



KANDICE ANGEL Associated Press

**A NAVY F/A-18D** fighter smolders after crashing into an apartment complex in Virginia Beach, Va. The two aviators aboard survived after bailing out. As of nightfall, there were no reports of any deaths on the ground.



# 'Boom!' Jet crash stuns Virginia neighborhood

BY DAVID ZUCCHINO

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. — Robert Leggett is accustomed to the deep roar of Navy jet fighter planes flying over his rooftop in this military town. But at lunchtime Friday, the F/A-18D Hornet that flew screaming above his apartment window didn't sound right.

"It sounded way too low," Leggett, 27, recalled. He should know. He's a Navy-en-

listed man who repairs Navy jet fighters.

Spilling fuel, the Hornet slammed into an apartment complex 100 feet from where Leggett stood in his bedroom Friday afternoon. Remarkably, there were no initial reports of deaths after about 40 units in the complex were destroyed or damaged by flames.

"The whole rooftop was in flames," Leggett said, describing plumes of black smoke that rose high into

the clear blue spring sky. "I saw six or eight people on their hands and knees, crawling out of their apartments."

Seven people were hospitalized, including the plane's two aviators, who had parachuted to safety. Six were treated and released, leaving only one of the aviators still hospitalized, hospital officials said. Their injuries were considered minor, said Marc Davis, a Virginia Beach

[See Jet crash, AA2]



VICKI CRONIS-NOHE Virginian-Pilot

**A RESIDENT** of the Mayfair Mews apartments, Elizabeth DeAngelis, huddles in a blanket after the fiery crash at her complex. Witnesses said it was hard to believe nobody was killed. Seven people were hospitalized, most of them only briefly.



# Fighter had 'catastrophic malfunction'

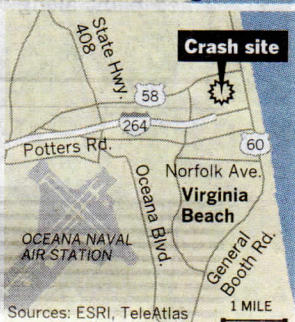
[**Jet crash**, from AA1] spokesman.

"It's hard to believe nobody was killed," said Tishawn Coins, 17, who was sitting at his computer in his apartment when the plane went past his window. "I thought it was going to come right through the window. I mean, it was that close."

By nightfall, three people were unaccounted for, Virginia Beach Fire Department Capt. Tim Riley told reporters. All but six of the most damaged two-story apartments had been searched with no fatalities reported, Riley said.

"What I'm praying for, what I'm thinking about now, is that we don't find any more victims," Virginia Beach Mayor Will Sessoms told reporters.

The plane had just taken off on a training mission from nearby Naval Air Station Oceana about 12:30 p.m. when it suffered a "catastrophic mechanical malfunction," according to the Navy. The two-seat Hornet dumped fuel just before it crashed, but it was not clear whether the dumping was intentional or a result of the malfunction, Capt. Mark Weisgerber of the U.S. Fleet Forces Command said at a news conference.



Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas

Los Angeles Times

for the crash. "The poor guy was in shock," Kavanaugh told the Associated Press. "I checked for broken bones and opened wounds."

At least 63 people were evacuated from the apartment complex, said Davis, the city spokesman. Among them was Natasha Coins, 33, Tishawn Coins' sister and the mother of seven children. Natasha Coins stood in the cool evening air Friday, watching firefighters walk past charred apartments 100 feet from her apartment, which she said



Dumping the fuel "mitigated what could have been an absolute massive, massive fireball and fire," said Bruce Nedelka, the Virginia Beach Emergency Medical Services division chief. "With all that jet fuel dumped, it was much less than what it could have been."

Police and firefighters arrived within minutes, and the blaze was under control in about an hour, said Alie Thompson, 64, who was watching TV in an apartment across the street when she heard the plane smash into the complex.

"There was this big boom and then black smoke, and then three more big booms — just boom, boom, boom!" Thompson said. "I could feel those booms go right through my body. My whole apartment was shaking."

The Oceana base is about two miles from the Mayfair Mews apartments, where the plane crashed.

One aviator is an "extremely experienced" instructor, and the other is a student pilot, Navy officials said. One aviator was found

connected to his parachute, disoriented and with a bloodied face, according to one apartment resident.

"I saw the parachute on the house and he was still connected to it, and he was laying on the ground with his face full of blood," Colby Smith told TV station WVEC. "The pilot said, 'I'm sorry for destroying your house.'"

Another resident, Patrick Kavanaugh, said he also stumbled across the aviator, and checked him for injuries as the Navy flier apologized

Police told her it may be a day or more before she can return home. "They didn't provide anyplace for us to go in the meantime," Coins said.

Because it was midday on a weekday, many residents were away from home. Many work for the military at one of the armed forces bases in the Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Hampton Roads area.

An F/A-18D Hornet, a twin-engine supersonic fighter, crashed into a San Diego neighborhood in December 2008 while returning to Marine Corps Air Station Miramar after a training mission. The Marine Corps attributed the crash to mechanical failure but also said the student pilot missed a chance to make a potentially safe landing at a nearby Navy base after the engine failed. A federal judge ordered the U.S. government to pay nearly \$18 million to the survivors of four family members killed in the crash.

Friday's crash reminded many of the 1986 tragedy here when an A-6E Intruder taking off from Oceana crashed and skidded onto Oceana Boulevard, killing a woman sitting behind the wheel of her car. Two crewmen were also killed.

The 56-foot-long F/A-18 has a wingspan of 40 feet, according to its manufacturer, Boeing. The jet's speed tops off at Mach 1.8, or more than 1,000 mph. The F/A-18 played a prominent role in Operation Desert Storm in the 1990s and has run combat patrols in Afghanistan. Most flights from Naval Air Station Oceana are training flights, Weisgerber said. "This is where the Navy teaches our F-18 pilots for the very first time in fleet-representative aircraft," he said.

Leggett, the Navy jet mechanic at Naval Air Station Oceana, said he sometimes worried about planes crashing on training missions because his apartment is right in their flight path.

"This is a real reality check for us," Leggett said.

His wife, Mackenzi, 23, stood staring at the charred apartments through a stand of loblolly pines across the street. "When our lease is up," she told her husband, "we are definitely leaving."

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