

Deadly helicopter collision along Kentucky-Tennessee border claims the lives of nine US Army paratroopers

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Around 10 p.m. Wednesday night, along the Kentucky-Tennessee border, two UH-60 Black Hawk assault helicopters from the US Army's 101st Airborne Division, based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, collided and crashed, killing all nine paratroopers aboard.

As of this writing the military has not released the names of the soldiers killed in the crash, claiming that the next-of-kin are still being notified. In a press conference Thursday at Fort Campbell, Brigadier General John Lubas said the process to notify family members could take some time. Lubas acknowledged that while all of the soldiers were assigned to the 101st Airborne Division, many of their family members lived outside of the state, and some outside of the country.

Lubas said the nine soldiers were spread out between the two helicopters, with four soldiers in one helicopter and five in the other. Due to the severity of the injuries suffered in the crash, Lubas indicated that none of the soldiers were transported to the hospital following the accident.

Lubas said all of the soldiers were wearing Night Vision Goggles (NVGs) as part of a night-time training exercise. The soldiers were part of a medical unit and were practicing evacuating injured personnel.

Following Wednesday's crash, the military leadership at Fort Campbell imposed an information blackout prohibiting soldiers from contacting their family members. Worried parents and relatives took to social media Thursday to express their concern about the fate of their loved ones.

On the official Fort Campbell Facebook page, one mother

wrote, "my son is stationed here and [I] have not been able to get a hold of him." Several other family members of soldiers replied in agreement, writing, "My daughter is stationed there too. I can't get a hold of her either."

The Black Hawk is one of the most ubiquitous US Army helicopters. For decades, from Mogadishu to Fallujah, the helicopter has quickly transported US soldiers and private military contractors to engage with the targets of US imperialism, whether in major cities or in desert enclaves.

Despite its "workhorse" reputation in the US military, the helicopter has been at the center of several major accidents that almost always end with the deaths of all the occupants. Just last month, on February 15, two soldiers with the Tennessee Army National Guard, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Daniel Wadham, of Joelton, and Chief Warrant Officer 3 Danny Randolph, of Murfreesboro, were killed when their UH-60 Black Hawk crashed near Highway 53 in Huntsville.

In an interview with CNN last month, Don Webster of Huntsville Emergency Medical Services, Inc. said that when firefighters first arrived on the scene the helicopter was "fully engulfed in flames," with the "remains" of two people inside the vehicle.

Webster said that initially emergency services were unsure that the helicopter was military because the previously visible markings on the outside had been "completely burned" off, complicating efforts to identify it.

These recent accidents are part of a deadly, and consistent trend of rank-and-file and low-level officers perishing in

“training accidents.”

- In January 2018, two Fort Carson soldiers stationed at the Colorado Army base were killed when their AH64 Apache helicopter crashed at the National Training Center located at Fort Irwin, California.

- During an early morning “training exercise” at Fort Stewart, Georgia on October 20, 2019, three soldiers were killed and three hospitalized after a Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle fell from a bridge and landed upside down in the water below sometime after 3:00 a.m.

Sergeant First Class Bryan Jenkins, 41, of Gainesville, Florida; Corporal Thomas Walker, 22, of Conneaut, Ohio; and Private First Class Antonio Garcia, 21, of Peoria, Arizona perished in the accident. All three soldiers belonged to the 1st Armored Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division, one of the Army units that spearheaded the 2003 invasion of Iraq. At the time of the accident, at least 12 Army soldiers had died while “training” in the United States in 2019.

- On January 18, 2022, two Marines, Lance Corporal Jonathan Gierke, 19, of Lawrenceville, Georgia; and Private First Class Zachary W. Riffle, 18, of Kingwood, West Virginia, were killed, and over 15 other Marines were seriously injured in an accident involving several military vehicles outside Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

Seventeen Marines, including Gierke and Riffle, were ejected from the 7-ton truck they were riding in when it overturned. Police claimed the driver, 19-year-old Marine Louis Barrera, took a right turn too fast. Barrera, who was also hospitalized following the crash, was charged with one count of exceeding a safe speed and two counts of misdemeanor death by motor vehicle. None of the commanding officers were charged.

- During a “training exercise” in Fort Bragg, on April 28, 2022, Specialist Luis Herrera, 23, of Marion, North Carolina died when the Humvee he was riding in crashed. Three other soldiers were injured.

- On October 22, 2022, Specialist Mackenzie L. Shay was killed in a vehicle accident when Army officials claim the massive M1120 she was driving rear-ended another M1120, crushing her in the cab. The M1120 Load Handling System is an eight-wheel-drive tactical truck used for transporting large equipment in its rear flatbed.

At the time of the accident Army officials told *Stars and Stripes* that “on average” nine soldiers have died annually in “Ground Mobility Vehicle” accidents during the past four years.

According to data compiled by the Congressional Research Service from 2006 through 2021, by far the leading cause of US Active Duty military deaths is “accidents.” Of the 19,378 total deaths recorded by the US military in the last 15 years, 6,198, or 32 percent, were classified as accidents. The second leading cause of death, at nearly 5,000, or 25.4 percent, is “self-inflicted” or “apparent suicide.”

Illness or injury, which presumably would include deaths from COVID-19, is the third leading cause of death, at 3,470, or nearly 18 percent. “Killed in Action” is only the fourth leading cause of death, at 2,740, while there were only 21 “terrorist” related deaths, or less than 0.1 percent.

Of the nearly 20,000 US Active Duty military deaths in the last 15 years, over three-quarters, or 76 percent, took place in “Non-Overseas Contingency Operations” (Non-OCO), with 93 percent of those deaths occurring within the United States. The remaining 24 percent of deaths took place in “Overseas Contingency Operations”(OCO), primarily within Iraq and Afghanistan.

The 14,758 US Active Duty soldiers killed in non-OCO operations averages out to about 922 non-war related deaths a year, or a little more than 2.5 soldiers a day.



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