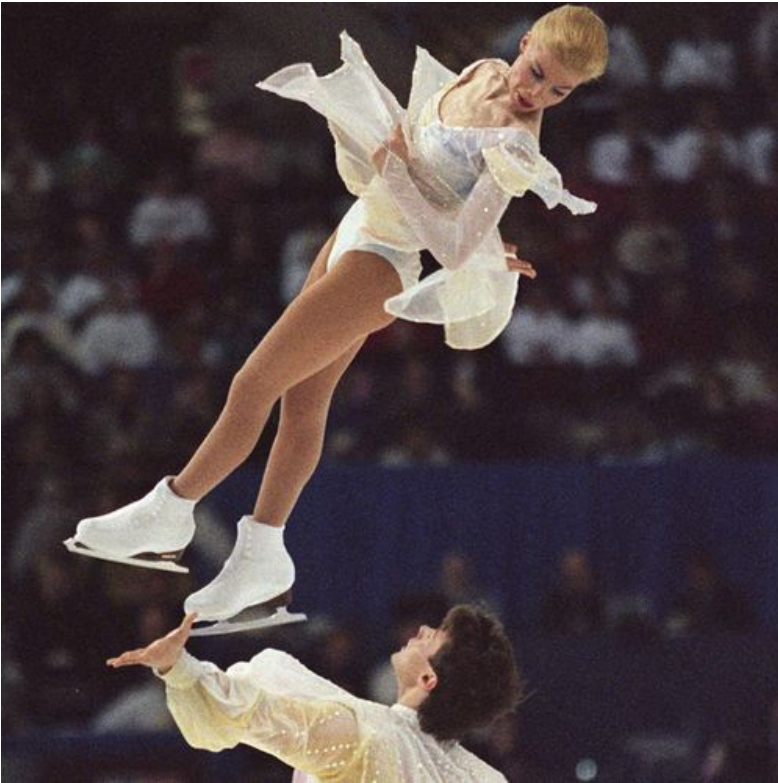
Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed to reporters that Russian figure skaters Evgenia Shishkova and Vadim Naumov were among the 64 people on board the United Airlines flight.»ç

They won the pairs title at the 1994 world championships and competed at the Winter Olympics twice.

"Unfortunately, we see that this sad information is being confirmed. There were other fellow citizens there. Bad news today from Washington," he said.

"We are sorry and send condolences to the families and friends who lost those of our fellow citizens who died in the plane crash."

READ MORE: [Man shares last text he received from his wife before horror plane crash](#)



World champions Evgenia Shishkova and Vadim Naumov of Russia execute a throw during the pairs short competition at the World Figure Skating competition in Edmonton, Alberta, March 19, 1996. (AP Photo/Dave Buston, File)



Evgenia Shishkova and Vadim Naumov of Russia perform during free skating in the pairs event of the NHK Trophy International Figure Skating Competition at Nagoya central Japan, December 9, 1995. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi, File)

He did not give details on how many fatalities there were.



Shishkova and Naumov are listed as professional pairs coaches on the website of the Skating Club of Boston.

Their son, Maxim Naumov, is a competitive figure skater for the US.

US Figure Skating said passengers included a group of figure skaters, their coaches and family members who were returning from a development camp held after the national US Figure Skating Championships in Wichita.

"We are devastated by this unspeakable tragedy and hold the victims' families closely in our hearts," the organisation said.



People associated with The Skating Club of Boston console each other. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

"We will continue to monitor the situation and will release more information as it becomes available."

Team USA pair skater Luke Wang said the news was "absolutely heartbreaking" and ice dancer Ethan Peal said he was "in shock".

The international governing body for figure skating said the global skating community was "deeply shocked" and "heartbroken" to learn that figure skaters and those close to them were on the flight.

"Our thoughts are with everyone affected by this tragedy. Figure skating is more than a sport â€” it's a close-knit family â€” and we stand together," the International Skating Union said in a statement.



District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser, with Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, left, and others, speaks during a news conference at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. (AP)

## **'Everything was standard'ï»¿**

Transport Secretary Sean Duffy said the plane was found upside down split into three different sections in waist-deep water.

Duffy said "everything was standard" on a clear night in the lead-up to the crash and the combination of passenger and military aircraft sharing similar airspace was "not unusual".

"If you live in the DC area, you'll see helicopters up and down the river," he said.



"This flight pattern is seen oftentimes when you live in DC, this was a standard flight pattern last night as well.Â



The wreckage of the plane can be seen in the Potomac River. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



A US Park Police helicopter flies over the Potomac River. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

"The American Airlines flight coming into land was in a standard flight pattern as it was coming into DCA."

Asked about Trump suggesting in an overnight social media post that the collision could have been prevented, Duffy said, "Do I think this was preventable? Absolutely."

Duffy also said passengers should be "assured" that flying is safe.

"We have early indicators of what happened here and I will tell you with complete confidence we have the safest airspace in the world," he said.

If no one survived, the collision would be the deadliest US air crash since November 2001, when an American Airlines flight crashed into a residential area of Belle Harbour, New York, just after takeoff from Kennedy Airport, killing all 260 people aboard.

**READ MORE:** [Multiple feared dead after passenger jet collides with US Army helicopter](#)

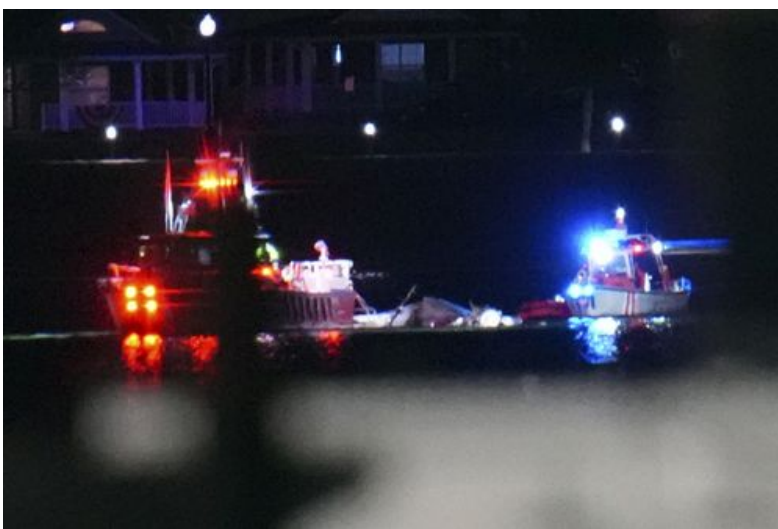
## The crash»:

Three US Army personnel were on board the Sikorsky H-60 Black Hawk helicopter when it collided with the PSA Airlines Bombardier CRJ700 regional jet arriving in the city from Wichita, Kansas, just before 9pm on Wednesday (2pm Thursday AEDT).

The helicopter was on a training flight and not carrying any VIPs, according to a US defence official.

Before dawn on Thursday (Thursday night AEDT), hundreds of rescuers continued to search the frigid waters of the Potomac.

Images showed boats around a partly submerged wing and what appeared to be the mangled wreckage of the plane's fuselage.



Boats work the scene on the Potomac River. (AP)

Helicopters flew overhead with powerful search lights scanning the murky waters, while emergency vehicles lit up the banks of the Potomac in a long line of blinking red lights.

The water temperature was just above freezing.

Hypothermia begins when the body's core temperature falls to 35 degrees, a process that can start within moments in water this cold.

Investigators from the Federal Aviation Administration were set to join the NTSB-led investigation into the crash.

The Ronald Reagan National Airport was due to reopen at 11am (3am Friday AEDT).

- *With Associated Press and CNN*

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