



Midair Collision in Washington, DC, Focuses National Attention on Aviation Safety

January 30, 2025

On the night of January 29, 2025, a crash involving a Bombardier Canadair Regional Jet 700 (CRJ-700) and a Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter occurred over the Potomac River near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA). The CRJ-700, operated by PSA Airlines as [American Eagle Flight 5342](#) and providing scheduled service between Wichita, KS, and Washington, DC, reportedly had 60 passengers and 4 crewmembers on board. The U.S. Army [Black Hawk helicopter](#) was reportedly based out of Fort Belvoir, VA, and operating with 3 servicemembers on board. The last major civil air transportation disaster of this scale in the United States occurred in February 2009, when [Colgan Air Flight 3407](#) crashed while on approach to Buffalo, NY, killing 50 people.

Air Crash Investigations

The [National Transportation Safety Board \(NTSB\)](#), an independent federal agency, has primary responsibility for investigating air crashes in the United States. The applicable authority of NTSB defined in [49 U.S.C. §§1131-1132](#) mandates that it investigate and establish the facts, circumstances, and cause or probable cause of all crashes involving civil aircraft and, with the participation of appropriate military authorities, each accident involving both military and civilian aircraft.

During the fact-gathering phase of an investigation, NTSB uses a “[party](#)” system to leverage resources from various organizations with connections to the accident and having specific knowledge and expertise to assist the investigation. Parties to an NTSB air safety investigation may include the airline or aircraft operator, labor organizations representing pilots or other personnel (such as maintainers and air traffic controllers), the aircraft manufacturer, and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The statute guarantees that the Department of Transportation (DOT) can participate in any NTSB investigation, but it may not participate in establishing a probable cause. Following the DCA crash, Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy indicated that he directed DOT and FAA to provide full support to NTSB and all responding agencies.

During fact-gathering, NTSB establishes a number of focused [working groups](#) consisting of staff and party representatives who specialize in specific areas, such as aircraft structures, systems, engines, operational factors, air traffic control, meteorology, human factors, and survival factors. The fact-

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gathering phase of the investigation culminates in factual reports detailing the work of these groups, which are reviewed by the parties and then made public. NTSB may hold a factual hearing or [special board of inquiry](#) to address substantial questions about safety raised by the accident. At this point, the factual materials gathered during the investigation are typically made public. NTSB then transitions to an [analysis phase](#) to make findings and determine probable cause. For major investigations, NTSB board members typically will convene a public meeting to adopt a final report that includes summarized factual information, findings, and a probable cause. At any point in the investigation, NTSB may issue [safety recommendations](#) to DOT or FAA or to aircraft operators, manufacturers, or airports, urging safety improvements. Recipients of a NTSB safety recommendation may voluntarily implement recommended changes, and [DOT must respond](#) within 90 days providing a timetable for addressing recommendations or the reasons for not taking certain recommended actions.

Under international agreements established through the [International Civil Aviation Organization](#), NTSB also participates in foreign investigations. Such was the case in 2018 and 2019, when NTSB participated in investigations of crashes involving two Boeing 737 Max airplanes. This resulted in [several NTSB safety recommendations](#) pertaining to the design and certification of crew alerting systems, as well as flight crew procedures and training.

Responses to Past Midair Collisions

Midair collisions involving commercial jets are extremely rare and have been mitigated by safety improvements, including traffic collision avoidance systems (TCAS). Midair collisions were a challenge throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The safety challenge was highlighted by the [1978 collision](#) between a Boeing 727 airliner on approach to San Diego and a small single-engine aircraft. While that accident resulted in some short-term fixes to air traffic control procedures, the persisting challenge of midair collisions spurred researchers to begin work on airborne traffic alerting systems. Following a similar crash in [1986, in Cerritos, CA](#), Congress responded with legislation mandating [TCAS](#) on passenger airliners and the installation and use of altitude-reporting transponders on all civilian aircraft operated in busy terminal airspace so the aircraft could be more easily tracked on air traffic control radar and on TCAS. The technology continues to evolve, and TCAS usage has likely played an important role in reducing midair collision risks. In recent years, midair collisions have been largely limited to operations other than commercial passenger flights. For example, in November 2022, a high-profile midair collision involved two historic “[warbirds](#)” [performing at an airshow in Dallas, TX](#).

Congressional Interest in Air Safety

Congress has a long-standing interest in aviation safety and has acted in response to major aviation mishaps. Following the February 2009 crash of Colgan Air Flight 3407, Congress debated extensive changes to airline safety that culminated in the enactment of the Airline Safety and Federal Aviation Administration Extension Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-216). Selected changes mandated by the act include the adoption of [safety management systems](#) by all commercial air carriers and implementation of the “1,500-hour rule,” which increased [training and qualification standards for airline pilots](#). The act also mandated revised regulations addressing pilot [flight and duty hours](#) to combat fatigue.

More recently, Congress has focused on [oversight of Boeing](#) and commercial airplane manufacturing. In 2020, Congress passed the Aircraft Certification, Safety, and Accountability Act (P.L. 116-260, Division V), mandating extensive [reforms to commercial aircraft certification processes](#). Additional reforms were included in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-63), which included [provisions](#) addressing a broad array of aviation safety concerns while also authorizing 10 additional daily flights at DCA.

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